



Local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)

Full report: case studies, cross case
analysis and methodological appendix

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This comprehensive report brings together each of the individual reports published in July 2021 presenting findings from case study research across the UK into local responses to food access issues between March-August 2020 (the first UK COVID-19 lockdown).

Each report can be found in this document at the following links:

[Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK \(March – August 2020\)](#)

[Argyll and Bute Case Study](#)

[Belfast Case Study](#)

[Cardiff Case Study](#)

[Derry and Strabane Case Study](#)

[Herefordshire Case Study](#)

[Moray Case Study](#)

[Swansea Case Study](#)

[West Berkshire Case Study](#)

[Methodological Appendix](#)

We welcome your feedback on the contents of these reports 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.



Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)

Lambie-Mumford, H., Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. and Shaw, S.

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About this report

This comparative report presents findings from a cross-case analysis of 14 local case studies which were undertaken to explore local responses to food access issues between March-August 2020 (the first UK COVID-19 lockdown). Individual case study write ups and a detailed methodological appendix are published at the same time and available on the project webpage: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

This research is part of a wider project designed to map and monitor responses to risks of food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. In addition to the local case study work presented in this report, the project is also examining national level responses and working with a participatory policy panel made up of people who have direct experience of a broad range of support to access food over this time.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| 1. Introduction | 6 |
| 2. Early signs of food access issues | 7 |
| 2.1 Economic access issues | 7 |
| 2.2 Rising need for food aid | 7 |
| 2.3 Physical access issues | 8 |
| 2.4 Fear of going out for food | 9 |
| 3. Phases of the response | 9 |
| 3.1 Early weeks (March-April 2020) | 9 |
| 3.2 Evolving responses (March – June 2020) | 10 |
| 3.3 Late June/early July to end of August 2020 | 10 |
| 4. Actors in the response and types of response provided | 11 |
| 4.1 Key Actor: Local Authorities | 13 |
| 4.2 Key Actor: Local food poverty alliances and food partnerships | 21 |
| 4.3 Key Actor: Existing third sector organisations doing direct food provision | 24 |
| 4.4 Key actor: Third sector organisations newly offering direct food provision | 27 |
| 4.5 Key Actor: Informal groups | 28 |
| 4.6 Key Actor: Local businesses | 29 |
| 5. Targeted interventions | 30 |
| 5.1 School food | 30 |
| 5.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups | 35 |
| 5.3 People experiencing homelessness | 36 |
| 5.4 Concern for groups who may not have been adequately supported | 37 |
| 6. How people accessed support | 37 |
| 6.1 Phone numbers for people seeking support | 38 |
| 6.2 Referrals | 38 |
| 6.3 Identifying people in need | 39 |
| 6.4 Informal word of mouth | 39 |
| 7. Dynamics across the food response actors | 40 |
| 7.1 Distribution of demand across actors | 40 |
| 7.2 Provision by existing and new actors | 41 |
| 7.3 End of government food box delivery schemes (local and national) | 42 |
| 7.4 The evolution and future of the new food actors | 42 |
| 8. Resources for local responses | 43 |
| 8.1 Funding | 43 |
| 8.2 Food Supplies | 46 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 8.3 Human Resources..... | 47 |
| 8.4 Premises and storage..... | 49 |
| 9. Key questions raised by the findings..... | 50 |
| 9.1 What worked? | 50 |
| 9.2 What are the longer-term legacies?..... | 53 |
| 9.3 Local and/or national responses? | 54 |
| 9.4 Cash or food? | 57 |
| 10. Key Takeaways | 58 |
| 10.1 Mapping observation 1: The scale of the response was unprecedented | 58 |
| 10.2 Mapping observation 2: Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses | 59 |
| 10.3 Mapping observation 3: Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives | 59 |
| 10.4 Partnership working and working together | 60 |
| 10.5 Responses in rural areas | 62 |
| 11. Post-August 2020 support and future research..... | 65 |

Executive Summary

This case study research is part of a wider project designed to map and monitor local and national responses to risks of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. This report presents findings from a cross-case analysis of 14 local case studies which were undertaken to explore local responses to food access issues between March-August 2020 (the first UK COVID-19 lockdown). Follow up research is being undertaken to explore how these responses evolved after August 2020.

Early signs of food access issues

- Local signs of increasing financial vulnerability and crisis included rising numbers of Universal Credit claimants and evidence of disruption to incomes because of the pandemic.
- Increasing need for local food aid was a key indicator of experiences of acute income crises over this time. Particularly in the early weeks, in some areas, this rising need also appeared to include some households who were struggling to physically access food, for example because of shielding.
- Physical food access issues were also identified early on, including disruption to food supply in supermarkets and other shops, closure of the hospitality sector and other food providers (including schools, day centres and food banks).
- Fear of going out was also seen as a significant contributor to restricted physical access to food at this time.

Three phases of the response

1. The early weeks of the pandemic response (March/ early April 2020) were characterised by a degree of panic and the mobilisation of responses from a range of actors.
2. This resulted in a significant landscape of response in all areas from across sectors which ran and evolved from March through to June 2020.
3. The late June to August 2020 period brought changes to the local food responses with the easing of restrictions (shielding ended at the beginning of August 2020), there was a wind down of some of the direct food provision from statutory organisations, such as the national government grocery box schemes for people who were shielding and local council food responses.

Actors

Various actors undertook a range of roles in providing a response to the pandemic, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key actors and their roles in a response to the pandemic

| Key actors | Role |
|---|---|
| <p>Local councils</p> | <p>Helplines, financial advice or assistance, direct food provision, support for third sector food response.</p> |
| <p>Local food poverty alliances or food partnerships</p> <p><i>These could be formal or informal. Some existed before the crisis (e.g., some members of the Food Power and/or Sustainable Food Places networks or the Feeding Britain network) others were set up in response to the crisis (e.g. the Swansea Together project or Good Food for Glasgow).¹ In some areas, partnership working was less formalised and involved practices of working together.</i></p> | <p>Co-ordinated food responses, facilitated collaborative working, channelled resources, collated and shared information on available support.</p> |
| <p>Third sector projects previously providing food</p> <p><i>Such as existing food aid providers, food banks and other community food projects.</i></p> | <p>Established local helplines, promoted support and identified households who would benefit from support.</p> <p>Adapted previous food responses in response to need and guidelines. Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided smaller food packs to minimise shopping trips for people who were staying at home.</p> |
| <p>Third sector projects newly providing food</p> <p><i>A variety of projects that previously had not provided food support began to offer food assistance for example housing associations, community councils and sports clubs</i></p> | <p>Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided support with shopping (collecting shopping and prescriptions for people shielding or self-isolating).</p> |
| <p>Informal groups</p> <p><i>Local community, neighbourhood or ad hoc support through social media or local communication</i></p> | <p>Support with shopping, informal, 'neighbourhood food banks', 'pop up food banks'</p> |
| <p>Local businesses</p> <p><i>Supporting the food response</i></p> | <p>Donations, resources, in kind</p> |

¹ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>, <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>, <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>, https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

Targeted interventions

- School food support during school closures varied and additional support was provided to families across the case study areas.
- In several areas particular population groups such as Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups or the homeless population were a key focus for support.

Helping people access information, advice and support

- Organisations worked hard to ensure there were a range of access points (such as telephone lines) and that existing access routes remained open (both proactively identifying people and adapting processes for referral agencies).

Dynamics across the food response actors

- In several case study areas efforts were made to distribute demand across different providers. For example, referral practices or local helplines were designed to signpost people in need to a range of providers, charities and organisations to avoid over-reliance on particular projects.
- The amount of new local and community food provision which popped up in response to the pandemic presented challenges. Including for councils on whether to provide them with funding. Pre-existing projects provided advice and support to new ones, or in some cases sought to channel new efforts into existing work to avoid duplication.
- The end of local and national government food box schemes sometimes resulted in an increase in demand for third sector food projects, but in other places it did not.

Resources for local responses

- Overall, there was a sense that new or repurposed funding was available to support the food response from a range of government and philanthropic sources over the duration of the period (March-August 2020). However, local actors did experience uncertainty about funding early in the response and some experienced problems accessing local and national government funding schemes. Organisations reported increases in levels of financial donations from the public over this time as well.
- Food projects across the case studies reported difficulties sourcing food in the early weeks of the pandemic. They worked hard to secure alternative sources.
- Food projects saw an immediate reduction in their pre-lockdown volunteer base (many of whom were older or had underlying health conditions). Some projects were able to take on staff re-deployed from other companies or organisations and new volunteers joined to support the work.
- Due to increased demand and food volume, food projects across the case studies required additional space for food storage and/or processing, for example using religious buildings which closed for worship.

Key questions raised

- What worked?

It is very hard to map and even harder to comprehensively evaluate local responses to food access issues. Systematic evaluation was beyond the scope of this research, but our data captured participants' reflections on what they perceived to be some of the key strengths and challenges in local responses. A key strength was felt to be the benefits of community responses that understood the needs in local communities and had 'people on the ground', who were established before the pandemic, were known in local communities already and

were therefore trusted sources of support. The challenges included providing wrap-around and non-food support over a time when face-to-face activities had to stop. Some of this was lost altogether over this period, some was replaced by telephone calls and some organisations tried to use new drop-off provision as a gateway to supporting people in other ways. Another key challenge was balancing assessment of need versus quick, accessible support and there is evidence of varied approaches to this dilemma in practice across and within case study areas.

- What are the longer-term legacies of this period?

The research has raised some important questions over the legacies of the COVID-19 response in March-August 2020. Given the scale of need and support at that time it will be important to monitor the longer-term impacts for support structures and experiences of food insecurity. For example, following what happens to the projects that newly popped up and the impact of the substantial amounts of funding on embedding food provision infrastructures and potentially reversing pre-pandemic trends away from food aid as a first response.

- Local and/or national responses?

Mapping the response to food access issues during COVID-19 highlights the work of different sectors at (and between) different scales. Our case study data have documented local councils playing a role in the implementation of national government grocery box schemes, and third sector community organisations receiving funding and support to provide food responses in local council areas. This raises important questions about the role for different governments, different actors, and different types of responses. Participants reflected on the challenges with the national government shielding grocery box schemes and the impact of these challenges locally. In some areas, local responses were conceived more broadly, designed to support the local food industry as well as individual households, for example sourcing supplies for food boxes locally. In other areas, where this was not done, it was seen as a missed opportunity to support other parts of local economies and communities during this phase of the pandemic response.

- Cash or food?

There is an important on-going debate around how best to respond to income and food crises and whether the emphasis should be on 'cash or food'. Our data suggests that many areas offered or supported income-based responses in a variety of forms, at the same time as food provision was made available. Moreover, our research does suggest that there is a lack of clarity and consistency around the term 'cash first approach'. We found it was applied both to schemes designed to refer people to, or support them to access, the social security system (e.g. sign posting or advice services) as well as more narrowly used to describe the provision of *additional* cash support on top of access to basic entitlements through crisis emergency payments (e.g. emergency finance schemes).

Key takeaways

- The scale of the response was unprecedented.

Local responses to food access issues between March – August 2020 were unprecedented in their scale, operationalisation, co-ordination and the level of resources required. This included work by new and existing food providers, almost complete overhauls in working practices, and partnership and collaborative working across spaces and places. There were levels of funding for food provision that have not seen in recent times and new groups of volunteers, organisations and companies became involved in food support for the first time.

- Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses

The provision of food (parcels / meals) was central to local responses to risks of food insecurity over this time. This provision was operationalised with support from, and input by a range of stakeholders including councils and businesses. It is important to note that some councils set up unprecedented direct food provision schemes. However, food banks and voluntary food aid providers (both existing and new) were pivotal to this local response, and were relied on, and supported by, statutory agencies and local governments. This adds to our project's previous findings, that at a national level the voluntary food aid sector was relied on heavily to support food access for those experiencing economic vulnerability to food insecurity and was offered levels of funding and other support from national governments not seen previously.

- Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives

Across the areas we identified the important role played by several types of food aid provision: (1) food aid projects such as food banks that had been in place before the pandemic and adapted to meet the needs of local communities (2) local third sector organisations that started to provide food aid as part of their work to support communities and groups through the pandemic (providing parcels, hot meals, chill-cook food) (3) and less formal 'pop up' provision, for example on an ad hoc or neighbourhood basis.

- Partnership working and working together was a key enabler of responses.

Across the case study areas partnership working, coordination and collaboration was seen by participants as key to the success of local responses. The areas studied included places with existing formal partnerships, partnerships that were set up in response to the pandemic and areas that worked on less structured practices of working together. Across all areas the risks of failing to collaborate and communicate effectively were identified including the duplication of provision and not being able to identify gaps in support.

- There were clearly distinct challenges in rural locations.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic distinct challenges in rural areas were identified and included concerns over supplies to, and food available in, local rural shops; supporting areas with a high proportion of older people; the economic security of areas reliant on tourism for employment; lack of affordable transport to access shops and reductions made to transport services during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

This comparative report examines some of the similarities, differences, and key themes to emerge in local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic between March and August 2020 in 14 case study areas. These areas were:

| | |
|---|--|
| England <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Bradford- Herefordshire- Greenwich- Leeds- Merton- West Berkshire | Northern Ireland <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Belfast- Derry and Strabane |
| Scotland <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Argyll and Bute- Edinburgh- Glasgow- Moray | Wales <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Cardiff- Swansea |

Details of case study selection and research methods can be found in the *Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix* document published at the same time as this report, on the project webpage (<http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>).

Overall, 131 participants with frontline experience of responding to food access issues in their local area (either in a policy or practitioner role) contributed to the research through (online) interviews and workshops focused on mapping local responses in each location.

The objectives of the case study research were:

- To understand what forms of help were available to people facing insecure financial or physical access to food before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To understand how the provision of support for people facing insecure food access changed over the spring and summer of 2020, including changes in operations of projects/programmes that had already been operating and the initiation of new projects or forms of support.
- To assess the long-term outlook of these landscapes into the future.

This cross-case analysis focuses on the findings of objectives two and three. The report begins by highlighting similarities and differences in the ways in which food access issues were identified in the initial weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, the different phases of the responses, the role and work of different local actors, access to support and operations. The report ends with reflections on key issues or questions raised for future research, policy, and practice.

Individual write ups of eight of the case studies have also been published alongside this report in July 2021. These areas are Argyll and Bute, Belfast, Cardiff, Derry City and Strabane, Herefordshire, Moray, Swansea, West Berkshire. The reports provide full details of the responses in each area and are available on the project website.

2. Early signs of food access issues

There was consistency across local case study areas as to what participants considered the early indicators of food access issues. These indicators included economic access issues, rising demand for food aid, physical access issues and fear of going out.

2.1 Economic access issues

Across the cases, participants reported that early indicators of rising financial insecurity in their areas included increases in the number of people applying for Universal Credit and increased demand on services providing employment or benefits advice. Participants reported increasing levels of rent arrears and their concerns over financial support in general, as well as for different populations, for example those who were self-employed (and whether this support would be adequate or timely).

Participants also reported that within this group of people experiencing financial insecurity at this time were those who had never sought financial support before and were new to the benefits system.

“The client base changed. We still had our historical clients who would come to us, but what we found was there were lots and lots of people who had been made redundant, had never been unemployed before, and had always managed to pick something up. And then all of a sudden they were losing their jobs and there wasn't alternative work out there, and for the first time they were having to tap into benefits.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

2.2 Rising need for food aid

In addition to these trends in financial insecurity were signs of rising levels of acute financial hardship in the form of increasing need for help with food reported by food banks. For example, the food bank in Moray supported 1,091 people in April 2020, compared to 751 in March and 446 in April 2019. A food bank in Swansea reported:

“I think pretty much instantly we had about three times as many people come in for food [to our food bank]. There were definitely a few weeks where we were holding our breath and thinking, how is this going to work?” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

It was reported that increased demand for food aid also included people who were struggling with both physical and affordability issues, particularly in the early weeks.

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

The data also suggests that statutory and other agencies who could no longer work to support people in person, and knew that other services were no longer available, were quick to refer people to food aid:

“I think when it was announced it kind of felt like everyone went into panic stations. So, all my referral agencies were suddenly like, “Oh, no, I’ve got all these clients who are now at home and haven’t got any money, and there is no way of getting food. So, all of these referrals were coming in.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

This finding was also reflected in data from community organisations providing a wider portfolio of support (which included food aid):

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

2.3 Physical access issues

Physical access to food was disrupted in multiple ways by the response to COVID-19 and the lockdown announcement in March 2020. This included food supply disruptions and shortages of food and other products in supermarkets and shops and the closure of institutions and other settings that served food (schools, day centres, community food projects). The impact of these were identified by participants in their local areas very early on and some responses adapted or upscaled to respond to changing and/or increasing need.

“As we went into the pandemic [and school closures], we realised, “Oh, my God, free school meals, what’s happening to kids who receive these?” (Council staff respondent, Cardiff)

The food bank in Moray noted an increase in referrals from families which they partly attributed to the schools being closed.

“Just with the schools, so as soon as the schools closed it put a lot more pressure on families. We definitely noticed more family referrals coming through compared to what we would normally have.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

One meals on wheels provider in West Berkshire reported a large increase in calls about the service at the start of the lockdown. Some of these were from people who were no longer able to provide their usual support to family members.

“So, there were a few enquiries just before, and then the phone went off the hook for a week or two, after lockdown started in the middle of March. It never stopped ringing. So, we could see it coming, people could see it coming, but it suddenly – “My God, my mum is at home, how are we going to feed her, because I can’t go and see her?” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Respondents highlighted the interplay between physical and economic access issues and the impact of shortages in shops on demand for food aid providers:

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

2.4 Fear of going out for food

A further theme discussed by participants was the fear that people felt in leaving their house, especially in the early weeks, and the impact this had on people’s ability to access food.

“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.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

3. Phases of the response

Responses to food access issues can be split into three broad phases across the spring and summer of 2020. The first phase comprised the early weeks of the pandemic response (from March 2020) which was characterised by some early panic and the operationalisation of responses from a range of actors. This resulted in a significant landscape of response in all areas from across sectors which ran and evolved from March through to June 2020. From approximately late June to the end of August 2020 there was an easing of some lockdown restrictions and from the 1st of August (England, Northern Ireland and Scotland) and 16th of August (Wales) a pausing of the guidance to shield. The June-August 2020 period brought changes to the food responses, with the wind down of some of the direct food provision from statutory organisations, such as the national schemes in each of the four countries providing grocery boxes for people who were shielding and food responses from local councils.

3.1 Early weeks (March-April 2020)

In the initial weeks (from late March into April 2020) the unprecedented nature of the situation led to uncertainty and panic.

“If I’m honest, it was panic. It was the unknown. It was almost crashing down together, so will we have enough food? The need will be absolutely huge. How will we deliver the model? What will we do? Will we get ill? The need to prioritise and then not knowing which one was the most important was what panicked us. I think that’s probably right to say, panicked us psychologically to begin with.”
(Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

As well as overcoming these feelings of early panic, organisations had to manage a balance of providing a quick response with setting up new systems and ensuring their activities could be delivered safely.

“I think many of us would have been in positions where we were witnessing and seeing what was needed, but because of the restrictions, it was then about capacity... You knew what was needed, but we service providers, whatever you want

to call us, were challenged by being able to safely do that and make sure that we could provide what we needed to.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

As outlined in section nine below, these early weeks were also dominated by issues with, and concerns about, food and resource supplies and volunteer workforces.

3.2 Evolving responses (March – June 2020)

Following this initial phase, a range of actors were providing a varied landscape of food responses between March and the end of June 2020. These weeks were characterised by adaptation and ‘learning while doing’.

“Our planning was done at the same time as we were going live. Our lessons learned were at the same time as our planning for the next phase.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Indeed, over the whole March – August 2020 timeframe, responses were subject to continual review and adaptation to suit the circumstances. For example, in Argyll and Bute, initially free school meal replacements were provided in the form of a hot meal delivered to eligible households, as it was assumed this would be a short-term response and school kitchen capacity was available to produce meals. However, when it was clear the response would be required for a longer term, this was later changed to food box deliveries.

“Initially, free school meals was about getting that hot meal to people, and that sounds crazy because it was, when I look back on it, but it was the right thing at the time. We thought schools would close for three weeks, what would you do for three weeks? We wanted to keep our services going because we had the food, we had the stock sitting in the kitchens, we had the catering staff there willing to do it, and we had the school transport.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute).

Swansea Council’s food distribution centres originally began to support supply of food to food banks, however, as time progressed through the pandemic they also became places from which the Council would assemble and deliver their own food parcels, particularly designed to fill gaps in food bank operating times.

3.3 Late June/early July to end of August 2020

As restrictions lifted, there was a move away from direct provision of food by national and local governments. The national grocery box scheme for people who were shielding came to an end in August 2020 and direct local authority food provision was also wound down. Resources also began to reduce as redeployed staff returned to original roles, volunteers who had been furloughed returned to their jobs and community buildings, such as schools, which had been used as food hubs required preparation for the start of the new school term in autumn 2020. For example, in Swansea, the Council’s Helpline, Food Administration Team, and food distribution centres all ran through to the end of the shielding scheme in Wales (mid-August 2020) because need had lessened but also because of changes in staff capacity. In Leeds, the building that had been used as the food warehouse by the Council was only available for a temporary period:

“As lockdown eased [in June 2020], a lot of council buildings were starting to reopen, and staff were able to go back to their day jobs. A decision was made to start winding down the warehouse facility which we only had on a temporary basis. We managed

to acquire it quickly through the Council’s asset management team and it was always the intention it would be for a short-term period. As demand to the helpline started to decrease, around June time and everything started to open up, the decision was made to wind down the warehouse and to hand over deliveries to the third sector again.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Over this period, preparation was done for the end of some of the direct food provision in local areas. Participants in different areas reported that organisations contacted people who were in receipt of national government food boxes in order to put in place local support beyond August 2020 where it was needed. For example, one organisation in Derry and Strabane, following the end of the national box scheme for people who were shielding or unable to access food for financial reasons reported:

“We still helped and supported maybe 30 or 40 through our own [food boxes], and then it just went back to normal to be honest within a few weeks. We were worried at the time, but it did. We just let it naturally happen. Essentially then, so from August/September time we might have got the odd one. We listened to them and we supported them or whatever. They were subsumed back in under our family support, and if there was any individual that didn’t meet the criteria for family support, you know I am talking one-offs, one or two a week or something, we would liaise and support them like anybody would do, based on their circumstances. That was the situation.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Although the local and national government food box schemes were approaching a wind down phase this varied in practice in different places and for different kinds of provision. For example, in Northern Ireland national food boxes for people who faced financial barriers to accessing food stopped on the 26th of June 2020 whilst food boxes for those who were shielding continued to the 31st of July 2020. The fresh food parcel provided by Argyll and Bute Council stopped at the end of June 2020, but the ambient parcels continued, with the addition of a small amount of fresh produce, until the end of July 2020.

4. Actors in the response and types of response provided

Various actors undertook a range of roles in providing a response to the pandemic, summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Key actors and their roles in a response to the pandemic

| Key actors | Role |
|--|---|
| Local councils | Helplines, financial advice or assistance, direct food provision, support for third sector food response. |
| Local food poverty alliances or food partnerships | Co-ordinated food responses, facilitated collaborative working, channelled |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><i>These could be formal or informal. Some existed before the crisis (e.g. some members of the Food Power and/or Sustainable Food Places networks or the Feeding Britain network) others were set up in response to the crisis (e.g. the Swansea Together project or Good Food for Glasgow).² In some areas, partnership working was less formalised and involved practices of working together.</i></p> | <p>resources, collated and shared information on available support.</p> |
| <p>Third sector projects previously providing food</p> <p><i>Such as existing food aid providers, food banks and other community food projects.</i></p> | <p>Established local helplines, promoted support and identified households who would benefit from support.</p> <p>Adapted previous food responses in response to need and guidelines. Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided smaller food packs to minimise shopping trips for people who were staying at home.</p> |
| <p>Third sector projects newly providing food</p> <p><i>A variety of projects that previously had not provided food support began to offer food assistance for example housing associations, community councils and sports clubs</i></p> | <p>Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery. Also provided support with shopping (collecting shopping and prescriptions for people shielding or self-isolating).</p> |
| <p>Informal groups</p> <p><i>Local community, neighbourhood or ad hoc support through social media or local communication</i></p> | <p>Support with shopping, informal, 'neighbourhood food banks', 'pop up food banks'</p> |
| <p>Local businesses</p> <p><i>Supporting the food response</i></p> | <p>Donations, resources, in kind</p> |

² <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>, <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>, <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>, https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

Around this local landscape were the national responses, delivery of which was sometimes delegated to the local authorities and the third sector. It is important to note that many of these actors worked together and collectively to provide a response, with significant interaction between the actors. These actors and the types of response they provided are discussed below.

4.1 Key Actor: Local Authorities

During the spring/summer 2020 lockdown, local authorities played several different roles in responses to food access issues, described below.

4.1.1 Helplines and support promotion

Councils in all case study areas ran helplines for residents to ring for support which connected people to food support. The structure of the helplines varied across areas. For example, in Moray the helpline was part of the wider 'Grampian Hub' which covered two local authority areas and was staffed by people who worked for the two local authorities as well as other statutory and third sector organisations, and in Leeds the Council provided two telephone helplines, the existing Welfare Support Scheme helpline and a specific COVID-19 helpline. It is worth noting that many third sector organisations also established helplines. For example, in Glasgow a further city-wide helpline, named Glasgow Helps, was implemented by Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector.

Regardless of the structure these helplines became a key gateway for people requiring support with food, with this often being the reason for calls to the helplines. For example, the Belfast Council helpline handled 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st July 2020. 7,838 of these calls were requests for support and 6,908 (88%) of these calls related to support with food.³ In Glasgow 57% of calls to the 'Glasgow Helps' helpline related to food or shopping support.⁴ In Cardiff the proportion of calls to the helpline reduced over time: over March 23-31st 69% of calls related to food, in April 54%, May 56% and June 33%.⁵

Councils also undertook extensive promotion of these helplines and the wider suite of support that was available. For example, Bradford Council undertook an extensive promotions campaign including letters sent to every household, leaflet distribution, posters displayed in the city and mobile LED screens transported on cars or worn by people, playing videos in multiple languages. In Leeds, communication about the support the Council could offer was also targeted to people living in the more economically deprived parts of the city.

³Belfast City Council (2020) COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report – August 2020. Available here: <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

⁴ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

⁵ Data provided by research participant

“We did a leaflet drop in deprived areas, looking at the index multiple deprivation for that targeting.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

4.1.2 Direct government food provision

In all four countries national schemes were established to support people who were shielding and unable to access food. In Northern Ireland the national scheme also supported households facing financial access barriers to food. In each country, this food provision was in the form of weekly food parcels delivered to households. Some councils played a role in operationalising this national scheme.

Belfast Council took the lead in coordinating and delivering the national scheme at the local level. Their role included signing people who were eligible up for the scheme, undertaking requirement assessments, receiving referrals and storing food. Deliveries were made by a combination of redeployed council staff and through a partnership with the Red Cross. Due to a number of concerns with the national scheme Swansea Council took over the “last mile” delivery of the Welsh Government’s shielding food parcel scheme in June.

“We found that there were issues, there were parcels going missing or stolen. We knew that we could do, for want of a better way of describing it, a better job of delivery. So we had all the parcels delivered to one location in Swansea and then a council team got involved and they took over the delivery. The beauty of that was that A) they know Swansea, but B) they could add more care to the delivery of the parcels; they could take more time on making sure that that parcel got to the individual... We really, really improved the success rate of getting a parcel to the individual” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

As well as this involvement in the national schemes many councils began providing their own local government food parcels. There were several reasons for this local government provision. These included providing support to a much wider range of eligible households than the national scheme which, with the exception of Northern Ireland, only provided boxes to people who were shielding; providing a wider range of fresh food than the national schemes; providing rapid support in crisis situations; providing food as a ‘stop gap’ before receipt of national government food parcels; and providing tailored support for individual households.

Offering wider eligibility was a common reason for the provision of food parcels by local councils. For example, Argyll and Bute Council provided fresh and ambient food boxes to individuals or households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason, individuals or households experiencing financial vulnerability, households of children entitled to free school meals as well as fresh parcels to households who were shielding. Glasgow City Council provided parcels to a ‘shielding plus’ cohort. Moray Council opted to provide fresh food parcels to people who were on the shielding list and identified by the Council money advice team as also potentially facing financial access barriers (due to being in receipt of benefits, households eligible for free school meals etc). These parcels acted as a supplement to the national boxes.

“Also, what became prevalent was that the Scottish Government food boxes didn’t contain a lot of fruit and veg. So, following discussions at the management level of

the assistance hub we agreed that we would further supplement people that were shielded and that were receiving a food box with a fruit and veg bag as well.”
(Council staff respondent, Moray Council)

Herefordshire Council provided food parcels to people on the NHS shielding list as a “stop-gap” until the Government’s shielding food box programme was fully established. This was done in response to concerns that the Government’s shielding boxes were not signed up for fast enough, nor were they distributed fast enough or consistently in the first weeks. For these reasons, this provision ran from the end of March till the end of May 2020.

In Merton and Leeds the Councils provided parcels for people in an immediate need or crisis situation. For example, in Leeds callers to the helplines who required food support were passed onto a newly established food warehouse where they were rated using an established system (RAG rating), based on the level of urgency of need:

“They’d ring the Local Welfare Support line and a referral was made to this new food warehouse. Then from that there was a RAG system, a red, amber, green system, where if it was rated red, they needed support within 24 hours and delivery was done direct by council staff that were working at the warehouse.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Many councils provided boxes that were tailored to specific households needs, such as catering for dietary requirements. Cardiff Council provided a food box to people for who the design of the national shielding box scheme was not appropriate:

“If people couldn’t physically pick up a box from their doorstep, Cardiff Council would provide the boxes for them instead so that social services could go in with an actual box and make sure that it wasn’t just left on the doorstep.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

In some areas the national and the local schemes operated entirely independently. For example, in Moray and Argyll and Bute eligible households would receive deliveries of the food parcels from the two different schemes on different days. One participant reflected that some households that were shielding opted out of the national scheme in preference for the local scheme.

“There were good reasons why that [the national scheme] happened that way, but it then meant people... people wanted to opt out of the shielding boxes and take ours, and that happened, we had people opt out of the national shielding boxes and come onto our programme because they knew it was a better offer.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

In other areas there seemed to be less of a distinction between the operationalisation of the two schemes. For example, Bradford Council initially established a central food distribution hub to distribute the national food boxes, however, the hubs were subsequently also used to provide food parcels to a wider range of people, not only people who were shielding.

4.1.3 Income advice and assistance

We heard examples of local councils increasing both awareness and availability of existing advice services as well as making changes to discretionary financial support.

Increasing awareness and availability of existing local advice services

Derry City and Strabane District Council, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, provided additional funding to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in evenings and weekends. Belfast Council increased their promotion of the advice services to ensure people were aware of their existence and the services offered.

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

The Money Advice Team at Cardiff Council was expanded over the lockdown period to enable them to take more calls, and they set up a triage system to help direct people towards correct benefit entitlements. They also set up a Cardiff Money Advice website, in the first weeks of the lockdown to provide simple and clear advice on money, benefits, and debt, and it also had a specific COVID-19 advice section.

Some councils were also being very proactive in offering support and advice to people who were newly accessing social security. For example, the money advice team at Moray Council phoned new applicants to explain key details of Universal Credit such as it being a monthly payment and that any advance payments would be deducted from later payments.

Financial assistance schemes

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland prior to the pandemic, discretionary crisis grants were available through national schemes. Changes were made to these schemes at a national level.⁶ Councils continued to refer and signpost people to this support where appropriate. For example, in Swansea, awareness of and referrals to the Discretionary Assistance Fund increased.

“I think the Discretionary Assistance Fund certainly came into its own during the lockdown, doing the pandemic, this would have been widely distributed... It was referred to much more; we could support people with applying for it, that kind of thing...” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

⁶ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

In England Local Welfare Assistance Schemes which are administered at a local authority level may provide discretionary grants or support with basic needs, such as food. Decisions regarding these schemes are made at a local authority level. We heard of local councils adapting their local welfare assistance schemes in response to COVID-19. For example, Leeds Council relaxed their eligibility criteria, offering support to residents impacted by the pandemic, including those with no recourse to public funds, and households where occupants were self-isolating or shielding.

“We already had the existing Local Welfare Support helpline and during the start of the pandemic we relaxed all criteria, so anybody needing support was able to be supported with food in that time. (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Moray Council used funding from the Scottish Government to provide a flexible food fund. This was a fund established specifically to support households with food expenses in response to COVID-19. This fund was in addition to the availability of the Scottish Welfare Fund. This fund is described in detail in the individual write up. Briefly, the flexible food fund provided eligible households (defined very broadly) with two cash transfers, one a month to support them with food (and associated costs). The second payment was made provisional on the recipients engaging with the wider support available through the Council’s money advice team.

4.1.4 Facilitating support with shopping

Some councils (Argyll and Bute, Glasgow, West Berkshire and Bradford) established systems to support access to shopping for people who were able to afford food but were physically unable to access it. Argyll and Bute Council introduced a scheme which allowed a member of the community to go shopping for somebody and charge that to a credit facility, owned by the Council, at the till. The Council then invoiced the recipient. Bradford Council provided a shopping service for those unable to do online shopping or access a shopping slot, taking payment through the customer service number.

Although West Berkshire Council set up a system to support volunteer shopping they also observed that the community groups providing this support devised their own mechanisms.

“We set up systems where cash wasn’t really needed so that we gave one or two community groups what I called a community purse. So, there was a pot of money that they were given so that they could reimburse the volunteer whilst the person who had received the service could write a cheque and it could be banked. Now, most of our community groups didn’t even need that. They just worked it out for themselves, how they were going to – they set up a volunteers’ pot and things like that.” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire).

Participants in other areas noted that retailers established systems to support volunteer shopping, so input from local councils was not necessary. One participant from Moray noted,

“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, Moray)

4.1.5 Partnering with and funding third sector organisations to deliver a food-based response

Rather than, or as well as, providing food parcels directly some local councils took a partnership approach with the Council supporting other organisations to deliver a direct food response.

Support for existing food banks

In some cases, this was support to existing food bank organisations. For example, Merton Council supported one of the existing food banks in several ways, including the provision of funding, and providing staff and vehicles belonging to the Council’s team of bailiffs who, combined with volunteer drivers, moved food around the distribution sites and delivered food parcels to clients. The Council also provided vans for “housekeeping” tasks:

“The local council were very helpful. If we needed extra vans, if we needed cardboard removed from the building and stuff like that, they were very, very quick at making things happen for us. I mean, I would say that they prioritised our needs.”
(Third sector respondent, Merton)

In Herefordshire, the Council supported food banks in a substantial way through both funding and in-kind support:

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

Cardiff Council worked with the Cardiff Foodbank to deliver food parcels on their behalf as the food bank did not have the capacity to do home deliveries. In these cases the food bank provided the Council with the food parcels to distribute from the Councils community hubs.

Supplying food, funding and resources to other third sector organisations

As well as direct support for existing food banks some councils provided support for a wider range of organisations providing a food response. For example, Swansea Council purchased food from local suppliers for food distribution centres which were then accessed by third sector providers. Similarly, Merton Council purchased food, and also received regular supplies from FareShare, which was then distributed to the third sector groups providing food parcels. As well as supplying food, Swansea Council supported organisations by providing sites for the public to donate food and storing the food for further distribution in a COVID-19 compliant way. One third sector respondent described this arrangement and how it was used to manage infection risks:

“I coordinated with the Council, I said, “I need these centres all over the city, donation hubs.” So, the public can donate food. And [the Council] did, they opened four of them... So, when Costa shut down, they delivered everything there. And then what happened was I’d call them and go, “What have you got? I need this, this and this,” and then the Council drivers would drop a van of all donations down. We came up with an idea of we needed rotational areas. Obviously guidance [from Public Health Wales] is the bug is 72 hours. So, if we could sit food for 72 hours and have seven stations in that community centre, a big, huge hall, then you know that, on a Thursday, I can take the Monday pile and it’s free and sanitised, self-sanitised, and there has been no-one touching it.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

In other areas the council support with food supplies was channelled through another organisation who took the lead in coordinating the third sector response. These lead organisations purchased food for further distribution. For example, Bradford Council provided funding to another organisation to procure and distribute food stocks for the established food aid organisations. Similarly, Greenwich Council supported another local organisation to establish a food box scheme by providing funding for the purchase of food, enabled use of one of the Council’s community centres and redeployed a nutritionist from the Council’s Public Health team to assist in planning and preparing the content of the food boxes.

In another model, West Berkshire Council acted as a conduit between a supplier, which they funded to supply food boxes, and the third sector organisations and community groups that delivered them to the communities. A member of council staff was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from the supplier and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups.

“So they would – the community [group] would ring up our community hub and say “I need a food parcel “so we would then do a referral across to [the supplier] for that, for the food parcel, then they would send me a list every Thursday for the following week on who was on their list for food and in what area. So I would break that down into areas and I would then send an email out to the lead of the community group and say I’ve these people in this area who need a food parcel, are you able to find someone who can pick it up and take it and drop it off and they would say yes and then...” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire)

Funding designated lead organisations

Rather than funding the food which was then redistributed, other councils provided funding to a designated lead organisation(s) for further redistribution. For example, Edinburgh Council provided significant funding to EVOC (the Council for Voluntary Service for the City of Edinburgh) who were commissioned to provide the governance over the further distribution of funds to other third sector organisations. Derry and Strabane District Council provided funding to the eight local Community Growth Partnerships which appointed an organisation to lead on the food response in each area. Similarly, Belfast Council provided funding to nine ‘strategic partners’ to provide food and other support at a local community

level. As well as utilising the funding to provide services the strategic partners also further distributed this funding to local groups.

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

In areas where this model was utilised, the rationale for providing the funding directly to the third sector rather than undertake a significant level of direct food provision themselves, was often the belief that the third sector were in a better position to know and respond to community needs.

“We relied heavily on our colleagues within the third sector, because in most cases... the third sector are there in the neighbourhoods working across the city and were able... hundreds of organisations who were within GCVS [Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector], who quickly used their local knowledge, their local skills and their transport, etc.” (Council staff respondent, Glasgow)

4.1.6 Staff support

Councils also contributed significant staff resources to support food responses. For example, Herefordshire Council's Talk Community Response teams had Community Link Workers to 'inform, support, and coordinate the community response'. Similarly, in Moray the existing community support team, whose usual focus was to support capacity building in the community, took on the role of supporting the community response. Each community support officer in the team 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, Moray)

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 response within the community. Swansea Council set up a Food Administration Team made up of 14 redeployed staff that signposted people to help with food and Local Area Coordinators provided signposting to support, help with shopping and were involved in local volunteer coordination.

Some council staff also contributed to third sector responses in a very 'hands on' way. For example, the Swansea Food Administration Team sometimes did deliveries of the food parcels for the local food bank. Moray Council school catering teams supported a local third sector organisation to cook large quantities of food to provide a meals on wheels service. Greenwich Council's Environmental Health team provided food safety training for non-food aid groups and individuals preparing meals.

“...there was a sailing charity that doesn't normally distribute hot food, and they were making hot food in their kitchen and delivering it to people's houses. We just made sure that they had all of the right health, environmental health stuff. But we also put Environmental Health in touch with groups to make sure everything was safe.” (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

4.2 Key Actor: Local food poverty alliances and food partnerships

Partnership working was a key characteristic of local responses to food access issues over the spring and summer of 2020. In some cases, these were through existing alliances and partnerships (such as food poverty alliances and food partnerships), in others formal alliances, partnerships or networks were newly formed (including COVID-19 response partnerships) and in others there was looser partnership working.

4.2.1 Food poverty alliances in the Food Power network

As discussed in the methodological appendix four of the case study areas were specifically chosen due to the presence of a food poverty alliance that was a member of the Food Power network, a UK-wide network of food poverty alliances.⁷ These areas were Belfast, Cardiff, Herefordshire and Moray. These alliances played different roles in the response depending on the focus of their activity prior to the pandemic. The research did not involve a formal evaluation of the work of these alliances but did provide some important insight into their role and activity over this time.

Food Cardiff sits within the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board's local public health team, and works closely with the Cardiff Council, as well as various community food and food aid organisations working across the city. Food Cardiff played a leading role in the COVID-19 food response across the city. Their activities included use of social media to flag actions being taken by organisations, businesses, and service providers to help link people with food. It was hoped this would reduce duplication of services. They also wrote a briefing note for Cardiff Council, which outlined the key issues they had identified and their recommendations for what the Council should do. The main recommendations in this briefing note were for the Council to establish a COVID-19 Food Response group, which Food Cardiff then took the lead on setting up. In April, Food Cardiff, in partnership with the Covid-19 Food Response Task group, Cardiff Council and Cardiff 3rd Sector Council set up Cardiff's "City-wide food response".⁸

In Moray, the 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.

In Herefordshire the food poverty alliance had not been active in early 2020 so did not engage in work related to responding to COVID-19 in the first months of the pandemic. However, it was described that as a result of seeing how many different groups were engaging in responses to concerns about food access across the county over the spring

⁷ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/map/>

⁸ Food Cardiff (2020) Cardiff city wide food response, version 6.1 30th April 2020. Available here: <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/05/30.4.20-City-wide-food-response-6.1.pdf>

2020, meetings of the alliance were re-initiated in July 2020, particularly with an aim to help coordinate activity.

Belfast Food Network sent out a comprehensive newsletter to all members every fortnight throughout the Summer of 2020 which detailed some of the responses across the city, some of the work the Councils were doing and different funding opportunities. To some extent they also became a contact point for people who wanted to help. They also distributed funding which they had received to provide grants to local food businesses, aimed at alleviating the impact of COVID-19 and supporting businesses to adapt their business models. Belfast Food Network opted to provide this support, rather than a direct food response themselves, describing the provision of food aid in the city as being “*saturated*”.

4.2.2 Other existing alliances (non-Food Power Network members)

In Leeds, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Argyll and Bute there were established alliances that played a role in the food aid response. Leeds Food Aid Network included third sector partners engaged in food aid, food waste reduction and sustainability.⁹ Over the spring and summer 2020 they supported network members with volunteer recruitment and help in activities such as transportation, in addition to conducting an audit of food aid provision and recording the activities of partners. During the pandemic, the Food Aid Network gathered reports on progress and challenges from their members. Weekly meetings were held between the Council and their commercial and third sector partners. This provided a means of identifying opportunities to collaborate, and for the different organisations to offer one another support.

“The Food Aid Network and the weekly call was there to try and enable and facilitate them working together and seeing what some of the challenges were.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

The Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance, part of Feeding Britain, was well established in the city. The alliance comprised 70 member organisations. In February 2020, staff members from Storehouse (who were tasked by the Council to provide food supplies to food banks) and Feeding Bradford and Keighley met with the Council to discuss the likely support food banks would need in the face of increased food insecurity. One of the first actions was an audit of food bank use, in order to be able to predict the stocks which might subsequently be required. Subsequently, Storehouse and Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance worked closely together, liaising weekly to ensure strategic supply of food and data reporting. Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance also supplied Storehouse with 25 tonnes of food.

Argyll and Bute Council initiated the set-up of the Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum in early 2019 with the rationale of connecting community food providers and building relations between them and the Council. After preparatory work the Food Forum was officially ‘launched’ with an event in February 2020 and members of all food banks in the area were invited to the launch. The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the March – August 2020 period to share experiences and support each other.

⁹ Please note - subsequent to the period of data collection Leeds Food Aid Network registered as a member of the Food Power network.

Edible Edinburgh, an alliance of organisations working across Edinburgh which works on food issues in multiple domains, including access to affordable food, food growing, sustainability, and the development of a healthy food culture, created a specific COVID-19 webpage providing signposting to the actions being taken in Edinburgh to support people with food access including links to council and third sector support. In Glasgow, the existing Glasgow Food Policy Partnership, supported by the Sustainable Food Places co-ordinator and Glasgow Community Food Network, played a key role in connecting and supporting local groups providing a response.

4.2.3 New COVID-19 partnerships

In some areas, such as Greenwich, Merton, Glasgow and Swansea, we heard of partnerships that were developed in response to COVID-19. These tended to be built on existing relationships or partnerships that were in place already. The partnerships sought to link up and facilitate communal support for organisations that were providing a food aid response.

One of the first actions taken by Greenwich Council was to establish a COVID-19 food response group. This was chaired by the CEO of Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency and included members such as Greenwich Foodbank, council staff from the Public Health and Environmental Health departments, Children's Centre staff, Health Visitors, Charlton Athletic Community Trust, representatives of community centres and various third sector groups. A clearly defined food response pathway was developed in the first few weeks of the pandemic, setting out the organisational responsibility for different needs and the criteria for the different forms of support. This group met regularly throughout March to July 2020.

In Merton, over the spring and summer of 2020, a new network of food providers was established called the Merton Community Fridge Network (MCFN). Members of the group included Sustainable Merton, Wimbledon Food bank, Wimbledon Guild, The Don's, Kommunity Kitchen, Salvation Army, Commonsides Community Development Trust, Friends in St. Helier, Association for Polish Family, Tooting and Mitcham Football Club. All these were organisations that were providing some form of food aid in response to the pandemic.

In Glasgow, a newly established coalition was set up, Food for Good Glasgow. The informal coalition was led by Glasgow Community Food Network with partners including Slow Food Glasgow, Strathclyde Uni Food Sharing group with oversight and extra capacity from Glasgow Food Policy Partnership. The coalition was set up to offer community groups support with supplies and logistics.¹⁰ One of the first responses to concerns about rising food insecurity in Swansea during the pandemic was the Swansea Together project. Swansea Together was initiated very early in the pandemic by Matthew's House in response to seeing people who were vulnerably housed being unable to access usual daily meal provision offered across the city. Matthew's House organised a meeting very early (18th March), bringing together their network of people and organisations who they worked in coordination

¹⁰ Sustainable Food places (2020) Glasgow's local response to COVID-19. 21st May 2020. Available here : https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

with across the city. This included other meal providers, representatives from the Council, SCVS, an NHS homeless outreach nurse, and other organisations involved in supporting people who are homeless, such as Crisis. The aim was to provide a meal service to ensure that people who are vulnerably housed, many of whom had been moved off the streets and put into temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfasts and hostels, were still able to have regular access meals.

4.2.4 Informal partnerships and working together

As well as the formal partnerships that were in place or established there was also a lot of informal partnership working in many of the case studies.

One participant described the collaboration that took place amongst third sector organisations in West Berkshire,

“The collaboration between the charities in West Berkshire has been incredible. We have all stepped up. We have all built relations where they maybe weren’t as strong before. They are strong relationships, and I am very proud of the relationships that we have, sat here today. It has been amazing. And we’ve all done damned well at it. I’m so proud of us all, it’s been brilliant, how we’ve worked together.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In Edinburgh it was described how stronger partnerships developed over the spring and summer, facilitated by weekly meetings, as described below:

“There are four localities in Edinburgh, and in those localities are all sorts of community groups... But, what happened was, although these localities were known to each other, and there was, kind of, loose working relationships, we set up weekly meetings, so people got together and decided what the strategy was and how they would, you know, work together to get funds, get food out, and any additional needs.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

4.3 Key Actor: Existing third sector organisations doing direct food provision

Existing third sector organisations played a key role in the response, including food banks and organisations already providing non-emergency food aid. Some of the local community organisations often set up local helplines, for example, in Derry and Strabane the lead organisation for each of the district electoral areas ran a local helpline for their designated area. Third sector organisations also undertook similar promotion activities to that of the Councils (described above), being proactive in getting the information about possible support out to the community.

Generally, across the third sector organisations the types of food provision were food parcels for collection, food parcels for home delivery, take away hot meals, and home delivery of hot meals. In order to provide these services existing food aid providers made a significant number of adaptations. Referring to local food banks one respondent in Herefordshire observed:

“They went through a huge overhaul, in the short space of time, as well as having to adapt their delivery model... Not all, some of them have [started delivery of food

parcels], and have remained with that, some have socially distanced appointments... So a lot of them are offering food parcels that are pre-packed with a set type of ingredients, with different food in them.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

Another food bank in Argyll and Bute spoke of redesigning their services:

“We redesigned the service. We decided that we had a layout and a hall that would facilitate a walkthrough service. So basically people come to the front door. We reduced the amount of information we were going to ask for, because we decided that we would just be a food provider, not an advice centre or a counselling or support service.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

The individual case study reports provide full details of these adaptations which are summarised below.

Means of distribution:

- Providing home deliveries of food parcels
- ‘Collect and go’ model for food parcels
- Reduced the number of food parcel distribution sessions
- Food parcels provided to referral agents to distribute directly
- Other people able to pick up food parcels on someone else’s behalf

Parcel Contents

- Pre-packed parcels (rather than offering choice)
- Parcel content (amount and food stuffs) varying with food supply
- Increasing size and content of the food parcels (e.g. 7 days supply rather than 3)

Referrals:

- Accepting self-referral
- Accepting alternate form of referrals from referrers (e.g. phone calls, emails, e-referrals)

Other:

- Buying food wholesale (to overcoming sourcing issues in early weeks)
- Minimal information collected from people accessing support – simply about providing food
- Changed venues to allow for better social distancing

Other types of community food providers, such as those providing community meals, community lunches and community cooking groups changed as a result of these types of activities not continuing during lockdown. The types of changes made included providing hot meals for takeaway, home deliveries of hot meals, providing food parcels (collect and delivered) and virtual cookery and other support sessions.

“...there is a church, for instance, that has for years provided hot meals on a Saturday for those who were either lonely, homeless or whatever. And that is one that we have advertised for years. And they changed their operation during COVID

to producing takeaway meals, and they were then open more than just Saturdays. So, they were inviting people to come and take a meal. And they were not alone, there were a significant number of those things going on.” (Third sector respondent, Greenwich).

We also learned of some organisations providing food packs as a way to reduce the number of times people may have needed to visit the shops, therefore reducing their risk. Such packs were not intended to meet all their food needs, but rather to keep essential supplies topped up.

“I call them pensioner packs because they were like basic supplies to pensioners who probably had maybe food but just needed like bread, the wee basics that they may be picked up from the shop every other day.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

As well as this direct food provision we heard of other types of support being offered by the existing food aid providers including vouchers and cash payments. Some third sector organisation started providing vouchers for shops, either as their main form of support or in addition to food parcels. The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) reported use of vouchers as an alternative to direct food provision¹¹. Moray Food Plus, for example, distributed vouchers 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. One of the benefits of this approach, for the food providers themselves, was the easing of pressure on the direct food responses.

“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, Moray)

Other organisations provided people with vouchers for fuel. We also heard of one food bank in Argyll and Bute providing all food bank clients with money to cover fuel bills.

“Twice during the summer we gave them money towards their gas and electricity bills. It was funded by grants that we specifically applied for to do that. The general thing was, “Please can we not have things that we have to cook in an oven because we can’t afford the power?” We did it across the board because it’s not for us to judge who deserves it and who doesn’t. Everybody who came in those periods got money for gas and electric. (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

¹¹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>

Although not an adaptation that food aid providers necessarily intended to make, we learned of times when food banks had to temporarily close due to a COVID-19 case amongst staff or volunteers or to accommodate self-isolation needs.

4.4 Key actor: Third sector organisations newly offering direct food provision

As well as the adaptations made by existing community food providers a number of organisations newly started providing food aid. For example, a survey by the Glasgow Community Food Network that mapped food aid providers during the pandemic reported that of the 95 organisations participating in the survey 18 were new providers of food aid, 14 of which were providing food parcels. Similar to the existing food aid providers the types of food provision offered by these organisations were commonly food parcels for collection, food parcels for home delivery, take away hot meals, and home delivery of hot meals. The switch to food aid was in direct response to the needs that were being witnessed in communities. One participant from Belfast said:

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

The types of organisations newly providing food aid were incredibly varied. This included organisations that ordinarily provided support (but not food support) to specific populations groups, housing associations, community councils, development trusts, churches, faith groups, and sports clubs.

“They changed the project. They completely reprofiled a project basically, to be able to meet the needs of their community, which is basically people with learning disabilities and their families. So, they walked straight into the middle of very regular parcels and actually hot meals and things as well” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

“There was funding for [food aid given to] 28 housing associations out of the 30, I think it was, as well, so quite a few of them hadn’t done any food or food partnership working before.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

As well as this direct food provision often the new food aid providers offered a service to support people with shopping.

“The best service to the elderly was the shopping and befriending service and prescription service. That was the sort of thing that they needed. We would have been doing a lot of that.... So, I had the helpline number, which was advertised all around so that everybody was aware of it in the local area. I took the call if someone needed shopping, either I would do it or some of the other volunteers would do it, or a prescription delivered, or if it was a case of somebody had phoned an order

through a shop and needed the delivery doing for the shop, all on a voluntary basis, none of it funded. (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Organisations were very proactive in publicising their new food aid services. For example, one research participant talked of a community group in Belfast making posters with their contact details and sellotaping it to the windows of houses in their area. Others did leaflets posted through people's doors.

“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.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

4.5 Key Actor: Informal groups

Another key support for food access during the first national lockdown came from quite informal ad hoc support that was provided at a very local level. This support was often in the form of helping out with shopping, collecting prescriptions or providing welfare calls. Usually this was neighbours helping neighbours or very localised COVID-19 response groups.

“What we found was a lot of community groups had started up their own WhatsApp groups, their own Facebook groups, in order to address the needs of the people who were isolating and shielding and couldn't get access to food or prescriptions or they arranged welfare calls. That was being established in communities all over the city and the county.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

“The burden of the actual supporting communities was taken by those voluntary groups who were going out and doing the shopping and picking up the prescriptions and delivering them.” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire)

It was shared by one third sector respondent in our Cardiff workshop that it was important that this response was “neighbour-to-neighbour” and that “keeping it less formalised and more neighbourly” was important to them.

As well as support with shopping some of the informal neighbourhood groups provided free food parcels. For example, in Leeds, where some of the food bank distribution centres had shut, informal and small scale neighbourhood level food bank type activity was established,

“I want to call them, kind of, neighbourhood food banks, but like on particular streets people giving out free food or collecting food and giving it out that way. They're smaller neighbourhoods. So, some of that provision popping up, a little bit in areas where our food bank centres would usually have been.” (Third sector respondent, Leeds)

4.6 Key Actor: Local businesses

Across case study areas many local businesses adapted to offer delivery or takeaway. Two websites were developed in Northern Ireland to provide a source of information on what businesses were available. 'InYourArea', is a website which allows people to search from businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.¹² 'Who is delivering? Northern Ireland' is a Facebook page that shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.¹³

The business response in Cardiff was described:

"In Cardiff, we are really lucky in that there are a lot of organisations that do food delivery, not just the big supermarkets, there are lots of local shops, and a lot of the local shops did actually really meet that head on by adapting their working model as well actually, and moving to deliveries and things like that, which certainly in Cardiff helped." (Council staff respondent, Cardiff)

Hospitality businesses that were closed for 'usual' service also started to provide free or low-cost meals to people in need. For example, a local café in one of the towns in Argyll and Bute prepared and delivered five hot meals a week for £10 for anyone who was elderly and vulnerable. Similarly, in Belfast local pubs started providing meals to the elderly:

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

Other businesses that ordinarily did not provide a food service also became involved in supporting food access in a variety of ways. For example, in Swansea the Mecca Bingo Hall became engaged in cooking for people who are vulnerably housed. In one town in Argyll and Bute a local toy shop became a point of contact for people that found themselves without food. In Greenwich a boiler maintenance company started collecting food and making it available to people in need.

"...there is a shop that belongs to a boiler maintenance company – which may seem strange – and they put a table outside and labelled it as "Food donations for those in need." They put a basket out there for people to donate into, and then they invited people to call and ask for food... That was a business. (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

In Belfast a local frame maker and gallery started making and delivering soup to people who were isolating in south and east Belfast. A team of local chefs from local restaurants made the soup. Their website describes the initiative, which finished on the 31st of May 2020:

¹² https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

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

In West Berkshire the owner of a local kitchen company started collecting and delivering food parcels on behalf of the local food bank.

“She [the owner] decided to contact the food bank and say, “What can I do to help? My shop is shut but we are going to sit in our shop every day, just in case, for any mad reason, somebody wants to come in and buy a kitchen because we don’t know what else to do. Can we help you? So, they became a delivery hub. So, we would literally make up the boxes for Thatcham, take them over to [name], and her and her husband would deliver them out in the afternoons, in their Dream Doors van.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

5. Targeted interventions

In addition to support targeted at people who were experiencing low income or were shielding, support with access to food was also in place for other key groups. Including families with school aged children, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers and refugees.

5.1 School food

The response for free school meal replacements differed across each of the four constituent countries and, within this, there was variation across local authorities. Full details of the national schemes are described in two previous reports published by this project.¹⁵ The Department for Communities and the Department for Education led on the national scheme in Northern Ireland, providing cash transfers to all eligible households. The Scottish and Welsh Governments encouraged local authorities to adopt approaches that met local needs and many opted, following an initial period of direct food provision, for a cash first approach. In England, schools and local authorities were encouraged to design the scheme although a national voucher system became the most heavily utilised option.

¹⁴ <https://www.frameworkbelfast.com/post/619622687522832384/today-is-the-last-day-of-our-soup-project>

¹⁵ Lambie-Mumford, H., Loopstra, R. and Gordon, K. (2020) Mapping responses to risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK, published August 2020; Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

England

In the English local authority areas we heard examples of other support being put in place for families with school children over and above the national voucher scheme. A headteacher from Greenwich participated in the research. They reported that the school where they worked remained open for approximately 25-30% of their registered students. These included vulnerable children, and the children of key workers. Students still attending school were able to collect surplus food provided by FareShare, as they had done prior to the pandemic and, where appropriate, were signposted to food banks. The school also began providing food parcels to the homes of vulnerable students not attending school, but about whom food access concerns were raised when the school made contact with the families:

“Well, they weren’t proactive. They didn’t email us because they were vulnerable, and part of our role during that lockdown was to email them and make telephone contact with the children to ensure that they were still safe. But in that you end up inevitably speaking to parents or with parents, and that way we were able to identify need, and some of them would say about food, and we were able to then deliver packages to parents.” (Education sector respondent, Greenwich)

Herefordshire Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers. To support these households, the Council also engaged with the Rotary who were providing food parcels. Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks who were offering support to families that were in need but not currently eligible for free school meals.

We also learned of food banks providing support to families eligible for free school meals. For example, in West Berkshire one of the food banks reported families eligible for free school meals were contacting them for support, particularly during the early months of the pandemic.

“During COVID, obviously when free school meals during the first lockdown wasn’t organised, we had a huge uptake. And that was obviously something that the families were saying – “We are entitled to free school meals, can you help us?” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In response, in addition to delivering food parcels to families, the food bank also provided parcels to about six or seven local schools for them to distribute as they saw fit. We also heard examples of food banks proactively contacting schools in the area to let them know the food bank was available as a source of support.

Northern Ireland

In the Northern Ireland case studies we heard of third sector organisations providing additional support over and above the cash transfers provided by the Department for Communities and the Department for Education such as providing packed lunches and activity packs. In Belfast one of the food banks provided lunch bags to school children during the summer school holidays providing 500 bags of five days’ worth of lunches. Many of the

families who accessed this support were those who were ineligible for the cash transfers that were provided to households eligible for free school meals through the national scheme. Referring to this national scheme the interviewee said:

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

Scotland

The response in Scotland differed between the local authority areas, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Free school meal replacement provision in 4 Scottish local authorities

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Argyll and Bute | Initially meals were collected from the school (from mid-March), then families received food boxes (mid-April – end of June), provision changed to cash transfers during the summer holidays (July onwards) |
| Edinburgh | Cash grants were provided to families - £2.25 per day, paid fortnightly |
| Glasgow | Families with children who were entitled to free school meals were provided with vouchers worth £20 per child each fortnight. The vouchers were for one supermarket chain (Farmfoods) |
| Moray | Initially grab and go bags collected from schools, changed to provision of vouchers after Easter holidays (from mid-April). Vouchers of £2.50 per day per child were provided fortnightly. |

As can be seen from Table 2 Argyll and Bute Council moved from a direct food response to a cash payment scheme at the start of the summer holidays. The rationale for this change was:

“And then as lockdown eased, we felt, at that time, it was the appropriate time to move away from that direct response and to provide a cash payment during the summer holiday period as lockdown eased. So, we have come in for a bit of criticism as to why are you delivering food and not enabling cash? But if you lived in a rural area, your nearest shop is ten miles away, there was no public transport and you had three kids to look after, having cash made no difference. So, that was very much a response for those families, and then when transport started to improve, kids were no longer at school, we felt, at that stage, it was absolutely the right thing to do, is protect the dignity and choice by providing a cash payment. So, that’s what we did.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute).

The rationale for cash provision in Edinburgh was that this cash would support social distancing measures to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus:

“A decision was made quite early on that those in receipt of free school meals would be given money and not food as a response, for various reasons, but I suppose one of the bigger ones being not wanting lots of families coming to one location, or in terms of trying to reduce the spread of the virus was one of the big concerns.”
(Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

As well as these cash transfers the Council provided additional food packages once a fortnight to families identified as more vulnerable by school staff. The packages were designed to provide food for two weeks’ worth of lunches, breakfast cereal and milk. The rationale for the additional fortnightly food boxes was based on concerns that the money provided would be absorbed by other essential costs rather than food, as shared below:

“But we were also aware that some families, that money, if it goes directly into an account, if there are direct debits, or whatever, needing to come out, the money might, the families would have the best intentions, but it might never actually materialise into food.” (Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

In Edinburgh Magic Breakfast provided replacements for some of the breakfast clubs that are usually held in schools.¹⁶

“We also linked with Magic Breakfast, who already run some of our breakfast clubs, and they wanted to continue providing that food to the clubs that they, or to the schools that they normally provide it for, which, initially, was a little bit difficult. But, again, it was mostly taken on by the schools and managed by the schools, and then, eventually, they managed to do direct delivery to houses through, I’m sure it was through Amazon. So, it was very much their normal breakfast provision, so cereal, bagels and beans type thing.” (Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

In Moray, schools and school link workers were proactive in contacting the eligible families to make sure that they were receiving the vouchers and explained how the vouchers would work and how to use them. Being rural, there was some concern regarding the travel costs that families would incur using the vouchers.

“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, Moray)

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

¹⁶ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>; Magic Breakfast (2020) Amazon home deliveries, <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/news/amazon-home-deliveries>

community organisation 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.

Wales

The schemes in the two case study areas in Wales evolved from initially being direct food provision to then taking the form of cash transfers. In Swansea, initially, replacements were provided in the form of cold lunches for pick-up. However, it was found that the take up of this provision was very low, possibly because of the difficulty of having to go to the school to pick up the lunch and because of safety concerns. This was then changed to schools providing a weekly shopping bag for families to pick up on Mondays, or it was delivered, enabling them to prepare food themselves at home for the week. This food bag system was only in place for a short period of time, as the Council then started providing a cash replacement instead, depositing money directly into parents' or guardians' bank account.

As Swansea is a City of Sanctuary, there is a significant population of asylum seekers and refugees.¹⁷ Ensuring a system of free school meal replacements for these families required a different response than money being deposited into bank accounts because these families may not have debit cards or because they may have limitations on funds they are allowed to have in bank accounts. Sandwich-type food parcels were also recognised to not provide culturally appropriate foods for many of these families. The Swansea Council for Voluntary Service and local authority and other organisations lobbied the Home Office for the following:

“We did manage to lobby and put pressure on the Home Office to actually allow the free school meal allowance go onto their Aspen Cards, which meant that they could then also have food, shopping, that way as well. So that I think was a big, well, we were all really rejoicing, we were thrilled with that.”¹⁸ (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

The scheme in Cardiff went through a similar development, initially starting with a “grab bag” programme, where parents could come to a school and pick up a takeaway lunch bag. In response to concerns with this approach, regarding the safety, stigma and people not wanting to go out, this was changed to vouchers. However, quickly this was changed and a system that was then offered was a direct cash payment system was introduced. Families received a direct money transfer to their bank account via ParentPay (an online payment system already established for paying school fees). The voucher system was also still offered, but it was shared that most parents opted for the ParentPay option. The value of support was £19.50 per week per child, covering both free school meal provision and breakfast provision. It was noted that in some cases, food parcels may have been provided (i.e. in cases where a family was self-isolating or where children were known to social services).

¹⁷ <https://swansea.cityofsanctuary.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

5.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups

In some areas the support provided to different population groups was discussed. The extent to which Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups were accessing the available support was a cause of concern. During the online workshop in Glasgow, whether different ethnic groups may have faced additional barriers to accessing food over the spring and summer in the city was discussed. This prompted reflections about whether such barriers were caused by culturally insensitive food provision, or resistance to seeking support from food aid. Respondents shared their knowledge and perceptions of barriers experienced by these Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in the following quotes:

“We have had a significant amount of feedback from ethnic minority populations in the city that they haven’t always felt able to access white services. I think that is really critical in a city that has as high a population of ethnic minorities as we do... I do actually think it is important to capture and how we think about it going forward.”
(Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

The subject of provision for Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities was also a theme running through the stakeholder workshop for Bradford. Some participants questioned whether the support from the food banks had reached Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities:

“...because what we have found in Bradford is that we haven’t had the call on the food banks from some of our Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities that we would’ve felt was appropriate, and, actually, [names] are currently looking at how that can be redressed, and looking at the possibility of specific satellite groups and food bank provision.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

This perspective was, however, challenged by one of our food bank respondents:

“We haven’t found that. Although our origins are faith-based, we’re a food bank, first and foremost, and we serve the whole community, and we have a huge percentage of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community accessing our services, and we have lots of referrals from different agencies who support Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, as well as asylum-seekers, as well as young mums/families. So, it’s not our experience that those people aren’t accessing our services or have limited access to our services.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Similarly, the work of other organisations to ensure different faith and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups were reached by food aid initiatives were described:

“...we have examples here, in Keighley, of good practice around this which have been led by the Keighley Food Poverty Group and [others], and they’ve done a lot of work with the mosques to get mosques involved, to also get imams to try and break down some of the barriers to people accessing food from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

In Edinburgh one organisation, Edinburgh Community Food conducted research to better understand the needs of these communities over the course of the spring and summer 2020 and tailored their response accordingly:

“We did a whole survey with Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, because we realised really early on that they weren’t engaging. They wouldn’t engage through the Council helplines... They were phoning us directly, and we were saying, “Well, you need to go through the Council to get this.” They were saying, “We don’t really want to do that.” We actually ended up getting a new piece of funding. We did a survey to find out what their eating habits were, what they needed, and then we built a tailored box round it.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

In the Belfast workshops participants highlighted how migrant workers or people working on temporary visas may have been disproportionately impacted by food access issues. One participant highlighted a reduction in public transport which impacted people on temporary work permits who may not have access to a car. They observed that this exacerbated access issues for some people in Asian communities due to the reduced opening hours of some of the Asian food retailers.

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

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

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

5.3 People experiencing homelessness

In West Berkshire the responses that were put in place to support people experiencing homelessness who had been provided temporary accommodation by the Council were discussed. Those providing food to this population group highlighted a challenge with this particular community was matching their needs with the type of products with which they were being provided. In addition to lacking food storage and preparation facilities, many people lacked food preparation skills:

“And that was quite interesting on the food side of it as well, because an awful lot of the people that we rehoused hadn’t really been catering for themselves for some considerable time, so there had to be some other things put in. Because a lot of the foods we were supplying, I think the classic line was, “No, when I said I wanted some food, mate, I meant ‘food’ food.” So, essentially, we were trying to supply fresh fruit and everything else and, in a way, there was a bit of a mismatch between what people wanted out of the ‘food’ food and what we were actually supplying, from our

point of view, being a balanced diet as best we could make it, with a lot of fresh produce. Whereas an awful lot of the people we were supporting, who had been long-term, either in temporary accommodation or had been homeless, whether it be street-homeless or whatever, didn't actually have the skill set to do that. So, at the time, we did have to do an awful lot of ready meals, which is not exactly what we set out to do. So, that of course meant that we had to go and try and source different items as well.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In Herefordshire, before the pandemic, a number of organisations provided hot meals to people who were experiencing homelessness or vulnerably housed. They offered various breakfasts and hot meals over the week, all coordinated so that there was something on offer each day of the week. These providers faced challenges around volunteers having to shield or self-isolate and their premises were also not of sufficient size to accommodate social distancing. Whilst one existing provider was able to make adjustments and continued to offer a Sunday takeaway meal most of the other hot meal provision was coordinated centrally through the Salvation Army:

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

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

5.4 Concern for groups who may not have been adequately supported

Whilst there were population groups that may have received targeted support there was still concern about other availability of support for other groups. For example, in Cardiff one respondent noted:

“I think it is still people who are most vulnerable who have been affected the most, and I think they fall through the net a bit on some occasions. We had people who had sensory incapacities, who use BSL communication, etc., who were missing out on a lot of information... they did not know what was happening. We also had engagement with people with learning disabilities as well, who really felt let down by not being able to access the information. Sometimes that relates to food as well, because they are not able to communicate in the same way.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

6. How people accessed support

Across case study areas there were a number of access points to receiving support.

6.1 Phone numbers for people seeking support

As noted above, both local councils and third sector organisations ran helplines, from which callers would be provided with or directed to appropriate support. These helplines became a key access point for food support.

In areas where there was a number of helplines running, one participant reflected that this may have caused some confusion, although organisations were subsequently trying to overcome this:

“That was a bit of confusion, to be honest, I have to say, because people in [island name removed], they had so many phone numbers they could possibly phone, there was some confusion, which we are now trying to pull together and trying to point people to the food bank. It was getting very complicated and people were getting quite confused.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

6.2 Referrals

As well as these centralised support lines to which people could self-refer, providers also accepted referrals from other organisations. This included referrals from statutory agencies, other third sector organisations and local community groups. Organisations that already had well established referral pathways noticed changes in the volume and type of organisations who were referring to them.

“Some [referral partners] were not so good at working from home, so initially, some really just went off the radar and we did not seem to get any referrals from some of the Council departments that we used to get referrals from.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

Alternate referral options were also provided to referrers. We heard examples of existing food aid providers adapting their referral methods to ensure their services remained accessible despite the changes referrers were having to make, such as working from home and no longer seeing clients face to face. New options included providing referral partners with a standardised email template. We also learned of a partnership between the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice to create a national helpline for people struggling to afford the basics.¹⁹ One participant told us they received referrals through this national helpline which overcame challenges of local Citizens Advice offices being closed.

Recognising there may have been uncertainty around the availability of the service, the food bank manager in Merton proactively contacted all referral agents to reassure them that the food bank was still operating, despite the fact that some statutory agencies were no longer seeing their clients:

“We spoke to all our voucher holders the first week that we realised there would be a lockdown. We told all of them we would be serving the community throughout the whole time. So, that’s over 230 organisations that have all got, I don’t know, 30, 50 or maybe 100 people sometimes, that all knew that if they had people that were talking

¹⁹ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/advice-partnerships/help-through-hardship/>

to them about the lack of food that they have, they could then refer people to us.”
(Third sector respondent, Merton)

6.3 Identifying people in need

Some organisations were also very proactive in identifying households who might require support. For example, the Salvation Army in Merton engaged with the organisation that ran a local adventure playground and local schools to identify families likely to need extra support. They contacted the families, identified their needs and established a food donation and distribution system at the borough’s adventure playground.

“Right at the very beginning, we were aware of how this was going to impact our local community, so we contacted the adventure playground and the local schools. Between us, we highlighted families that we were pretty sure were going to need some extra support. We then contacted those families direct, either through the schools or through the adventure playground, or through ourselves, and spoke to them about some of the needs that they might have.” (Third sector respondent, Merton)

In Belfast, knowledge of families who may need support, led to one organisation pre-empting food access issues in some of their existing clients:

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

6.4 Informal word of mouth

There was also some evidence of more informal sharing of knowledge of support amongst recipients which may have led to people accessing the support. For example, new population groups were observed in the food bank in Merton. One respondent shared serving people from the Tamil, Portuguese and Spanish communities for the first time. These were not unique individuals, but “whole communities” suggesting there may have been a cascade of information about available help within particular groups. One respondent involved with the food bank shared:

“When they couldn’t help each other, they started finding ways to get help instead, just like they would usually have supported each other. When they were unable to do that and they found a way to get a bit of help, they would tell others in exactly the same situation as them.” (Third sector respondent, Merton)

Despite all these efforts participants expected that there would still be people reluctant to seek support. This was perhaps exacerbated by the responses being provided at a very local level.

“One of the problems we find within [village name removed] was that we had self-referrals but mainly referrals from 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.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

7. Dynamics across the food response actors

A wide range of actors therefore responded in a variety of ways to food access issues during the COVID-19 pandemic between March – August 2020. Across the case studies we identified key dynamics between these actors including interaction and shared working, the role of new food providers and local responses to changing national provision.

7.1 Distribution of demand across actors

There was evidence that the demand for food support was distributed across the actors. This was perhaps most clearly exemplified in Leeds, where callers to the Council COVID-19 helpline were directed towards different actors depending on the urgency of their need, based on a newly established system (RAG rating):

“They’d ring the Local Welfare Support line and a referral was made to this new food warehouse. Then from that there was a RAG system, a red, amber, green system, where if it was rated red, they needed support within 24 hours and delivery was done direct by council staff that were working at the warehouse. If it was amber, it was they needed support within 2 to 3 days and that referral was distributed by the third sector that had partnered with us on this response. Then if it was green, I think that was four to seven days and that would go to the community care hubs for them to distribute the food or supplies.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

There were significant concerns about the impact of the pandemic on demand levels for existing food aid providers, many of whom saw an immediate spike in demand in the early weeks of the pandemic. However, as more actors came on board the demand was more distributed across actors and interventions. For example, one food bank in Leeds attributed reduced demand to both council interventions (direct food and Local Welfare Assistance) and other third sector partners. In addition, the food bank was very active in signposting people to these alternative sources of support. The food bank in Moray reported a similar experience:

“I think the reason we got quieter is because, obviously, we were signposting people to the [Council] money services ... and they were also able to get support locally as well.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

7.2 Provision by existing and new actors

A further dynamic emerged between the existing food aid providers and the new actors in the field. Whilst existing food aid providers welcomed the sentiment and the support of the new third sector and informal actors who were providing food aid there was some concern regarding this particularly around duplication of services and a lack of expertise.

For this reason, some of the existing organisations offered their support to the new actors. For example, despite some reservations about new 'pop up' food banks in the area the existing food bank in West Berkshire offered their support.

“So, these are very, very community-focused, and tend to be without criteria and tend to be without any of the signposting or the long-term. So, we've had conversations with all of them regarding food dependency and creating food dependency. Some of them get it, some of them don't. Because they just want to help. So, we have very much stood back and have turned around and said, “If you need support, we are here. If you get a complex case that you are worried about, let us know.” We have, obviously, all the safeguarding, training, and connections...” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

One food bank in Argyll and Bute tried to discourage other new actors establishing their own food aid project, but rather offered to work together and provide the support which was needed.

“We had one group from another community who wanted to come to us just to get supplies of food, so they could set up their own wee food bank in their own back yard. We discouraged that and said, “Well, look, we are here, and we are happy to help. Why don't you get people to come here? If they can't come themselves a neighbour can come or another volunteer.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute).

Being aware of both existing and new actors Bradford Council was very deliberate in its decision as to where to channel funding, preferring to support established providers, particularly where there were referral mechanisms in place, rather than ad hoc interventions:

“We had confidence in our food bank network. The spontaneity was at risk of precedent-setting, so we didn't feel confident that we could give Mrs Smith £200 for food when she was opening a Facebook site saying, “Come to my garden and you can have a food parcel,” because, at the same time, we had a mosque that was cooking hot meals for 200 or 300 people a week, or a businessman who'd got together with a group of businessmen that was providing hot food. And because they didn't have a referral system, we didn't know whether that was providing to the most vulnerable or to anybody that turned up at the door. So, it gave us a really difficult issue of how we supported all of our communities when our relationship was through the food bank network... And there were dozens and dozens of people setting up, and if we'd have invested in each of them and it wasn't needs-based, it would've taken resource away from the food bank network that was absolutely needs-based. So, that was the challenge.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford).

As a counter to this we also heard frustrations from those who found it hard to access funding for this reason. For example, one participant in Belfast said:

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

In some areas we learned of some tensions between new and existing food aid providers. We heard from participants who were concerned that this may have resulted in resources such as food donations, being channelled to the new food aid providers, impacting on the usual supplies to the existing food aid providers. Others had concerns about the levels of expertise of the new food providers and the short-term nature of their intervention.

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

7.3 End of government food box delivery schemes (local and national)

As noted above the large-scale direct food provision through local and national food box delivery schemes came to an end around July and August 2020 (with some variation). The rationale was that by this point, shielding was coming to an end and people receiving food boxes were better able to access other support as restrictions around friends and families visiting had been eased to some extent and retailers delivery capacity had increased. If there were still needs, our data suggests councils and other local providers worked to ensure ongoing support was provided by linking people in with other services.

In Leeds this wind down of the Council’s involvement in the food box scheme was described as being ‘handed back’ to the third sector:

“We put plans in place as demand started to decrease, around June time, to wind down the warehouse and to hand over deliveries to the third sector again.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

7.4 The evolution and future of the new food actors

Due to the timing of the data collection (winter 2020/2021) in which the pandemic was still very present, data on the intentions and plans of the new actors in the field was still ‘live’. However, some participants did provide insight into their plans for the shorter and longer term.

In Moray we heard from a Community Association which had started providing food aid as a result of the pandemic. This was something they planned to continue doing for the foreseeable future.

“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... 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, Moray)

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

8. Resources for local responses

Across many of the case studies funding, food supplies and human resources were identified as key resources for ensuring a food response was delivered. The availability and challenges of these changed over the course of the period under study (March-August 2021).

8.1 Funding

Reflecting back across the whole period, many organisations that took part in the research who were delivering responses to food access felt they were able to access sufficient funding. However, the early weeks following mid-March 2020 was a period of significant uncertainty, when organisations were acting quickly and hoping they would get funding to cover this at some point. For example, in Swansea, when we discussed funding with council staff representatives, they described the approach within the Council was to fund upfront and count on funds being provided by the Welsh Government later:

“The Council fronted up the funding to do things quickly, with the hope that the Welsh Government would be able to see us right at the end. And the priority was “we’ve got to support people, we need to do this.” Do it, and we’ll worry about how to log that later... Subsequently, we have had funding from Welsh Government, COVID response funding.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

Some third sector organisations reported a similar approach.

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

generosity and the goodwill of our neighbourhoods and communities.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

A number of funding sources were utilised, including the funding pots announced by the national governments to support this type of community activity. As an example, funders that community organisations in Moray utilised included 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. In addition, a range of local businesses and organisations provided donations to organisations providing a food response. Participants also reported that funding applications were found to be less burdensome with easy processes and quick turnarounds.

We also heard reports that organisations were able to reallocate some of their funding, which could not be used for the original purpose, to fund the COVID-19 response. For example, in Swansea food banks were allowed to adapt the way they used funding they had previously received from the Council (funded by the Welsh Government) for Brexit preparedness. In Greenwich third sector organisations were able to repurpose the funds received via public health contracts and organisations in Glasgow repurposed funding received for activities around holiday hunger that could not go ahead due to lockdown restrictions.

“...it was helped in a way by city council saying that people could use their holiday hunger money that was due to them in a way that helped, you know, in a way that was flexible. They were able to just realise funds for purchasing food, because they knew it was the first issue.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

As well as the availability of grant funding many organisations reported an influx of financial support in the form of personal donations. This may have been new donors and from those who would ordinarily provide food switching to cash donations instead.

“What we actually found was that we got a significant increase in financial support. An awful lot of people who previously would have bought food and dropped it off started either a Bacs, a direct debit Bacs bank transfer, or sending a cheque or coming in with an envelope with money. It has been quite staggering, actually, the amount of money that people gave us. That wasn't much of a feature of the food bank before. It was mainly food that people gave. But we found that a lot of people would be giving you £20, £40, some more than that.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute).

Participants in West Berkshire described significant fundraising efforts:

“In the same week we created the hub, Greenham Trust launched for the first time we'd ever done this, we launched the coronavirus appeal fund. We put in £200,000 of our own trust money as matched funding to attract public donations, other charitable donations, and corporate donations. We raised, pretty much, another £200,000 through doing that. We got high net worths, we got charitable organisations locally, we got the general public donating. You know, anything from £10 to £10,000 from

individuals to corporates to you name it. They put money into this. We used this, to deploy, to support the various food agencies and other people who needed support during - you know, whatever need throughout it. So that was running at the same time.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Some participants reported problems accessing funding. In Herefordshire, some food providers felt that the Defra Food Charity Grant was ill-matched to their needs, reportedly too complex and not designed for small organisations. One participant in Moray felt that when accessing funding it was:

“Almost impossible to navigate the vast array of [funding] sources for the non-professional.” (Third sector respondent, Moray).

Furthermore, whilst the easing of some of the usual application and reporting requirements was welcomed, due to less time and fewer resources needing to be dedicated towards securing funding, there were some concerns about the accountability and the due diligence of the funding processes. For example, in areas where funding was further distributed through coordinating organisations there were some challenges in getting data on how the funding had been used by the organisation to which it was disbursed, as they were very focussed on delivering the response.

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

Another participant reported concerns that a lack of due diligence by funders lead to some duplication in services.

Following on from the uncertainty around how long responses would be required some organisations also noted the funding was provided with specific end dates. However, when these end dates were reached it was apparent that the response was still required. Although, often, extensions of funding periods were then announced these came quite late, which created some uncertainty for the organisations.

Finally, whilst the availability for the funding during the pandemic was welcomed some organisations were concerned on the impact of this for the future. Such concerns were shared by a participant from Derry and Strabane:

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

8.2 Food Supplies

Food projects across the case studies reported difficulties sourcing food in the early weeks of the pandemic. This was due to a combination of reduced public donations and food shortages in the shops.

“Because obviously, it was physically quite difficult to buy food at the beginning, wasn’t it? So, you couldn’t buy any bulk food, because all the supermarkets were prohibiting that. So, individuals were not really giving us food, because a) they don’t want to leave the house, and b) they couldn’t physically buy it anyway, because it was actually quite tricky.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Some food banks discussed in the early weeks how limits on bulk purchases in the supermarkets where they usually purchased food meant they had to set up trade accounts with alternate suppliers or wholesalers or shop in the cash and carry. However, this was more expensive than their usual food supply.

“We used them [wholesaler] more. It worked out being an awful lot more expensive because most of their stuff is branded whereas, when we go to Tesco, we’re getting Tesco’s own.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Over time a number of mechanisms were put in place to overcome some of these supply issues. In many cases this was in partnership with the main retailers. Examples include Argyll and Bute Council working with Morrisons who allowed them to “buy wholesale”, supermarkets in Greenwich allowing bulk purchase of certain items and the partnership between the Trussell Trust and Tesco and Morrisons.

“Through the Council, we got in touch with the store managers of the large supermarkets within the borough and a number of them enabled us to go in and do an out of hours shop in their store for things that they had that were on shortage. So, they let us have a proportion of the things that they were rationing elsewhere.” (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

Aldi also allowed food aid organisations to submit orders to their distribution centres which could then be collected directly. However, as collection was not an option for the food bank in Moray (due to the distance to the distribution centre) Aldi offered to deliver their order to the local store.

One retailer in Derry and Strabane ordered, stored and delivered the food needed by one of the food aid organisations in the area.

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

In Bradford it was highlighted that some of the smaller food banks were more reliant on the food provided through the scheme which Bradford Council put in place rather than sourcing food through national partnerships. These different sources were described:

“[Food banks] have had different experiences. Some of them are still very, very reliant on that central food [from the Storehouse/Council supply], and I know that Trussell [Trust] [food banks have] probably found it easier to access food and had additional sources that weren’t open to some of the smaller independents. And I know some of the smaller independents are still relying, about 50% of their food, from this centrally-provided fund. So, it really varies from one food bank to the other, but it’s brilliant that big players like [the] Trussell Trust have brought in lots of food to the system, as well, because I think the Council money just wouldn’t have lasted if [the Trussell Trust food banks] had been as heavily reliant on council food as some of the smaller food banks have been.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Alongside these more formal partnerships we heard reports of organisations supporting each other more informally with food supplies. For example, third sector organisations were able to contact Argyll and Bute Council if they were low on a certain item and the Council would add it to the order with Morrisons (noted above). In Derry and Strabane one food bank collected food via FareShare and distributed that amongst the other organisations providing food aid.

Some organisations sourced food through FareShare and this was an important source of supply. One respondent provided mixed reports on FareShare as a source of food.

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

As well as these food sources available through retailers, over time food donations from the public also increased.

“Our food donations picked up. As soon as the supermarkets were allowing people to buy items. People were incredibly generous financially, but also were fantastic about donating food as well. We were I suppose a bit concerned that wouldn’t continue... We were generally fine supported by our donors. It was really good.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

8.3 Human Resources *Volunteers*

Many third sector organisations, particularly food banks, experienced an immediate change in volunteer availability at the start of the pandemic. Organisations reported a shift in their

volunteering workforce, most commonly an initial decline in volunteers who were older or had been required to shield.

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

However, generally the loss of existing volunteers was compensated for with new members of the public volunteering.

“[The food bank] took the decision, even before the government said, to offer over 70s to step back for a season. It was causing much distress around the families because it was that unknown. They’d heard the virus hits older people... Then we were concerned that from a logistics point of view, we wouldn’t have sufficient volunteers. But the brilliant thing was those that were furloughed then came forward. Some of them are now carrying on, in their spare time, to volunteer.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

In many areas an established third sector support organisation took the lead on recruiting volunteers across the COVID-19 response, and many of the recruited volunteers supported the food aid responses. For example, the Swansea Council for Voluntary Service put out calls for volunteers which had a significant impact on the volunteer resources of food initiatives and projects in the city. Voluntary Action Leeds led on recruiting and coordinating volunteers, receiving offers of help from 7000 volunteers.

“When COVID hit, Leeds City Council went to Voluntary Action Leeds and said, “We need to join together and create a volunteering system so everybody is supported. So, literally overnight, Voluntary Action Leeds developed this citywide, hub-based – community care hub-based – volunteering programme.” (Third sector respondent, Leeds)

As well as this new cohort of volunteers the work of existing volunteers was extremely important. In Glasgow, it was reported that due to some of the necessary processes of recruiting new volunteers it may have actually been the increased efforts of existing volunteers which lead to some of the increased capacity.

“But the feedback we have had from a lot of organisations is that the capacity to engage new volunteers in systems that were quite complex and changing at a time that you couldn’t sit down really and meet with people first face-to-face was quite limiting, so a lot of the extra capacity in the sector, I think, has actually come from existing volunteers doing more.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

Existing volunteers also had to adapt their usual working practices to ensure their own safety.

“... my volunteers talking about staying in bubbles, and we knew that, if we stayed in bubbles, it would mean that everybody would have to work set weeks, or set days in a week, we’d have to work harder than we expected to. Everybody committed to that.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Redeployed staff

Another source of workforce that became available to organisations providing a food response was staff being deployed from other teams.

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

Alternatively, staff from other companies were able to spend some time supporting COVID-19 responses. For example, one of the third sector organisations in Moray utilised a national initiative offered by Scottish Gas where 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.

8.4 Premises and storage

One of the other challenges that organisations faced was an increased need for space, particularly for food storage and distribution. This was often overcome by repurposing existing space, which was possible due to other activities not taking place, or by moving into other premises. For example, the independent food bank at the Al-Ikhlās Centre mosque in Cardiff used their main prayer hall, which was not being used as the mosque was closed, for food storage and sorting.

“The main prayer hall became a big food storage/sorting facility. It was quite amazing to see and quite emotional that it became such a vital space.” (Third sector respondent – written submission, Cardiff)

Others reported a benefit of many churches not operating their usual activities, such as services and nurseries, was that this gave the food bank distribution centre more room to operate, which was beneficial in light of social distancing requirements and the need to store more food at their centres.

One food bank in Argyll and Bute changed locations so they did not have to share space with others. Due to the cleaning and safety requirements necessary at their existing food bank venue they decided to move premises to a local hall which they had full use of and, therefore, did not need to “*worry about other people in the building*” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute). In addition, their food used to be stored in an unused room in the back of a care home but as the care home was closed to visitors it was decided to move the food store as well.

9. Key questions raised by the findings

9.1 What worked?

The research has provided a rich and detailed insight into food responses in the 14 case study areas. It gathered data at a time when the pandemic was still 'live' and these actors continued to work at full capacity in the challenging circumstances of COVID-19.

Whilst providing a strong evidence base, the research also highlighted how difficult it is to comprehensively map local responses to food issues. The complexity and small scale of some elements of the response make it extremely challenging. Similarly, assessing what was effective is also difficult. Robust, systematic evaluation is required which is beyond the scope of this project.

Participants in this research did provide their reflections on the responses in their areas and highlighted a number of issues which could be explored further. Namely, the drawbacks from not being able to provide wraparound support (social or signposting) as effectively over the pandemic, benefits of frontline charitable sector responses and challenges in deciding how to manage need.

Challenges of providing wraparound support during this time

Some participants highlighted that the adaptations that were necessary during the pandemic made the provision of wraparound support more challenging. Often, this related to the loss of social interaction or signposting opportunities which resulted from the 'grab and go' or home delivery models that had to be adopted. Where there was a loss of a social engagement this was keenly felt by participants.

"We knew that we had to change what we were doing in that normally, when you have your voucher, you'll come to the centre, you come in, you have a cup of tea, a chat, sometimes mums in particular would be hungry and sometimes we had to give people, we've always had to do this, food themselves because they haven't eaten for a few days or something just as terrible. Then they would see the money advice person if they wanted to, etc. They would be with us for maybe up to an hour or something. [During the pandemic] we couldn't do any of that. We basically had to close the doors and have the voucher handed in almost around the door and the food handed out... for our volunteers in the distribution centres, it broke their heart. They were in tears all the time." (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

Where possible some organisations put other activities in place to try and counteract this loss of social contact. One food bank in West Berkshire made weekly calls to the food bank clients. Volunteers who were shielding and therefore unable to fulfil their usual role made the phone calls.

"So, we put in process a welfare call system. So, our volunteers - it tended to be our older volunteers that were shielding, who couldn't come and help anymore and were desperate to help, making phone calls to our clients weekly. Not offering them food – offering them support, offering them comfort. And that is something I'm incredibly

proud of. Because a lot of those clients were only talking to one of our volunteers once a week, and they hadn't spoken to anybody since then. For safeguarding purposes, we very quickly gathered the information of people living alone, and made sure that we did contact them weekly. And if we hadn't got hold of them, we kept trying, until we did get hold of them." (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In addition, some participants highlighted that the provision of food by home delivery provided some opportunity to do additional welfare checks. In Glasgow it was reported that:

"many third sector organisations who became involved with food provision did not aim to simply drop off food parcels or cooked meals. Many organisations used food as the lead offer to open up conversations with people which led to households receiving other relevant support, such as access to Wi-Fi or additional devices, referrals to welfare rights services, etc."²⁰

However, despite these alternative efforts to provide social support many participants reported looking forward to a time when their usual face to face activities could return.

The benefit of a community response and having people 'on the ground'

Participants reflected on some of the perceived benefits of having people and organisations who were already known in their local community spearheading the response. Firstly, this had the benefit of these organisations already being a known source of help.

"We're here 25 years operating, so our local people and our local communities and neighbourhoods are aware of us. It's a trusted phone line." (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Another benefit was having locally known people leading the response, which may have made it easier for people to access the support and for organisations to provide a wider suite of support.

"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, Moray)

This may have led to people being more likely to engage with the support provided within the local community, compared to that provided by statutory agencies. In Leeds it was perceived that, despite the Council relaxing eligibility criteria for support, some residents may have been more willing to access support offered by non-statutory organisations.

²⁰ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

“I think we do know that there were still a lot of rich relationships that happened where people accessed food from their trusted local partner and they didn’t engage with the system.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Another benefit of having responses designed and provided locally, by people and organisations in the community, was that they could see what the need was and respond appropriately. For example, the response in Herefordshire, the Herefordshire Council Talk Community Hub programme, was premised on a local community first basis.

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

In Swansea it was also expressed that local communities can find their own solutions because they know the needs of their communities best:

“Trusting communities to find their own solutions, to know what their own response should look like. [Local Area Coordinators’] job is to facilitate that, grease the wheels as they get things in order. I think it shows trust in the communities of Swansea. The hope is that it will encourage even more people to become resilient, part of their communities and to be contributing citizens.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

In other areas it was hoped that the ability of local communities to respond, which had been demonstrated during the pandemic, would allow further delegation of tasks in the future.

“I think that it shows the flexibility and the responsiveness that we [have] 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, Moray)

Challenges of balancing assessment of need verses quick, accessible support

Across case study areas, participants highlighted a difficult balance between responding at speed during a crisis whilst assessing the need for support. In some areas it was purposely decided that there would be a less detailed assessment of need for the Council provided support.

“So, a lot of people [are] working zero-hour contracts, working in the grey economy. Anecdotally, some of our communities are earning £30 a day and those people were really, really struggling for food. The Council took a decision that it would rather see a small degree of inefficiency and make sure that everyone was fed than not provide food and have people go hungry. So, the system that we had internally was geared towards a less-detailed approval process that, whilst it did have needs-based questions within it, didn’t perhaps have the same level of rigour, because we were more conscious that we wanted to make sure everybody got fed than people didn’t get fed.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

This approach was replicated by some of the third sector organisations. However, where there was little or no assessment of need, some participants voiced concerns about this. Some voiced concerns about recipients of this food building up a dependency on a temporary service. The lack of needs assessment also made it challenging to determine the level of need for food support which was a result of people experiencing financial or physical access barriers as opposed to people making use of a service that was being provided.

“For me, it’s made it really difficult to evaluate what the need was in the area because I don’t know how many folk were genuinely in need and how many folk were just like, “We’re getting free food, why not?” (Third sector respondent)

Some participants from Glasgow voiced their concern that the lack of needs assessment had led to duplication, although the scale of this duplication was not measured. Participants reflected that this may partly have been a result of a lack of coordination across some of the new providers. The following excerpt from the report produced by Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network reflects on the issue of duplication of food provision, highlighting that partnership working minimised this duplication:

“In some areas of Glasgow – but not all - duplication in food deliveries has been identified as a concern. Where there were strongly-led collaborative partnerships, any duplication was quickly dealt with. Referrals were cross referenced against other organisation’s lists. Where organisations who had never been previously involved in food work, or who did not have a footprint in local communities, became involved in food delivery duplication was more likely.”²¹

9.2 What are the longer-term legacies?

The research has raised some important questions over the legacies of the COVID-19 response in March-August 2020. Given the scale of need and support at that time it will be important to monitor the longer-term impacts for support structures and experiences of food insecurity. For example, following what happens to the projects that newly popped up and the impact of the substantial amounts of funding.

The future of food aid landscapes

Some concerns were expressed by research participants about the direction that food aid was heading, potentially representing a reversal of pre-pandemic trends to move away from this type of provision.

“In fact, most of the food banks were starting to enter into a dialogue to shut the food banks down because everyone’s starting to recognise that surplus food certainly isn’t the answer to this, and we don’t want an American model. Otherwise, we’ll be doing this for eternity. Yes, that debate was just starting to gather pace here actually, which is really good... Then post or during the pandemic, literally nearly every other

²¹ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

organisation did something around food. Yes, I mean, I suppose in a way, it's the easiest response, isn't it?" (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

We heard concerns in Northern Ireland that the provision of direct food aid through the national food box delivery scheme could represent a more substantial shift in the type of response to food insecurity supported by government away from, for example, a social supermarket approach which they saw as a more progressive approach. One participant said:

"The department did a complete U-turn. The department are the ones that fund the social supermarket and then we were going like, "Where are you going? You are turning back and you are just going backwards here." (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Similarly, although existing food aid providers welcomed the sentiment and the support of the new third sector actors who were providing food aid there was some concern that this would embed a 'food first' approach, whilst not providing wider signposting or support.

"And I think we need to get back to actually – you know when you look at the organisations like [name removed], their ethos is around protecting people and confidentiality, and all of that, and that's so important for people who are in poverty because what you want is to build trust, and you want to build that trust in order to move them on, you know, you don't want to keep people in poverty, you want to put the services and the right support in place, and I kind of feel like some of that has got lost." (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

However, as previously noted there was, in many places, a continuing focus on income-based response as well as the direct food aid with promotion of advice services and support for people newly accessing social security. Another example is the flexible food fund introduced by Moray Council, described earlier. Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum also worked to foreground an income-based approach. A key output of the Forum during the pandemic, working in partnership with the Council, the local housing association, Citizens Advice and the Bute Advice Centre was the development of a leaflet providing information on the different sources of financial support and referral routes. This project was developed in collaboration with the Independent Food Aid Network as part of their cash first project (for information see here: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>). The options for support detailed in the leaflet include Scottish Welfare Fund, maximising income, debt advice, benefit advance, hardship payment, and challenge a decision.²²

9.3 Local and/or national responses?

The response to food access issues during COVID-19 highlighted the different scales at which work was carried out, the interactions between those scales and their effectiveness. For example national government food box schemes for people who were shielding, local council food box schemes and local charitable food provision; as well as the role of local councils in the national government box schemes. This raises important questions about

²² https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/sites/default/files/worrying_about_money_a4_argyll_and_bute_17.07.20.pdf

what scale and level is most effective. Understanding this fully would require systematic evaluation, but our participants provided reflections on two fronts in particular relating to their local perspective, challenges with national schemes, and the use of and impact on local food systems.

Challenges with national schemes

Participants voiced their concerns regarding the food boxes provided through the national schemes. These included concerns about suitability and nutritional quality.

“They [boxes] were very restricted and I suppose here in neighbourhoods and the areas across the city and across the North we spent the last 15, 20 years trying to educate people about healthy eating. Then these hampers were coming out and they were all full of processed foods.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

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

In some of the rural areas we heard anecdotal stories of the large delivery lorries being unable to navigate the more remote country roads, thereby making deliveries very challenging. In other areas there was concern regarding time lags between people being told to shield and them either receiving their first box or getting access to online delivery slots. In Swansea, in this period, the Swansea Council for the Voluntary Sector mobilised their volunteers to help people do their shopping:

“We had volunteers who were supporting people with doing their shopping for them, because we did have quite a lag between the food parcels being available and the shielding list having come out.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

In Derry and Strabane third sector organisations did the ‘last mile delivery’ of the food parcels provided by the Department for Communities whereby the third sector organisation leading the food response in each area were provided with a set number of food boxes and referrals for households eligible for the box. Some organisations “dissected” the boxes and added in additional products to make them more tailored to each individual household.

“There was no thought put into whether it was a household or whether it was an elderly person. The same standard box was going to everybody. So you could have an 80-year-old getting a massive box full of pasta and pasta sauces and shower gels every week that were never going to be used, and then a family of four or five were getting exactly the same and they’d have gone through the box in a couple of days. So there was no thought put into it.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

We also heard from food banks that some of the contents of the boxes were being donated to them. This seemed to be happening most explicitly in West Berkshire with one participant reporting:

“We called them Boris boxes. We used to collect about 40 Boris boxes a week, from donors that were being sent them and they didn’t need them, so they donated them to us. So, we had Sky engineers, because Sky engineers, as we all know, were stood down the first time around. They used to go out in their vans and collect the Boris boxes and bring them to the food bank” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Local food system responses

Recognising the potential impact of the pandemic on the wider food landscape, including suppliers and local hospitality businesses, some local area responses were designed to provide support that benefitted the local economy, as opposed to only focussing on households.

This strategy was most deliberate and explicit in the food box scheme by Argyll and Bute Council who made the strategic decision to source supplies for the food boxes locally to the extent this was possible. They sourced local suppliers for items to be included in the boxes which was dubbed ‘for Argyll from Argyll’.

“I had, kind of, got ‘Argyll for Argyll’ which was me saying, ‘As much of that food money that I got from government is going to feed people in Argyll and Bute, it will do that through the Argyll and Bute businesses where possible.’ Kind of a ‘From Argyll for Argyll’ first approach.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

As well as this quite formal inclusion of local business in the large-scale council responses other areas incorporated local businesses into the suite of support by sharing funding that had been granted. For example, the community support officers at Moray Council supported community groups to apply for funding, which was then further distributed amongst the community organisations and businesses.

“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, Moray)

In other areas some respondents noted that the influx of food being provided through the national food parcel scheme was having a negative impact on the local shops.

“There was a lot of displacement out there. I even heard local shops when the department boxes come in that they were doing maybe £500, £600 a week [less].” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

This was something that Argyll and Bute Council actively avoided by planning a tailored response on the inhabited islands of the area.

“What we did in the island communities was, we didn’t just send food from the mainland to the islands, we worked with the local shops, because what we were conscious of was, if we didn’t work in partnership with them very quickly, they could

close. And if we started sending food to doorsteps on islands, that makes fragile economies even more fragile.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Where local supply systems were not integrated into responses this was a source of disappointment for some. One respondent in Belfast expressed disappointment that local suppliers were not utilised in the supply of the nationally provided grocery boxes for the shielding population.

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

Accordingly Belfast Food Network included in their response, in which they deliberately avoided any sort of direct food provision, support for local sustainable businesses through the allocation of grants. As noted previously the Food Network received funding from the organisation Necessity to provide grants to local food businesses. The grants aimed to help alleviate the impact of COVID-19 and support businesses to adapt their business models. Twenty-seven microgrants were awarded to small sustainable food businesses and were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock.

9.4 Cash or food?

A final question raised by the research reflects upon what can be learned from the pandemic around the question of the ‘cash versus food’ debate. Previous research at a national level highlighted that where cash was provided as an alternative to free school meals replacements this was widely welcomed.²³

The data highlighted different responses to food insecurity grouped under a ‘cash first approach’. Some participants referred to ‘cash first’ approaches as those that pointed people to, and supported people to access, existing benefits, often through the provision of or signposting to advice services. Other participants considered ‘cash first’ more narrowly, referring to additional cash support on top of people’s basic entitlements through crisis emergency payments.

As noted in the previous section many areas offered or supported income-based responses in different forms. It was perceived that the Flexible Food Fund introduced by Moray Council led to reduced demand on the food bank, indicating the potential efficacy of cash-based responses in reducing the need for food banks.

²³ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>; Child Poverty Action Group (2020) The cost of learning in lockdown family experiences of school closures. Available here: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/cost-learning-lockdown-family-experiences-school-closures>

However, whilst recognising the benefits of a cash first approach participants remained mindful that there is not a 'one size fits' all solution with some noting the need for tailoring depending on particular circumstances. This was raised in particular in relation to the rurality of some of the case study areas. As previously noted, Argyll and Bute Council initially provided a direct food response as a replacement for free school meals due to limited public transport restricting access to shops. Another participant raised a concern regarding the higher cost of living in rural areas which meant cash responses would not stretch as far as in the more urban areas.

"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 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, Moray)

10. Key Takeaways

As well as these key questions, we reflect here on some key takeaways from the case study research. The first of these are observations on the local response mapping, including the unprecedented scale of the local response to food access issues, the central role played by voluntary food aid providers and the range of initiatives that work to provide this food assistance. The last two takeaways present further reflective data from participants on the experiences of these responses and importance of partnership working and the distinct challenges facing rural populations.

10.1 Mapping observation 1: The scale of the response was unprecedented

The actors identified in this research adapted and mobilised in response to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a scale and operationalisation of local level support for food access not been seen before. As this report has set out, many existing food aid providers undertook significant work to adapt, as much as possible, to continue to provide their service and scale up where needed. National and local governments started providing direct food aid often on a large scale. Other third sector organisations and much smaller scale neighbourhood networks also provided food access support. At the same time, new means of coordination developed and partnership working, utilising both existing and new partnerships, was key. Unprecedented levels of financial, food and human resources went into the local food response.

10.2 Mapping observation 2: Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses

The national mapping we previously conducted for this project evidenced that the voluntary food aid sector was heavily relied upon to support food access at that level.²⁴ This has also been found to be the case at a local level, with data showing that third sector food aid providers played a key role in responding to food access issues in the case study areas over the March – August 2020 period. The third sector responses were organised both in partnership with statutory bodies or as a more independent sphere of food access support in local areas.

Dynamics between voluntary and statutory sector responses evolved over time. In the early weeks of the pandemic in many areas participants reported that third sector organisations were quick to respond, while the statutory organisations adapted to a move away from face-to-face working. This led to significant concern amongst participants, at that time, about the capacity and sustainability of the third sector as a core response. Later, as statutory services were mobilised, participants observed how the third sector continued to play a key role with significant funding and logistical support provided from the national and local governments.

10.3 Mapping observation 3: Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives

Across the areas we identified the important role played by several types of food provision:

- (1) food aid projects such as food banks that had been in place before the pandemic and adapted to meet the needs of local communities. These organisations adapted their practices and often drew on new or alternative forms of resources and support.
- (2) local charities that started to provide food aid as part of their work to support communities and groups through the pandemic (providing parcels, hot meals, chill-cook food). These organisations had not been providing this form of support before. Some, such as community cafes may have been serving or working with food before but not on a food aid / delivery basis. Others, such as housing associations had not been providing any kind of food before the pandemic.
- (3) less formal 'pop up' provision, for example on an ad hoc or neighbourhood basis. Some of this was organised on social media (WhatsApp or Facebook), some targeted very locally (one street or neighbourhood), other examples we came across included a local café or business providing food assistance using their premises.

²⁴ Lambie-Mumford, H., Loopstra, R. and Gordon, K. (2020) Mapping responses to risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK, published August 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

10.4 Partnership working and working together

The local case studies highlight the extent of partnership and collaborative working that went on in local areas and the importance that participants held in that. We have reflective data from participants on these aspects, which we present here.

The areas which had existing strong and active food poverty alliances or food partnerships considered this a significant enabler in the speed and coordination of the approach. In Cardiff, where there is a very active food partnership with a track record of taking action on food insecurity, various stakeholders talked about the influence of these pre-existing relationships on the responses enacted over the spring and summer and how this enabled their response. Many of these existed because of the Food Cardiff partnership. It was felt that this partnership meant that a COVID-19 Food Response Group could quickly be established and allowed for greater coordination and clear roles to be delineated, as shared in the following quotes:

“Objectively, [if I] think about what would’ve happened if it wasn’t for the partnership in place, I think there would be a lot less coordination and there might be a bit more tension between groups, like between the local authority and the third sector and the grassroots.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

“That taskforce that was set up right at the beginning was hugely helpful, the Food Cardiff one, because not only did it alleviate anxiety but you knew that 1) you weren’t duplicating what somebody else was doing, 2) the gap was identified and then a solution was found. Then we knew that what we were doing was alright. We didn’t have to expand into it.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

Similarity, in Leeds, pre-existing relationships and partnership working was considered a strength in the city’s response.

“I think when we’ve been asked, “What has been the strength of Leeds?” I think having the Food Aid Network and the existing relationship with partners has been something that we could build upon because the Council has always been seen as an equal partner in the discussions rather than a leader. Obviously, there have been certain asks of the Council during this time and we’ve tried to work as much as we can, but I think in terms of leadership, when COVID hit the Council realised that we had to bring partners together. We’ve built upon the Food Aid Network infrastructure that was already there, but more probably from a council leadership perspective.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Where it was felt that there had been a co-ordinated approach, with a range of organisations working together, this was warmly received and positively reflected on by participants.

“I think what has been really outstanding in Swansea is the way that from the early days, certainly through to the middle of the first lockdown, how there was incredible will between sectors to work together, which was quite new. Obviously, we’ve done it before, but we were really successful.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

The food aid providers group meetings, and the relationships that were established as a result of the collaboration between organisations in West Berkshire was felt to have contributed to a coordinated response:

“It beautifully came together really that every... We, just, were able to corral the whole group together, whatever they were doing in the food provider space, get them talking, get them sharing food in terms of the various sources of food that were available. You know, whether it be restaurants that had closed or whether it be FareShare or whatever it was, we got this collective really working together in different parts of the community whether it was those in general food poverty families or whether it was those living on the street or, by then, in hostels because that’s what the government... You know, wanted everybody to be under a roof.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Communication was key to establishing this coordination and many areas spoke of regular meetings across providers. In Derry and Strabane, for example, regular meetings occur between both local groups providing a response and between the co-ordinating organisations from areas across the wider area.

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

Alongside these positive reflections there were observations that the response could have been better coordinated, and this was particularly in the early days of the response. Where responses were not coordinated this led to problems with potential duplication of services and households receiving support from a number of routes.

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

On the other hand, another consequence of a lack of coordination was that gaps in responses could not be identified and filled.

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

Better and stronger connections across sectors and between organisations was considered by participants to be one of the positive legacies to emerge from the pandemic responses over spring and summer 2020.

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

10.5 Responses in rural areas

Case Study areas were selected to provide a mix of urban and rural geographies. This provided insight into the differences and challenges arising in providing responses in rural areas.

The case study areas of Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenwich, Leeds, Merton and Swansea were predominantly urban. Argyll and Bute, Moray, Derry and Strabane, West Berkshire and Herefordshire, whilst having been selected for their rurality, had a mixture of urban and rural characteristics.

In some areas this rurality impacted on who provided responses in different areas. For example, in West Berkshire it was described how there was some informal geographical division of responsibility, with the residents of the larger towns supported by the established organisations, and the smaller villages and hamlets relying instead on the community groups which were established in response to the pandemic.

“We predominantly found that we were dealing with people in the towns of Newbury and Thatcham and that, in the surrounding villages, local people at a village level and a smaller town level, initiatives were kicking off and helping people.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Data evidenced the continued impact of factors that are associated with food access challenges in rural areas.²⁵ Such factors include the demographics of rural communities which generally have a skew towards an older population. For example, the high proportion of an elderly population impacted the form of the response provided in one of the small villages in the Moray case study.

“The other thing I would like to say about the village is that we’ve got a very peculiar demographic where in the last census it said that we’ve got 50% more over 75s living in the village. And we became aware very early on that there were people who were self-isolating were at the very worst crisis for our demographic because there were people who were living on their own who were self-isolating even within the village. So, we basically then had to go out to them and actually what has been the basis of our response ever since is that we’re going out to people rather than having them coming even to our food hub in the village because they’re elderly. A lot of them are very frail as well and a lot of them, as I say, are living on their own.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Access to affordable transport can also present food access barriers and this was exacerbated during the pandemic. For example, in Argyll and Bute there was a reduction in

²⁵ Food Power (2019) Tackling food poverty in rural communities. Available here: https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/FoodPower_RuralFoodPoverty_FINAL.pdf

the usual public transport services that were available potentially making it extremely difficult for some residents of rural communities to access shops.

“A lot of our public transport systems are based around the school buses. So, once school closes that means that run doesn’t operate anymore, so it’s the same even during the summer holiday period, access to very small villages just is non-existent, or there might be one bus a day. Now, if you’ve got kids and you’re taking them to the Co-op ten miles away and it’s three and a half hours between buses, what do you do with them? There are no cafés or shops open...So, that’s where the access to food was very, very challenging because even if you could get the one bus in, what do you do for the rest of the day?” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Furthermore, many rural areas have relatively low wage economies, with low paid sectors disproportionately represented.²⁶ For example, Argyll and Bute relies heavily on tourism for employment.

“Employment was really impacted. Also, within our area, tourism is a huge thing, and there were a number of people, individuals who had secured employment and were all set to start jobs and then those jobs were then retracted because the jobs no longer existed. So that’s really difficult when people are relying on seasonal work that just didn’t happen.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

While these issues are not necessarily exclusive to rural communities they highlight some of the factors that shaped the responses in the areas. Some of the responses were designed to minimise these challenges including third sector organisations opting for a delivery model due to the elderly populations staying at home, tailored food packs suitable for elderly people who were not receiving the usual support from family and friends with meals, and responses that provided vouchers for travel on public transport so to support people accessing the shops. In some respects, the increase in deliveries of food to households (through either the Council or third sector schemes) perhaps made food more readily accessible to certain groups with these communities than would be the case in ‘normal’ times.

As well as these existing factors impacting food access in rural areas the pandemic brought others to the fore. In Argyll and Bute the shortages of food in rural areas was a particular concern, and a key driver for the Council's decision to undertake a large scale food box delivery scheme.

“The rest of Argyll and Bute is not well serviced with shops anyway. Now we’ve got panic buying, we’ve got national food shortages, and we’ve got a failure, even by the distributors, to get stock to these shops to meet that demand. So there’s a real concern, very, very, real concern that food isn’t flowing into Argyll and Bute like it was.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

However, within this local authority area there are five large towns which may not have faced the same food shortages of other areas. One participant reflected that the direct food

²⁶ Food Power (2019) Tackling food poverty in rural communities. Available here: https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/FoodPower_RuralFoodPoverty_FINAL.pdf

provision response that was necessary for the more rural communities was, perhaps, not so necessary for the larger towns:

“I wrote to the Council to ask why they had decided to use parcels rather than either vouchers or money, because some other areas had gone for that choice. And they said it was due to the rurality of the area. They thought that there weren’t enough shops with enough food. That might have been the case in some areas, but it wouldn’t have been the case in Helensburgh, Dunoon. There are quite a lot of places in Argyll that are reasonable-sized towns. I don’t think that argument would have held. It would have held for some of the island communities maybe.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Whilst the response was not tailored to cater for differences in the mainland areas of Argyll and Bute, the Council implemented responses on the inhabited islands that accounted for their particular characteristics. Rather than sending food from the mainland to the island, which would negatively impact the local shops operating on the islands, the Council worked in partnership with these shops so they supplied and delivered the food parcels.

This example shows the challenges of providing an authority wide response and the need for tailoring to subsets of the community which have different requirements.

In contrast the approach by Derry and Strabane Council, who did not provide any food directly but rather channelled funding to the local growth partnerships in smaller geographic subsets of the local authority level naturally tailored the response to the more localised needs. However, this too brought challenges as the infrastructure in the rural areas was less well developed than that in the urban areas.

“Something that’s been highlighted for us is that the meals on wheels services in rural areas are not as well developed as urban areas. The meals on wheels are delivered by the health trust, it’s the Western Health and Social Care Trust in that area. Again, the majority of referrals for meals on wheels from social workers and GPs are in urban areas for some reason.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

This put pressure on the organisations that operated in the rural areas which were usually staffed by volunteers and did not necessarily feel like they had the experience or resources that their urban counterparts had.

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

Having a range of actors providing food aid across the rural communities may have also led to a less co-ordinated approach as noted by a participant in Herefordshire:

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

The need for a tailored response depending on the particular geography, in areas with a mix of urban and rural areas, was exemplified in Argyll and Bute where the local council adapted the scheme to be appropriate for the island communities. In the more urban areas, however, the food shortages and access issues may have been less significant and more quickly rectified, suggesting other approaches may have also been an option in these areas. The more localised focus of the Derry and Strabane were inherently more tailored, as responses were designed and provided at a more local level, but this became more challenging for the areas which had less developed infrastructure in place prior to the pandemic. The balance of local authority wide provision verses more localised tailored responses brought, therefore, both advantages and challenges.

11. Post-August 2020 support and future research

Many third sector organisations spoke of an increase in need at the time of data collection (November 2020 - February 2021) and concerns about the joint impact of the pandemic and winter.

“Just recently I have noticed the demand is going up a bit, and I'm relating that to fuel bills. People are now paying for fuel, which they weren't in the summer, and there's now a conflict between people's ability to pay for heating and pay for food. Just in the last couple of weeks really, we have had a few more referrals of people saying, 'I've had a fuel bill. I can't afford to do the shopping' We've responded to that.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

For some this was a cause of concern as they were feeling a real sense of fatigue having provided such demanding services through spring and summer of 2020.

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

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

“I know I said it but I know we would have done, because it’s our people, we would have done it anyway, but it was just letting the department know that enough is enough.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Some organisations talked about a real fear for the future when they anticipated the longer-term consequences of the pandemic would increase demand for their services.

“It’s just we’re now in the third week in February and the government hasn’t come to talk to us about it and it’s scary, there are lots of people on the ground, how are we going to support these people and continue on or help fix this problem? Just because we’re coming out of lockdown or because things are easing off. It’s going to take years for people to get back to normal. It’s going to take at least until this time next year for people to get into a routine and get their bills and their wages sorted out to get into a routine again and free up some cash. So it’s really, really scary times for all of us...I think this is worse than it was last year. I think we were all fearful last year and we really didn’t know what was happening but now it’s a different fear.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane).

The next phase of the research will involve revisiting the case study areas to explore how the responses evolved from Autumn 2020.



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Argyll and Bute Case Study

Gordon, K., Loopstra, R., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Argyll and Bute Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

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

Argyll and Bute Council also became a key actor in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rurality of the area, characterised by fragile supply chains, fewer major food retailers and limited public transport meant physical access to food was a major factor in the Council's response, as well as concerns about financial barriers. The Council allocated a significant proportion of their Scottish Government Food Fund funding, which provided funding to local authorities to support people with access to food, to provide food parcel deliveries to three population groups: fresh food parcels to people who were shielding; fresh food parcels and ambient parcels to people who were experiencing barriers to accessing food; and fresh food parcels and ambient parcels as a replacement for free school meals.²⁷ If required, frozen food parcels could be provided as an alternative. As well as providing this support to households the service was designed to support local businesses and food suppliers and this was achieved by sourcing the contents for the parcels locally wherever possible, presented as 'for Argyll from Argyll'. The immense geography and the rurality of some areas of the local authority meant significant resources (people, vans, storage) were required as well as thorough strategic oversight. More tailored solutions were developed for and with the communities on the 23 inhabited islands of the area.

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

| | |
|---|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Argyll and Bute | 1 |
| Data overview | 5 |
| About Argyll and Bute | 5 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 7 |
| Argyll and Bute Council | 7 |
| School food provision | 7 |
| Contracted Meals on Wheels | 8 |
| Community food organisations and food banks | 8 |
| Bute Advice Centre | 11 |
| Community Food Forum | 11 |
| Meal providers | 12 |
| Early signs of food access issues in the COVID-19 pandemic | 12 |
| Financial vulnerability | 12 |
| Physical barriers to food access | 13 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic 14 | |
| Argyll and Bute Council | 14 |
| School food provision | 21 |
| Community food organisations and food banks | 22 |
| Bute Advice Centre | 26 |
| Community Food Forum | 27 |
| Other Community Groups | 27 |
| Other Local Businesses | 28 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Argyll and Bute | 29 |
| Supporting local businesses..... | 29 |
| Third Sector as an early response..... | 30 |
| Urban/Rural Mix..... | 30 |
| Reflections on national shielding grocery box scheme | 31 |
| Looking ahead | 32 |
| Longer term impact of the response | 33 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 34 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer..... | 34 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer | 35 |

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Council website identifies 13 community food projects operating in the Argyll and Bute area.²⁸ The services and operations of these organisations differ and include emergency food parcel distribution (food banks), pay what you can community meals, community cafes, community lunches and community fridges/cupboards. None of the food banks are part of the Trussell Trust network.

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

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

Argyll and Bute Council

Argyll and Bute Council undertook a wide range of actions to support people with access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset the Council identified three priority

²⁸ <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/untitled-c20s2>, <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/food-banks-argyll-and-bute>

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

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

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

People in need of the parcels were identified through a combination of self-referral through the local helpline and through referrals from other organisations, such as other agencies, social work teams, third sector organisations and local community groups. Due to the geography and rurality, delivering the parcels across the region was a "momentous operation". Forty council officers worked on the 'back office' roles such as maintaining the database of recipients and planning delivery routes. About 200 vehicles a week were utilized to collect supplies and make deliveries, a combination of the school transport fleet, the council fleet of 20 electric vehicles, local delivery vans and vehicles of businesses and organisations, including refrigerated vans for the fresh food, that were not operating due to lockdown. Due to the specificities of the island communities a different process was set up to provide the food parcels to the households living on one of the islands, for example, often the council funded the local shops, based on the island, to supply the food and make the deliveries.

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

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

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

Food Banks and Community Food Organisations

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

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

Community Food Forum

The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to share experiences and support each other. In addition, a key output of the Forum during and working in partnership with the Council, the local housing association, Citizens Advice and

the Bute Advice Centre was the development of a leaflet providing information on the different sources of financial support and referral routes. This project was developed in collaboration with the Independent Food Aid Network as part of their cash first project.²⁹

Other Support

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

²⁹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>

Data overview

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

The case study draws from the following data sources:

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

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

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

About Argyll and Bute

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

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

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

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

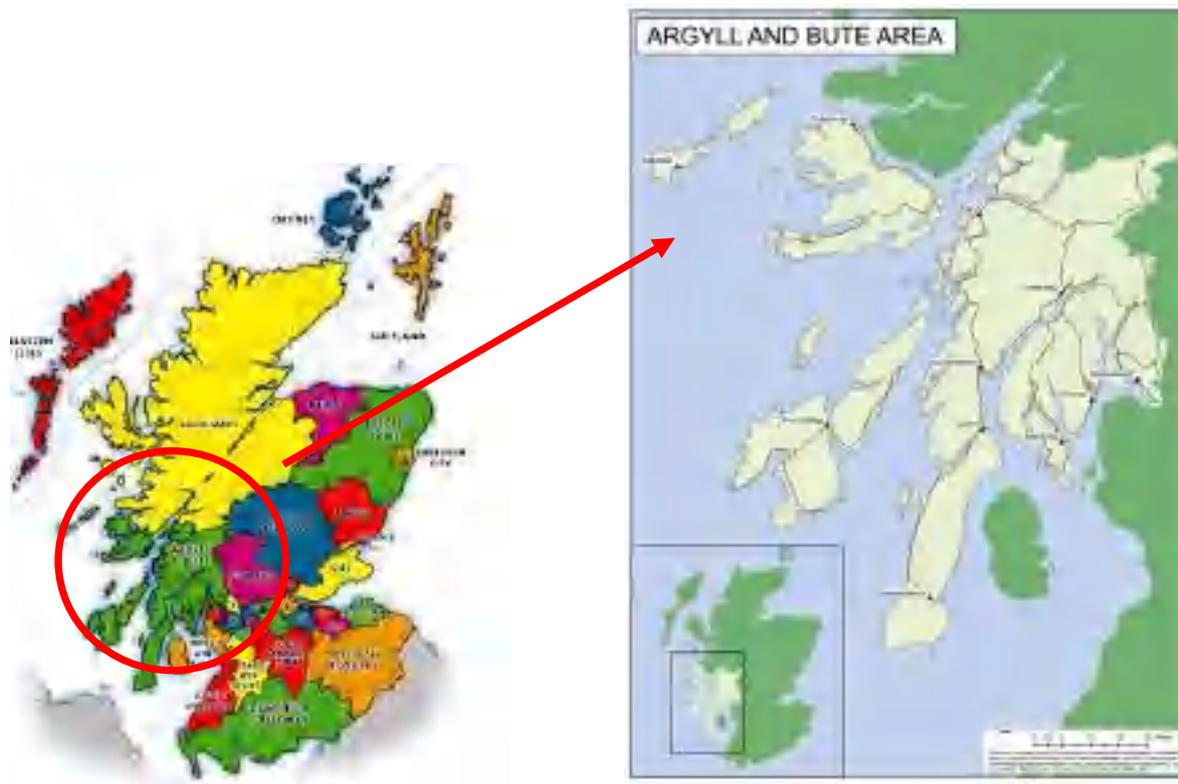
The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is a relative measure of deprivation across Scotland. Of the 125 data zones in Argyll and Bute, thirteen were identified as being amongst the 20% most overall deprived data zones in Scotland in 2020. These thirteen data zones all located in the towns of Rothesay, Dunoon, Campbeltown, Helensburgh and Oban. None of Argyll and Bute's rural data zones fall into the 20% most overall deprived data zones in Scotland.³¹

One interviewee described the area:

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

³⁰ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/argyll-and-bute-council-profile.html>

³¹ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/info/home>



Map of Scottish Council Areas and Argyle & Bute Council Area³²

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

Argyll and Bute Council

Prior to the pandemic the main council response to food insecurity was embedded in a wider cash first approach so support was provided through the Money Advice Team at the Council.

The Argyll and Bute Advice Services helps clients who have money worries, providing advice and support on a range of financial issues such as debts, welfare assistance and crisis payments from the Scottish Welfare Fund. Free and confidential appointments can be made with an advisor, with appointments held in private rooms through the local authority area. The 'Money Advice' page on the Council website lists the range of support available as well as other sources of support, such as DWP, CAB and Home Energy Scotland.³³

School food provision

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Argyll and Bute Council had no provision for school food during holiday periods, with food banks providing support for those in need of immediate, direct food provision.

³² <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/council-and-government/maps-argyll-and-bute>

³³ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/money>

Contracted Meals on Wheels

Prior to March 2018 Argyll and Bute Council contracted the Royal Voluntary Service to provide a Meals on Wheels service in the area. Local volunteers delivered the service. The service was withdrawn in 2018 due to a national policy change for Royal Voluntary Service.³⁴ Since then there has been no council provided meals on wheels service, although the Council can signpost people to commercial providers if appropriate.

The community based third sector organisation Cùram Thiriodh provides a meals on wheels service on the Isle of Tiree, which they set up following the withdrawal of the Royal Voluntary Service. Meals are prepared in the kitchen of a local care home and distributed four days a week to clients identified as requiring the service by Social Services. Clients pay £5.50 per meal.³⁵

Community food organisations and food banks

A number of community food projects operate in the Argyll and Bute area. Both the Council and Bute Advice Centre web pages list these organisations.³⁶ Some provide emergency food parcel services only whilst others run a range of community food activities. None of the food banks are part of the Trussell Trust network and they all operate differently. Convening the Food Forum highlighted the range of ways in which services operate and provide support.

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

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

| Name, website, location | Emergency Food Aid | Other Services | Other Organisational Features |
|---|--|--|--|
| Bute Oasis (Isle of Bute) ³⁷ | Food Bank – open every day 10am – 4pm. | Signposting to advice services and other support services. | The food bank service is funded by the profits from accompanying second-hand shop. A local person decided to set up the food bank after the local advice service, which had a small amount of food to distribute to people in need, reported increasing demand for this food. |

³⁴ http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_49552.html

³⁵ <https://www.curamtiree.co.uk/Meals-on-Wheels/>

³⁶ <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/untitled-c20s2>, <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/food-banks-argyll-and-bute>

³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/buteoasis2/>

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Helensburgh and Lomond Food Bank ³⁸ | Food Bank – 4 sessions a week. 3 in Helensburgh (Mon & Fri 10.00-12.00, (Thurs 18.00-20.00) and 1 in Rosneath (Wed 13.00-15.00). Parcels can be delivered to the Health Centre in Arrochar for collection. | Signposting to advice services and other support services. Gas and electricity top ups. | The sessions run as a ‘cafe like environment’ with clients encouraged to stay for a cup of tea and a ‘chat’. Referrals and self-referrals accepted but self-referrals are much more common. |
| Hub Grub and Dunoon Food Bank (Dunoon) ³⁹ | Food Bank - two sessions a week (Thurs 17.00-18.30 and Friday 10.00-12.00) | Friday cafe providing meals on a free/pay what you can basis aiming to support people experiencing loneliness and social isolation. Monthly lunches held in partnership with local befriending organisations. | Operates predominantly on a self-referral basis. A referral is needed if the need exceeds the usual provision of one food parcel covering 7 days. Most food is donated by the community with a small amount purchased with funds raised from fundraising activities. |
| Moving on Mid Argyll, (Mid Argyll) | Provides food parcels to people in need via referral agencies. Weekly food parcels are provided for three weeks (or more if necessary). | Recipients provided with a financial award at the same time as the food parcel. | Originally supported homeless people making the transition into their first accommodation by providing a starter pack of essential items. Over time adopted a broader purpose of addressing poverty in the community. Works in partnerships with other agencies to support people transition to “ <i>a position of stability</i> ”. |
| Islay Food Bank ⁴⁰ (Isle of Islay) | Food parcels delivered to households in need. | Signposting to advice services and other support services. | Referrals from other agencies, such as social work and Carr Gomm, a Scottish charity supporting people in need with a range of services, are accepted. ⁴¹ |

³⁸ <https://helensburghlomondfoodbank.org/>

³⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Dunoon-Foodbank-324045001773009/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.islaybaptistchurch.org.uk/community-store-cupboard>

⁴¹ <https://www.carrgomm.org/>

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| | Up to three parcels provided in a 3-month period. | | <p>Self-referrals accepted via a confidential phone line open on Mondays and Fridays between 10am – 5pm.</p> <p>The food bank was initially set up in response to a request from the Council's social work team who were sometimes supporting clients by buying food <i>“out their own pocket”</i> (Workshop Attendee, Third Sector).</p> |
| *Hope Kitchen (Oban) ⁴² | Food Bank open daily (11.30-13.30) accepts self-referrals and referrals from other organisations. | <p>Community cafe open for lunch every day. Customers are asked for a £1 donation (although this is not obligatory).</p> <p>Community hub running a range of activities (knitting groups, recovery groups, creative writing groups and music groups).</p> | Accepts referrals and self-referrals. |
| *Mull and Iona Community Trust (Isle of Mull) ⁴³ | | Community fridge. Located in a community hall, open 9.00-17.00 every day. | <p>Core aim is to reduce food waste.</p> <p>Surplus food is provided by local businesses or members of the public.</p> <p>Food can be accessed by anyone who feels that they can use it.</p> |
| *Solar Project (run by third sector organisation Cùram Thiriodh (Isle of Tiree) ⁴⁴ | Deliveries of food parcels or vouchers for the Co-op. | Community cupboard in an old telephone box. | People can self-refer by email or phone or be referred through the local medical practice. |

⁴² <https://www.hopekitchen.org.uk/>

⁴³ <https://www.mict.co.uk/projects-services/rethink-mess/community-fridge/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.solartiree.com/>

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

Bute Advice Centre

As well as the in-house council advice services an independent advice service is available on the Island of Bute through the Bute Advice Centre, supporting people living in the Bute and Cowal area of the local authority. Operating for over 30 years the advice centre is now an independent organisation reliant on local and national funding. Funders include Argyll and Bute Council and the Scottish government amongst others. Bute Advice Centre offers a wide range of support and advice on welfare rights including government support schemes, child winter heating allowance, universal credit, Best Start, Funeral Support, warm home discount, Scottish Welfare Fund, Job Start payment, school and education grants and Scottish child payment.⁴⁵ As well as these statutory schemes the Advice Centre explores all possible avenues of support, seeking to provide a holistic suit of support.

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

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

Community Food Forum

Argyll and Bute Council initiated the set-up of the Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum in early 2019 with the rationale of connecting community food providers and building relations between them and the Council. At the time the Council were concerned about the anticipated impacts on food vulnerability due to Brexit and, therefore, sought to become more involved with and provide support to existing local community food work. The Council commissioned and funded Bute Advice Centre to facilitate the process. Prior to the set up the Council explained the rationale to the Advice Centre:

⁴⁵ <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/>

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

After preparatory work the Food Forum was officially ‘launched’ with an event in February 2020 and members of all food banks in the area were invited to the launch:

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

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

Meal providers

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

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

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

Financial vulnerability

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

“Ooh, boy, our numbers escalated. Basically, because we deliver money advice as well as welfare rights support, what we discovered was that we had reached our usual annual target six months in because of the number of Universal Credit new claims that we were having to make for people who had no knowledge [of it]. The client base changed. We still had our historical clients who would come to us, but what we found was there were lots and lots of people who had been made redundant, had never been unemployed before, and had always managed to pick something up. And then all of a sudden they were losing their jobs and there wasn’t

alternative work out there, and for the first time they were having to tap into benefits.”
(Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

Physical barriers to food access

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

“The rest of Argyll and Bute is not well serviced with shops anyway. Now we’ve got panic buying, we’ve got national food shortages, and we’ve got a failure, even by the distributors, to get stock to these shops to meet that demand. So there’s a real concern, very, very, real concern that food isn’t flowing into Argyll and Bute like it was.” (Council staff respondent)

Further discussing the challenges with distributors one participant stated:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Argyll and Bute Council

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

Caring for People helpline

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

Resourcing and planning a food response

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Food parcel deliveries

A key focus of the food response team was the set up and operation of a weekly food parcel delivery scheme. In the early stage of the pandemic the key issues with food access in the area related to physical accessibility, which led to this decision to provide deliveries of food parcels to people in need. This was primarily funded by the funding provided to local authorities from the Scottish Government through the Food Fund.⁴⁶

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

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

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So I had, kind of, got ‘Argyll for Argyll’ which was me saying, ‘As much of that food money that I got from government is going to feed people in Argyll and Bute, it will do that through the Argyll and Bute businesses where possible.’ Kind of a ‘From Argyll for Argyll’ first approach.” (Council staff respondent)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What we did in the island communities was, we didn’t just send food from the mainland to the islands, we worked with the local shops, because what we were conscious of was, if we didn’t work in partnership with them very quickly, they could close. And if we started sending food to doorsteps on islands, that makes fragile economies even more fragile. So, we worked with the shops to purchase... they made up the food parcels for us, so the fresh food parcels were made up by the shops and delivered fully using their own networks and we paid for it.” (Council staff respondent)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Facilitating volunteer shopping

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

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

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

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

As well as working together to overcome issues with restrictions on purchases the Council also supported community member shopping for others by introducing a payment facility at the co-op. The scheme allowed a member of the community to go shopping for somebody and charge that to a credit facility, owned by the Council, at the till. The Council then invoiced the recipient. Other supermarkets had introduced responses across the network so the credit facility was only required at the co-op.

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

Supporting food banks

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

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

School food provision

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

"Initially, free school meals was about getting that hot meal to people, and that sounds crazy because it was, when I look back on it, but it was the right thing at the time. We thought schools would close for three weeks, what would you do for three weeks? We wanted to keep our services going because we had the food, we had the stock sitting in the kitchens, we had the catering staff there willing to do it, and we had the school transport." (Council staff respondent)

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

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

"And then as lockdown eased, we felt, at that time, it was the appropriate time to move away from that direct response and to provide a cash payment during the summer holiday period as lockdown eased. So, we have come in for a bit of criticism as to why are you delivering food and not enabling cash? But if you lived in a rural area, your nearest shop is ten miles away, there was no public transport and you had three kids to look after, having cash made no difference. So, that was very much a response for those families, and then when transport started to improve, kids were no longer at school, we felt, at that stage, it was absolutely the right thing to do, is protect the dignity and choice by providing a cash payment. So, that's what we did." (Council staff respondent)

Community food organisations and food banks

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

*Bute Oasis (Isle of Bute)*⁴⁷

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

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

*Helensburgh and Lomond Food Bank*⁴⁸

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

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

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

⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/buteoasis2/>

⁴⁸ <https://helensburghlomondfoodbank.org/>

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

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

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

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

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

The food bank secured a grant of £3,500 which covered the cost of some of the necessary adaptations. The Council community development manager advised the food bank to apply to the fund which was part of the Scottish Government Supporting Communities Fund which was held by the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park and made available for redistribution to smaller local charities.⁴⁹

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

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

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

⁴⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/helping-communities-affected-by-covid-19/>

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic the food bank was concerned about changes in their existing food supply. They experienced a drop in food donations from the local community, largely attributed to existing drop off points at local Churches not being accessible and fewer people visiting the shops to deposit food in collection baskets. However, the decline in food sourced in this way was compensated for by other supply sources. Firstly, using some of the grant money detailed above the food bank ordered a bulk purchase through Morrisons and got a delivery of pallets of food to boost stocks. Secondly, the food bank received food through the national commitment which Morrisons made to give food to food banks.⁵⁰ Thirdly, the food bank sourced some items that were difficult to obtain (such as UHT milk) by contacting the Council and purchasing it through their bulk purchase order. Finally, the food bank experienced a significant increase in financial support.

“What we actually found was that we got a significant increase in financial support. An awful lot of people who previously would have bought food and dropped it off started either a Bacs, a direct debit Bacs bank transfer, or sending a cheque or coming in with an envelope with money. It has been quite staggering, actually, the amount of money that people gave us. That wasn’t much of a feature of the food bank before. It was mainly food that people gave. But we found that a lot of people would be giving you £20, £40, some more than that.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Hub Grub café and Dunoon Food Bank (Dunoon)

A number of changes to the ‘back office’ of the cafe and food bank were required. Due to the cleaning and safety requirements necessary at their existing food bank venue they decided to move premises to a local hall which they had full use of and, therefore, did not need to “worry about other people in the building” (Third sector respondent). In addition, their food used to be stored in an unused room in the back of a care home but as the care home was closed to visitors it was decided to move the food store as well.

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

“We did it across the board because it's not for us to judge who deserves it and who doesn't. Everybody who came in those periods got money for gas and electric.”
(Third sector respondent)

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

⁵⁰ <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2020/03/morrisons-to-donate-10m-worth-of-groceries-to-uk-food-banks/>

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

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

Moving on Mid Argyll

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

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

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

Islay Food bank⁵¹

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

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

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

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

⁵¹ <https://www.islaybaptistchurch.org.uk/community-store-cupboard>

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

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

Bute Advice Centre

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

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

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

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

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

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

Community Food Forum

The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to share experiences and support each other. In addition, a key output of the Forum during the COVID-19 pandemic, working in partnership with the Council, the local housing association, Citizens Advice and the Bute Advice Centre, was the development of a leaflet providing information on the different sources of financial support and referral routes. This project was developed in collaboration with the Independent Food Aid Network as part of their cash first project (for information see here: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>).

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

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

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

Other Community Groups

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

clients, examples given being an existing elderly befriending organisation and a mental health support charity. Another example was Dunoon Burgh Hall which had to close its doors and cancel all planned events at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the organisation started a 'community kitchen' which delivered meals to elderly and vulnerable people. This was funded through a £30,000 grant from Scottish Government's Covid 19 Supporting Communities Fund which was administered in Argyll and Bute by the organisation Highlands and Islands Enterprise.⁵² Very localised groups, such as community councils or informal neighbourhood groups, also started providing services to support food access. When discussing this support from other local community groups one participant added to the chat box:

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We had one group from another community who wanted to come to us just to get supplies of food, so they could set up their own wee food bank in their own back yard. We discouraged that and said, "Well, look, we are here, and we are happy to help. Why don't you get people to come here? If they can't come themselves a neighbour can come or another volunteer." (Third sector respondent).

Other Local Businesses

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

⁵² <https://www.hie.co.uk/>

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

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

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Argyll and Bute

Supporting local businesses

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

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

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

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

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

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

Third Sector as an early response

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

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

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

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

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

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

Urban/Rural Mix

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

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

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

I wrote to the Council to ask why they had decided to use parcels rather than either vouchers or money, because some other areas had gone for that choice. And they said it was due to the rurality of the area. They thought that there weren't enough shops with enough food. That might have been the case in some areas, but it wouldn't have been the case in Helensburgh, Dunoon. There are quite a lot of places in Argyll that are reasonable-sized towns. I don't think that argument would have held. It would have held for some of the island communities maybe.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

Reflections on national shielding grocery box scheme

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

“And I'm not saying... I'm trying not to be critical around that, there were good reasons why that happened that way, but it then meant people... people wanted to opt out of the shielding boxes and take ours, and that happened, we had people opt out of the national shielding boxes and come onto our programme because they knew it was a better offer.” (Council staff respondent)

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

“In hindsight, should the shielding not be delivered through local authorities?

Probably. Because we could have then been more consistent and prevented some of these issues that arose.” (Council staff respondent)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking ahead

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

“Just recently I have noticed the demand is going up a bit, and I'm relating that to fuel bills. People are now paying for fuel, which they weren't in the summer, and there's now a conflict between people's ability to pay for heating and pay for food. Just in the last couple of weeks really, we have had a few more referrals of people saying, 'I've had a fuel bill. I can't afford to do the shopping' We've responded to that.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Longer term impact of the response

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

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

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

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

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

Participants' answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

Funding for responses

Participants reflected that there was sufficient funding available during the national lockdown and this was a key facilitator to delivering responses. The Scottish Government Food Fund, which provided funding to local authorities to support people with access to food⁵³ was used by the Council to cover the costs of the food parcel delivery response. Also, third sector organisations utilised the supporting communities funding for grants to cover a range of costs.⁵⁴

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

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

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

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

Partnership working and building relations

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

⁵³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/news/helping-communities-affected-by-covid-19/>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Early confusion

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

“That was a bit of confusion, to be honest, I have to say, because people in Islay, they had so many phone numbers they could possibly phone, there was some confusion, which we are now trying to pull together and trying to point people to the food bank. It was getting very complicated and people were getting quite confused.” (Third sector respondent)

More co-ordination needed from the outset

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An option for face-to-face support

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

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

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

Direct food provision

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

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

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

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



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Belfast Case Study

Gordon, K., Loopstra, R., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Belfast Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

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

| | |
|--|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Belfast | 1 |
| Data overview | 4 |
| About Belfast | 4 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 6 |
| Belfast City Council..... | 7 |
| Belfast Food Network | 7 |
| Emergency food providers..... | 8 |
| School meal provision | 8 |
| Meals on Wheels..... | 9 |
| Community food providers..... | 9 |
| Early signs of food access issues in the COVID-19 pandemic | 9 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic | 10 |
| Belfast Council..... | 10 |
| Strategic and thematic partners | 12 |
| Community groups and organisations | 13 |
| Belfast Food Network | 15 |
| Emergency food providers..... | 16 |
| Informal street level support | 18 |
| Community food providers..... | 18 |
| Food retailers and hospitality | 19 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Belfast | 19 |
| Local community responses..... | 20 |
| Meeting the needs of different groups | 21 |
| Limitations of the shielding box programme | 21 |
| Crisis vs holistic support..... | 22 |
| Evidence and concerns of economic impact..... | 23 |
| Political dimensions | 24 |
| Looking ahead | 24 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 25 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer | 25 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer | 27 |
| Appendix 1: Information leaflet included in grocery box deliveries..... | 30 |

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

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

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

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

Participants reported 18 food banks operated in the city prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of these were food banks in the Trussell Trust network. The Council website lists some of the other organisations providing emergency food aid in the city including the Storehouse, East Belfast Mission, Belfast Central Mission, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. In addition, a wide range of third sector organisations provided community lunches, Meals on Wheels, community cafes and pay as you feel services across the city. A Meals on Wheels service was also provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with meals provided at a cost for recipients. A range of holiday clubs ran across the city during school holidays, many of which provided food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.⁵⁵

The Belfast Food Network (BFN) is a collaborative forum established in March 2014 to work towards developing the city as a recognised Sustainable Food City.⁵⁶ BFN also registered as a member of the Food Power network in 2017 and received financial support to develop its network, produce a food poverty report and increase Healthy Start uptake. Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the bulk of BFNs work centred on five funded strands: the 'Peas Please' initiative, a sustainable ready meals project (in partnership with organisations supporting people with additional needs), the 'Healthy Start' programme, a sustainable fish initiative, and the 'Nourishing Communities Programme' (a cooking and food education programme).⁵⁷ On top of these funded programmes BFN undertook work to inform policy work on building a sustainable food network in Northern Ireland.

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

The Council set up Belfast's Community Response Hub at the start of April, including a helpline which received 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st of July 2020. Of the calls requesting support in some form, 88% related to support with food.⁵⁸ The food support provided depended on the needs of the household.

⁵⁵http://www.cini.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

⁵⁶<https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>

⁵⁷<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/peasplease/>

⁵⁸<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

In Northern Ireland weekly grocery box deliveries were available through an intervention from the Department for Communities. This scheme provided weekly food boxes to people who were shielding and unable to access food through other means and people who were not shielding but were in critical need of food.⁵⁹ Belfast Council played a central role in operating this provision across the city. People who received a letter advising them to shield were advised to contact the national helpline, ran by Advice NI, if they required support with food. Callers would be triaged and passed onto the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust who undertook an assessment of the callers' support requirements. If required, callers' details would be passed on to Belfast Council in order for a food box to be provided. In addition, any Belfast resident who self-identified as vulnerable and isolated, with little or no family or friend networks, and no other means of accessing food could then call the Council helpline and request a weekly food parcel. The Belfast Community Response Hub sorted the food parcels received through the national initiative and delivered them to eligible households. Most of this work was undertaken by re-deployed council staff and Red Cross volunteers. Between the 8th of April and the 31st of June, a total of 50,533 food box deliveries were provided in Belfast via the community response hub with an average of 5,000 boxes a week. The delivery of food boxes for people who faced financial barriers to accessing food stopped on the 26th of June. However, the scheme continued until the 31st of July for people who were shielding with deliveries in July being made by the Red Cross.

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

The types of responses that the strategic partners were providing included food parcels, help with shopping, provision of shopping vouchers, electricity and gas payment top ups, prescription collections, benefits advice, friendly phone calls and wellbeing packs. This support was provided through the network of local organisations and community groups that received a disbursement of funding from the strategic partners. Reporting on the use of the funding disbursed via the strategic partners, the Council noted that 134 local groups were funded to contribute to the response and 56,874 food parcels or meals were provided.⁶⁰

Perhaps as part of this network of organisations coordinated by the strategic partners, or independent of this, a number of organisations newly started providing food aid including local football clubs, youth diversionary projects, community restorative justice and local non-food businesses. In addition, new initiatives were formed purely for the purpose of providing food aid during the pandemic, for example, a 'pop up' soup kitchen that ran for 14 weeks providing 1,600 meals a week to people who were struggling to access food for whatever

⁵⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

⁶⁰ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

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

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

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

Belfast Food Network continued with a focus on sustainable solutions. They distributed £50,000 of funding which they had received from Necessity, to provide grants to 27 local food businesses.⁶¹ Grants were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock. They also produced a series of online videos on cooking and growing and published a comprehensive newsletter every fortnight throughout the Summer which detailed some of the responses across the city, some of the work the Councils were doing and different funding opportunities.

Local businesses also started providing food support such as pubs and restaurants delivering hot meals to elderly people. In addition, two websites were created to provide information on local food businesses continuing to operate throughout lockdown. 'InYourArea', is a website which allows people to search for businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.⁶² 'Who is delivering? Northern Ireland' is a Facebook page that shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.⁶³

⁶¹ <https://necessity.info/about>

⁶² https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

⁶³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

Data overview

This case study primarily draws on data collected through interviews and a participative workshop held between September 2020 – January 2021. This case study area had a ‘local research facilitator’ working as a partner on the project who identified and facilitated access to the research participants. The full methodology for the local area case study research has been published alongside this report in the Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix. This is available on the project website. Details of the data collected for this particular case study is reported below. The case study draws from the following data sources:

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

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

In addition to primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two key sources of this secondary data were the Council’s ‘COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020 and ‘digests’ that were written by Belfast Food Network and sent to members providing updates on various responses across the city and beyond.⁶⁴ These digests were updated weekly during May and June, fortnightly throughout July and every 3 or 4 weeks thereafter. Lastly, during the workshops, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. Other data included comments submitted via the ‘chat’ function and emails which were sent with additional comments following the workshop. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Belfast

As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, areas that were either predominantly urban or rural, and evidence of

⁶⁴<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. The claimant rate reflects people either receiving Jobseeker's Allowance or receiving Universal Credit and expected to be looking for work. Belfast was selected due to the presence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 113%.

Belfast City Council serves a population of 330,000. There are 59 electoral wards which make up 10 district electoral areas.⁶⁵ 20% of the population in the Belfast Local Government District are aged 0-15, 65% are aged 16-64 and 15% are aged 65+. The median age in mid-2019 was 35.9 years. Compared to other Governmental Districts across Northern Ireland Belfast has the highest proportion of the working age population, particularly at the younger working ages (people aged 16 to 39 years) (35.7 per cent).⁶⁶ Before the pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Belfast was 3.1% in January 2020, but this rose to 6.6% in July 2020.

Levels of deprivation across the country are reported in the 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures' which splits the country into 890 Super Output Areas (SOAs). Belfast has 174 SOAs. In 2017, Belfast had 50 of the 100 most deprived SOAs, accounting for 29% of its 174 SOAs, and five of the 10 most deprived SOAs.⁶⁷

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 47% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.⁶⁸



Map of Northern Ireland Councils and Belfast City Council Area⁶⁹

⁶⁵ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/your-council>

⁶⁶ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2019-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>

⁶⁷ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/NIMDM17-%20with%20ns.pdf>

⁶⁸ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/local-government-maps>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Belfast City Council

Prior to the pandemic the main response to food poverty by Belfast City Council was the provision of funding for the five advice consortia in the city. These advice consortia comprise organisations that give out general advice and information around income maximisation and support with welfare. The consortia model is based on geographical providers. The Council also undertake a wider programme of work to tackle poverty and social exclusion in the city.⁷⁰

Belfast Food Network

The Belfast Food Network (BFN) is a collaborative forum established in March 2014 to work towards developing the city as a recognised Sustainable Food City, with Belfast being one of the original 6 pilot Sustainable Food Cities.⁷¹ The pilot had six objectives: tackling food poverty, diet-related ill-health and access to affordable healthy food; promoting healthy and sustainable food to the public; building community food knowledge, skills, resources and projects; promoting a vibrant and diverse sustainable food economy; transforming catering and food procurement; reducing waste and the ecological footprint of the food system. BFN also registered with the Food Power network in 2017 and has received financial support to develop its network, produce its food poverty report and increase Healthy Start uptake.

An early key output was the Food Poverty Scoping Report 'Enough is Enough'.⁷² This scoping study laid the foundation for developing an action plan to tackle food poverty in Belfast in collaboration with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. The report made a number of recommendations: adopt a rights-based approach to food poverty; promote the living wage; build advocacy capacity; widen the debate (involving a range of stakeholders); promote the availability of fresh, healthy food; and data collection.

A final report on the Enough is Enough work was published in August 2019.⁷³ The listed key achievements were:

- A holiday hunger survey was sent to all schools in Belfast to gauge the level of holiday hunger in the city, map 'hotspots' and target resources.
- The Food Poverty Working Group, led by Dr Liz Mitchell, has been able to deliver seven projects from the collaborative response to food poverty, with reasonable attendance at meetings.
- Three Community Gardens have adopted their 'Sow, Grow, Munch' manual.
- Delivered a 'Right to Food' joint project between three civil society organisations – Nourish Scotland, Belfast Food Network and Food Sense Wales to strengthen existing networks, build knowledge and share learning on the right to food.

Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the bulk of the food network's work centred on five funded strands: the 'Peas Please' initiative, a sustainable ready meals project (in partnership with organisations supporting people with additional needs), the 'Healthy Start' programme, a sustainable fish initiative, and the 'Nourishing Communities Programme' (a

⁷⁰ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s13777/Appendix%201%20- Revised%20draft%20of%20the%20Belfast%20City%20Council%20framework%20to%20tackle%20poverty%20and%20reduce%20inequal.pdf>

⁷¹ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>

⁷² <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/Portals/4/Documents/Belfast%20Enough-is-Enough-Report.pdf>

⁷³ https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Belfast_AllianceDev_12monthSnapshot.pdf

cooking and food education programme).⁷⁴ On top of these funded programmes BFN does policy work and building a sustainable network in Northern Ireland.

Emergency food providers

The Council website lists some of the organisations providing emergency food aid in the city including the Storehouse, East Belfast Mission, Belfast Central Mission, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army.⁷⁵ Participants reported there were 18 food banks operating in the city prior to the pandemic. Five of these were part of the Trussell Trust food bank network (West Belfast, South Belfast, North Belfast, South-west Belfast and Dundonald).

Eighteen food banks represent an increase of one food bank in existence since 2015 when the 'Enough is Enough' report identified 14 food banks operating in the city and a further 3 in development. Three of these food banks were in the Trussell Trust network (South Belfast, North Belfast and Dundonald), North Belfast Advice Partnership, Foodstore @ Cooke, Sustain, The Larder, Storehouse and Willowfield Parish Church. The three in development were Falls Community Fellowship, Greater Shankhill Methodist Circuit and Greencastle Methodist Church. The report also identified a further 36 organisations which were involved in more ad hoc provision of food parcels or were charities working in collaboration with food banks. In addition, it was reported that many advice centres reported working with their local Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul to provide food and fuel support to clients in pandemic.⁷⁶

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

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

School meal provision

A pilot of a 'Healthy Summer' programme ran in the Summer of 2019 targeted at children who are eligible for free school meals. The programme was run in partnership between the Northern Ireland Executive's Urban Villages Initiative, Business in the Community NI and local businesses to provide 30,000 meals through a diverse range of community-based initiatives in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.⁷⁷ In addition to this specific programme aimed at low-income families a range of holiday clubs also run across the city during school holidays, many of which provide food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/peasplease/>

⁷⁵ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/poverty>, <https://www.storehousebelfast.com/provision/food>, <https://www.ebm.org.uk/>, <https://www.belfastcentralmission.org/>, <https://www.svp.ie/northern-ireland-homepage.aspx/>, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/Portals/4/Documents/Belfast%20Enough-is-Enough-Report.pdf>

⁷⁷ <https://www.bitcni.org.uk/post-news/businesses-helping-provide-a-healthy-summer-for-local-children/>, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/urban-villages-initiative>

⁷⁸ http://www.cini.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

Meals on Wheels

A meals on wheels service is provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with meals provided at a cost for recipients. 406 people in Belfast used this service in 2019/20.⁷⁹

At least one community organisation, East Belfast Mission, also provide meals on wheels service to over 250 people in the local area. Meals cost £4 for 1 course and £5.30 for two courses.⁸⁰

Community food providers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I was going, “This is just horrendous,” but panic buying really, really did frighten people. Don’t get me wrong, you could see the trauma that people were going through watching their TV. I do think the message could have been conveyed a bit

⁷⁹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/cc-adults-ni-19-20.pdf>

⁸⁰ <https://www.ebm.org.uk/meals-on-wheels/>

better, do you know what I mean, that we were never going to run out of food.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

Belfast Council

The Council set up Belfast's Community Response Hub the first week of April. The Hub ran a community helpline which went live on the 8th of April. The helpline handled 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st of July 2020. 7,838 of these calls were requests for support. 6,908 (88%) of these calls related to support with food, including calls related to the grocery box delivery scheme (see below) such as requests for a food parcel, calling to find out date of delivery, clarification on missed deliveries, and customers cancelling deliveries. Of the non-food related calls 43% resulted in a referral for charity or community support, 20% for emergency service support, 11% for collection and/or delivery of prescriptions and 10% for emergency/crisis support. People seeking support also emailed the Hub and, at the peak of the pandemic, around 300-600 emails were processed each day.⁸¹

Promoting advice services

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

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

⁸¹<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

that on a wider level as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Grocery boxes delivery scheme

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

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

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

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

Funding and support for community organisations

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



Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020⁸²

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

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

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

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

Strategic and thematic partners

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

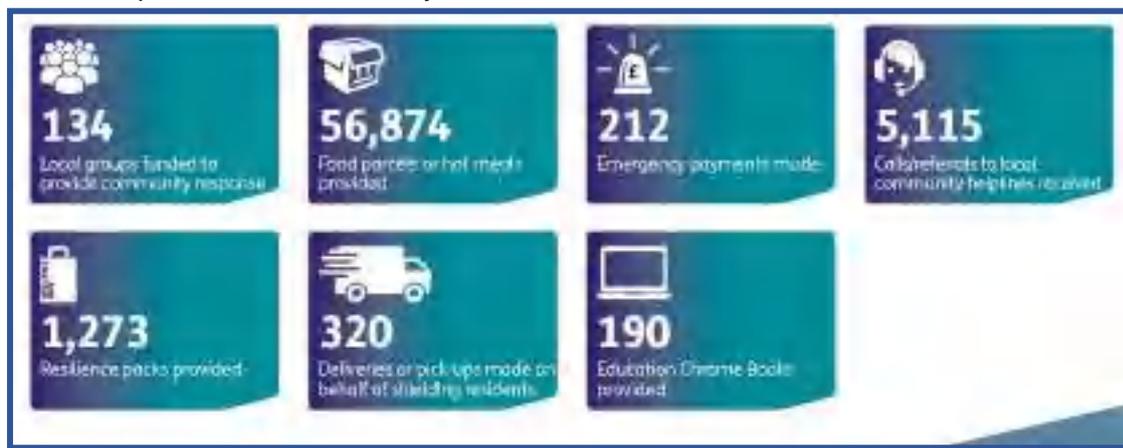
“I was engaging with a couple of the strategic partners. The sense I got from them was that we as a council gave them money, and then they used that in the way that was most appropriate for their particular area. Certainly, there was a sense that, whilst you had the strategic partners, they were engaging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

⁸²<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

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

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

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



Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020⁸³

Community groups and organisations

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

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

From desk-based research prior to the workshop an initial list of organisations was presented during the workshop, including existing organisations that continued with food provision, existing organisations that newly started food provision and new initiatives

⁸³<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent commented that it would be the “beginning of a very long list, to be honest.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

“Today is the last day of our soup project. Over the past 10 weeks, with the help of a team of restaurants, cafes, arts organisations, home cooks, drivers, harassed pals and well-wishers we have produced nearly 14,000 portions of soup to help feed our city’s most vulnerable. We have also supported 10 other charitable ventures throughout Belfast and provided the start-up seed money and mentorship for other soup kitchens throughout our city. We feel incredibly privileged that we have been trusted to do this.” (Framework website)⁸⁴

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

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

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

⁸⁴ <https://www.frameworkbelfast.com/post/619622687522832384/today-is-the-last-day-of-our-soup-project>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Belfast Food Network

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

They received about £50,000 funding from the organisation Necessity to provide grants to local food businesses.⁸⁵ The grants aimed to help alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and support businesses to adapt their business models. 27 microgrants were awarded to small sustainable food businesses and were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock.

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

“We had low-cost cooking videos based on fresh local and seasonal produce so to give people something to cook in the house, build their cooking skills, reconnect with

⁸⁵ <https://necessity.info/about>

food, use that as a way of boosting their mental health, that kind of thing.” (Third sector respondent)

They also produced a series of online videos focused on cooking and growing your own in partnership with the emergency response from Keeping Northern Ireland Beautiful which sent out 550 growing packs to individuals, families and community groups.⁸⁶

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

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

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

Emergency food providers

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

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

“At the end of August things changed and we started to see job losses. We started to see a new group of people accessing the food bank who never accessed it before. Before who actually – and as I always say - the first thing they say to you is, they say,

⁸⁶ <https://www.nigoodfood.com/calling-all-would-be-grow-your-owners/>

“I’m awful sorry for contacting you,” that’s the way they start the conversation, “But I really need help.” They apologise for asking for help. So it’s a really different group of people that we would see accessing our service now. People who are really struggling.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

| | |
|---|--|
| South Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust) ⁸⁷ | All face-to-face services paused. Started delivering food parcels to homes 5 days a week and also distributing food boxes through key agencies. |
|---|--|

⁸⁷ <https://southbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

| | |
|--|--|
| West Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust) ⁸⁸ | Operating a delivery service only. Referral agencies provide food bank with recipients details and an E-voucher is issued. Parcel will be delivered as soon as possible. UP to three attempts at delivery will be made (food parcels cannot be left unattended). |
| South-West Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust) ⁸⁹ | Food bank remained open (Tuesdays 1:00pm to 2:30pm and Thursdays 10:45am to 12:15 pm). The building was closed, parcels provided at the door. Home deliveries also available. |

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

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

Informal street level support

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

“So, you had that, kind of, quite high-level community response. You then had that more neighbourhood, and then within neighbourhoods, there was that street-by-street thing, and I think also, there was that natural human response to want to help your fellow man. So, people were coming together in informal ways to meet the needs that they could see happening around them.” (Council staff respondent)

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

Community food providers

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

“I mean, we’ve got a very, very, very big and diverse food scene in Belfast. It really is. There’s an awful lot of really interesting projects and stuff, but they all ceased operating essentially. You know, anything that was to do with... well, ceased operating in a communal sense and went more with the emergency food response

⁸⁸ <https://westbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

⁸⁹ <https://southwestbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

really. Some of them went into online lessons as well, but no, I mean it just stopped everything.” (Third sector respondent)

Food retailers and hospitality

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

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

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

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



Food provision
Spar, Eurospar and Vivo home delivery

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

Source: Belfast Council Website, Accessed Nov 11 2020.⁹⁰

In addition two websites were created to provide information on local food businesses continuing to operate throughout lockdown. ‘InYourArea’, is a website which allows people to search from businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.⁹¹ ‘Who is delivering? Northern Ireland’ is a Facebook page shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.⁹²

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Belfast

⁹⁰ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/community/health-and-wellbeing/covid-19-belfast-community-support>

⁹¹ https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

⁹² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

Local community responses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They basically have funded a whole new raft of mini organisations to turn into food banks. They started duplicating existing services. This is a flippant comment, it’s not an accurate statement, but we went from 14 official food banks to 300 overnight, something like that. I mean that’s not obviously the case but that’s what it felt like.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

“That splintered unjoined-ness, from what I’ve seen just as an outsider, has just been replicated with bells on.” (Third sector respondent)

Meeting the needs of different groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations of the shielding box programme

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But yes, I mean, when the Department for Communities, through Belfast City Council, as well, made the money available for the food delivery then, for the second phase, went to the Red Cross, which left a number of community groups, “Well, what about us? We stepped up to the mark and we did this, and now you're just bypassing us.” (Third sector respondent)

Crisis vs holistic support

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evidence and concerns of economic impact

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Political dimensions

Some respondents spoke of their disappointment at what were perceived to be political dimensions in the response. One respondent pointed us towards news coverage of political affiliations of the groups that received funding from the Council (for example see here⁹³). Another commented that they felt “quite disgusted” as they perceived that food poverty had been made political, when it is a non-party political social issue. Another respondent discussed that there may have been a political reason for some of the community groups becoming involved, with some group possibly feeling they should be providing a response because other neighbouring communities were and “politically, it would have been impossible for them not to be doing it.” (Third sector respondent)

Looking ahead

Respondents talked of activity that was happening at the time of the workshop (January 2021) around supporting recovery from the pandemic and also the legacy of the strong involvement of the community sector. The Council have been exploring ways to support the recovery.

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

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

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

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

“And I think there actually has been quite a bit of head-scratching, in terms of, “What is it you want us to do now?” And there has been a certain amount of ‘we’ve done the

⁹³ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/04/06/news/uda-linked-group-awarded-share-of-120-000-council-coronavirus-funding--1891872/>

food, but we also realise it's no good just keeping somebody alive with food if we're not giving them a quality of life'.

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

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

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

Participants' answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

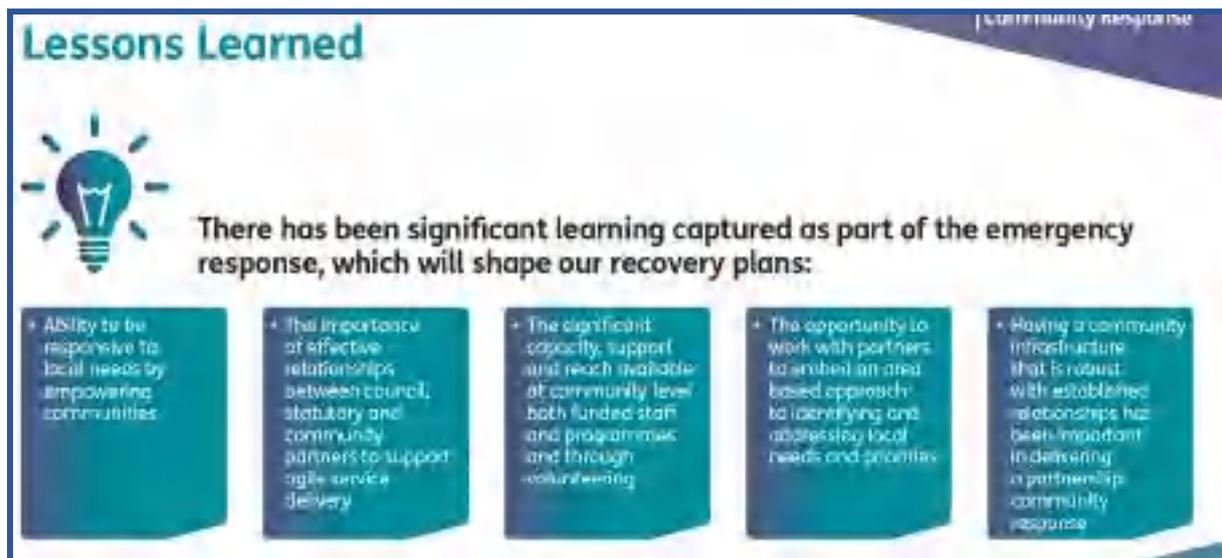
A 'layered' response

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

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

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

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



Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020⁹⁴

Opportunity for engagement

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

“And this is in an inner-city part of Belfast, where there would be a high proportion of older and very vulnerable people, particularly older men, who you would have seen in some of the wee city centre pubs and clubs, having a drink of an afternoon. And you could keep an eye on them there. But now, because this is happening and they’re closed, these guys are going out to these houses and making sure that they’re okay and they’re settled.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

Resources

Respondents also reflected that some resources were easy to secure, such as offers of repurposed physical space to store food and host operations. There were lots of volunteers

⁹⁴<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

across the city. Some respondents felt that funding was available to a wide range of initiatives that supported a food response.

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Lack of co-ordination

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But ultimately, what they were doing was they were physically taking the food out of normal local food banks to drive it to Belfast. They were getting food collected in Donaghadee, forgetting about the Donaghadee food bank and driving it to Belfast. That was being replicated across the whole province, across all of their shops literally. I had spoken to three food banks directly, Donaghadee, Bangor and Lisburn and they were all experiencing this loss of donations because it was being rediverted up to Belfast which was actually really completely unnecessary. Now, to be honest with you, that's been my experience of food poverty emergency grants here. It's not good. It's not coordinated.” (Workshop attendee, third sector)

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

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

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

“We heard a lot of stories around duplication, people being on the same list two or three times, people getting food when they didn't need food, the quality of the food they were getting not being appropriate for either their ethnicity or their cultural kind

of background or their age, frankly. It just seemed to be a very complicated space.”
(Third sector respondent)

Funding

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose I’m more interested in nutrition and the training of it, because that’s what I do, and our ‘culture cuisine with me’ course was about the heritage and the background of food, and encouraging people to eat nutritionally, different culture of food from different diverse trainers. Now, our trainers got ready to make little, small videos to do that, but we couldn’t get the funding because funding wasn’t attached to that importance. So, in a roundabout way, we have stopped it.” (Third sector respondent)

Tracking funded activity

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

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

Lack of consideration of local food systems

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

“The thing that I found the most shocking was the utter disconnect from any locality or local supply systems, supply chains and stuff like that...there is no reason why those very localised, very, very important links in a sustainable food supply chain

couldn't have been supported to be the delivery mechanism for this township." (Third sector respondent)

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

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

Appendix 1: Information leaflet included in grocery box deliveries



Belfast
City Council



Department for
Communities
www.communities.gov.uk

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

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

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

Please check the contents carefully



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

What happens next?



- **The scheme will continue until 26 June 2020.**
- We have a limited supply to help the most vulnerable, **so if you don't need this box again next week** and are happy for us to support someone else with it **please tell us:**



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



- Email: **covid19@belfastcity.gov.uk**
- At some point over the next few weeks you will also receive a call from Belfast City Council who will make sure you are getting the help you need.

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



For Information: Other ways to have access to food

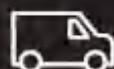
If you are vulnerable because of health conditions:

You can get food shopping support through a local volunteer:



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

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



Supermarket delivery slot:

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

OPTIONS OPEN TO ANYONE:



1. Spar/Eurospar/Vivo Home delivery

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



2. Other independent retailers

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



3. Foodbanks and other community support:

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



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Cardiff Case Study

Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Cardiff Case Study

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 to 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.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Cardiff has had an active food partnership, Food Cardiff, in place since 2013. Food Cardiff sits within the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board's local public health team, and works closely with the Cardiff Council, as well as various community food and food aid organisations working across the city, such as ACE (Action in Caerau & Ely)'s Dusty Forge Pantry. Cardiff Council had a focus on food poverty before the pandemic, as outlined in their food strategy. The Cardiff Food Bank has long played a leading role in the provision of food parcels to people who are economically vulnerable and also had a history of working with the Council. These foundations likely contributed to the rapid mobilisation of responses to concerns about food insecurity over the pandemic by these groups. Importantly, Food Cardiff also saw their role as linking up actors who were newly engaged in food responses, ensuring that they were supported and part of the overall food response in Cardiff. Thus, though there were many moving parts and many actors involved, the overall feeling was that a comprehensive response was established across the city that should have met food needs over the spring and summer of 2020.

The responses enacted involved direct food provision by the Council and the coordination of a local (usually ward-level) food response by Food Cardiff and the Council. The Cardiff 3rd Sector Council also played an important role in providing training and recruitment of volunteers to this food response, as well as supporting other food projects with funding and volunteers over the spring and summer.

We heard about the ways that organisations adapted their ways of working, sometimes at the expense of meeting their usual aims, yet being able to maintain food provisioning activity was a priority. New actors became involved in food provisioning, especially to respond to the needs of people who were not necessarily economically vulnerable or on the shielding list, but who were unwilling or unable to go out to acquire food. Groups, including the Council, also worked to address the gaps in the adequacy of the Welsh Government shielding box scheme. Looking ahead, though the rapid mobilisation of a food response across the city was applauded, our research participants flagged the need for a returned focus on the root causes of insecure access to food in Cardiff.

| | |
|--|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Cardiff | 1 |
| Data overview | 5 |
| About Cardiff | 6 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 7 |
| Food Cardiff..... | 7 |
| Cardiff Council | 8 |
| Cardiff 3 rd Sector Council (C3SC)..... | 10 |
| Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Public Health Division | 10 |
| Food banks and other food parcel providers | 10 |
| Community pantry or community fridge projects | 11 |
| Meal providers | 12 |
| Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic | 12 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic 14 | |
| Food Cardiff..... | 14 |
| Cardiff Council | 17 |
| Cardiff 3 rd Sector Council (C3SC)..... | 24 |
| Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Public Health Division | 24 |
| Food parcel providers..... | 25 |
| Community pantry or community fridge projects..... | 28 |
| Meal providers | 30 |
| Other third sector organisations..... | 31 |
| Food retailers and local businesses | 31 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Cardiff | 32 |
| The desire and ability to act quickly, and consequences of this | 32 |
| The confusion of the first weeks | 33 |
| The importance of stakeholders playing a coordinating role | 33 |
| New relationships and future impacts of these..... | 34 |
| New ways of working and the need to establish new ways of responding to food needs .. | 34 |
| Responsibility | 35 |
| Looking ahead | 36 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 36 |
| Enablers of the food response over spring and summer 2020 | 37 |
| The importance of pre-existing relationships and benefit of working together | 37 |
| Barriers to enacting responses to concerns about food insecurity over spring and summer 2020..... | 38 |

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 38

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

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

A key actor leading on work to address food insecurity in Cardiff before the pandemic was the food partnership, Food Cardiff. Food Cardiff was established in 2013, sitting within the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board's local public health team. The partnership is also a member of the Food Power Network.⁹⁵ The partnership includes a working group focused on food poverty, the Food and Poverty group, comprising of seven key organisations: Cardiff Council, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (Public Health Dietitians), Cardiff 3rd Sector Council, Action in Caerau & Ely (ACE), Business in the community, Albany Baptist Church, FareShare Cymru, and Cardiff Foodbank (Trussell Trust network). Some main areas of work since the partnership was established have been setting up and piloting a school holiday enrichment programme, outlining a 5-year plan for tackling food insecurity,⁹⁶ developing and rolling out a maximizing family income programme and helping establish food pantries and community food retail projects.

As well as active participation in the Food Cardiff partnership, the Cardiff Council provided support for addressing food insecurity primarily through their money advice services, which operated across the city as part of the Councils "community hubs". Money advice staff located at the hubs offered support to ensure that people were claiming their full benefit entitlements and other forms of financial help, such as the Welsh Government Discretionary Assistance Fund. If appropriate, people accessing the Hubs for support would also be referred to the Cardiff food bank. In addition, the Council funded staff from their money advice services team to visit each of Cardiff food bank's distribution centres.

The Cardiff Public Health Division was also involved in supporting food access prior to the pandemic, including the provision of funding or in-kind support for a number of food poverty initiatives in the city, delivering the Maximising Family Income programme in partnership with Food Cardiff, supporting a range of community programmes (including food banks and food aid projects) aiming to improve nutrition knowledge and cooking skills in areas of deprivation, and mapping and research on food insecurity.

As well as these public sector actors, third sector organisations provided a direct food response. The Cardiff Foodbank, a member of the Trussell Trust network, is the largest food parcel provider in Cardiff. An independent food bank has been running from the Al-Ikhlās

⁹⁵ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>

⁹⁶ <http://www.cardiffandvaleuhb.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/1143/Building%20Resilience%20Food%20Security%20Plan.pdf>

Centre mosque. Dusty Forge is a community food pantry run by ACE (Action in Caerau & Ely). Members paid £5 per visit on an allocated day and were allowed to choose ten items from the food shop, with an estimated minimum value of £15. The Tremorfa Pantry operated as a bit of a hybrid between a community pantry and food bank. There were also a number of organisations providing various pay-as-you-can meals prior to the pandemic.

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

Covid-19 Food Response Task Group

Food Cardiff took the lead in setting up a Covid-19 Food Response Task Group, which included council departments, Cardiff 3rd Sector Council, FareShare Cymru, the Cardiff Foodbank, and Cardiff & Vale University Health Board. The response structure established involved identification of 11 “anchor” organisations and various “food response partners” in each ward of the city (these were the same organisation in some wards). Anchor organisations that already had experience in safeguarding, training, and GDPR were responsible for coordinating the local area volunteer response. Food response partners were involved in collecting and coordinating the distribution of food to other organisations and groups in their local areas and providing support for those involved in food distribution (for example, by providing advice on food hygiene or providing a physical space for cooking). Food response partners also were involved in accepting referrals of people needing food or help with shopping.

The work of anchor organisations and food response partners were supported by organisations in the Covid-19 Food Response Group:

- Food Cardiff continued to be a source of information and responded to offers of help and community requests. They also directly supported Food Response partners.
- Cardiff Council’s role in this scheme was to manage the “Together for Cardiff” volunteering portal and to provide staff resources to support anchor organisations and food response partners.
- The Cardiff 3rd Sector Council also supported the scheme with volunteers and providing best practice advice on managing volunteers.
- The Cardiff and Vale Public Health Dietetic team provided nutrition advice.
- FareShare Cymru supported the scheme by managing food supplies for their members involved in the scheme.

The Cardiff Council

The Council set up a triage system for callers to the Cardiff Council advice line. Different referral routes were available for the different triaged groups.

- People who were self-isolating and were facing financial access barriers were referred to the Cardiff Council Food Team.
- People who were not self-isolating but were struggling to access food were referred to the existing local council hub for either a food parcel or a referral to the food bank.
- People who were self-isolating who could afford food were advised on local volunteer shopping support and supermarket delivery details.

- People who were shielding but for whom the national food box delivery scheme was not appropriate were referred to the Cardiff Council Food Team.
- Any contact could lead to a money advice team call back of appropriate.

The Council's Money Advice Team was expanded over the lockdown period to enable them to take more calls and bolster their capacity to help direct people towards correct benefit entitlements. Referral to the Cardiff Council Food Team resulted in the delivery of a food box from a temporary warehouse which was set up in response to the pandemic. The Cardiff & Vale Public Health Dietetics team worked with the Council to ensure the food parcels they were providing met nutritional, dietary and cultural requirements. The breakdown of the number of boxes provided by the Council is shown in the table below.

| | March 23-31st | April | May | June | Total |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Food parcels collected from Hubs | 87 | 318 | 113 | 33 | 551 |
| Food parcels delivered | 825 | 1,621 | 730 | 616 | 3,792 |
| Shielded food parcels delivered | n/a | 777 | 770 | 385 | 1,932 |
| | 912 | 2,716 | 1,613 | 1,034 | 6,275 |

The form of the replacements for free school meals when the schools were closed evolved over the lockdown. Initially replacements were provided in the form of a 'grab bag' collected from the school. This later changed to the provision of vouchers. However, after a couple of weeks this approach was replaced with a direct cash payment system, providing cash transfers of £19.50 per week per child to cover breakfast and lunch. A partnership with the Council, schools in Cardiff and the Cardiff & Vale Public Health Dietetics team, set up a new summer programme, the Cardiff Summer Squad, which served children identified as vulnerable by Children's Services. During the half day session children were provided a breakfast (morning session) and lunch (afternoon session). This summer programme was set up in response to the pausing of the usual School Holiday Enrichment Programme, the funds for which were diverted towards free school meal replacements during Summer 2020.

Emergency food providers and community food organisations

Cardiff Foodbank kept six of their seven distribution centres open, running 9 of their usual 11 sessions each week, but the model changed. Instead of offering clients tea, a chat and other support as necessary as they had prior to the pandemic, a 'grab and go' system was established. The food bank experienced an increase in demand in March and April when more than twice as many food parcels were given out compared to the same months in 2019. The food bank also worked with the Council to provide food parcels via the aforementioned community hubs. The benefit of this was that people could receive both a referral and a food parcel during one visit to the hub.

The independent food bank at the the Al-Ikhlās Centre mosque scaled up their operations over the pandemic to serve a wider range of people, open on more days and offer delivery. They also extended the support available, becoming open to anyone who needed support. In comparison to their pre-pandemic figures, their weekly average rose from just around 25 food parcels per week to 200 food parcels per week.

The Dusty Forge food pantry moved to a delivery model service early in the pandemic so that their most vulnerable members, namely those who were shielding and/or low-income families with children not eligible for free school meals, would still have access to their food. Parcels cost members £5 and members received about £25 worth of food: one ambient bag, one chilled/frozen, and one fruit and vegetable bag. Two new pantries were also established in Cardiff over the spring and summer of 2020.

A range of new actors also started supporting people with food access during the lockdown including community groups, comprised entirely of volunteers and existing organisations and groups that normally provided an array of services but not food. One example of a new meal provider during the spring of the pandemic was a local school who used their facilities to prepare hot meals for older people and others who were self-isolating or shielding and unable to prepare their own meals. Food retailers and local businesses also adapted their models to improve food accessibility.

Data overview

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

In Cardiff, we had one “Research Champion” from Food Cardiff who helped promote the research and recruit participants. An initial scoping interview was carried out with the Research Champion to receive an overview of the role of Food Cardiff during the COVID-19 pandemic and also to learn about the activities of other key organisations. From this initial scoping interview, invitations to participate in research interviews and the research workshop were sent by the Research Champion. Candidates for the interviews were people who played leading roles in various responses to food insecurity over the pandemic, of whom three were council staff and one worked with Cardiff Foodbank. Candidates for the workshop included those invited for interviews, as well as additional council staff, staff from the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Dietetics team, individuals who worked or volunteers for “Anchor organisations” (explained below), businesses and food suppliers involved in the food response in Cardiff, food aid project representatives in Cardiff, and other third sector organisations (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of individuals invited to participate in interviews and/or the research workshop for the Cardiff case study and numbers who participated.

| Type of Organisation/Group | Number Invited | Number Attended Interview/Workshop |
|---|----------------|------------------------------------|
| Cardiff Council | 5 | 4 |
| Cardiff and Vale Health Board | 1 | 1 |
| Anchor organisations (see case study for explanation) | 6 | 3 |
| Food project suppliers | 1 | 1 |
| Cardiff Third Sector Council | 2 | 1 |
| Food Businesses involved in the response | 1 | 0 |
| Food aid projects including food banks | 4 | 2 |
| Other third sector organisations | 1 | 0 |
| Mutual Aid Groups | 2 | 0 |
| Other Food Cardiff members | 1 | 1 |

The following case study draws from the following data sources:

- Three individual interviews conducted with representatives from the Cardiff Council, Food Cardiff, and the Cardiff Foodbank.

- One workshop conducted with 12 participants of whom:
 - 4 worked for the Cardiff Council
 - 7 worked or volunteered with third sector organisations or voluntary groups
 - 1 was part of the public health dietetics team from the Cardiff and Vale University of Health Board

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. Sources such as project reports and action plans were also shared by research participants. We also received written submissions to questions from a representative from one food aid project who was unable to participate in an interview or the workshop. Lastly, during the workshop, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Cardiff

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. Cardiff was selected due to the presence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 100%.

Cardiff is a city of about 364,200 people, of whom about 36,400 are 70 years of age or older.⁹⁷ It was described by one of our research participants as a "tale of two cities", with the Southern Arc containing areas of high deprivation and the Northern Arc being relatively well-off. Compared to Wales, in 2015, Cardiff had a lower proportion of households in income poverty (30.8% compared to 34.5%) but these headline figures mask variation across wards in Cardiff. In some wards, such as Ely, Llanrumney, and Adamsdown, income poverty levels were greater than 40% in 2015.⁹⁸ This said, it was pointed out that there are also pockets of deprivation in wealthier areas of the city, but that most interventions focus on the Southern Arc, as shared in the following quote:

"We get pockets of deprivation in the wealthy areas as well...but I'd say that Southern Arc is particularly deprived, and we've known that. There are a lot of interventions that we have and then we get complaints going, "All the money goes to the Southern Arc." It's like, "That's because they haven't got any."
(Council staff respondent)

⁹⁷ <https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/Your-Council/Have-your-say/Ask%20Cardiff%20Library/1.Amcangyfrif%20Poblogaeth%20Caerdydd%20-%20Cardiff%20Population%20Estimate.pdf>

⁹⁸ <https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/Your-Council/Have-your-say/Ask%20Cardiff%20Library/Aelwydydd%20Caerdydd%20mewn%20lodi%20yn%20ol%20ward%20-%20Cardiff%20Household%20Poverty%20by%20Ward.pdf>

In the Cardiff Well-Being Plan, it was highlighted that if the wards in the Southern Arc were considered a single local authority, it would be the most deprived local authority in Wales.⁹⁹ This geography is important to keep in mind, as interventions we heard about in Cardiff during the COVID-19 pandemic mostly focused on areas in the Southern Arc.

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 22% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.¹⁰⁰

Figure 1: Wards in Cardiff, highlighting those that make up the Southern Arc.



Source: <https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/Your-Council/Have-your-say/Ask%20Cardiff%20Library/Ask%20Cardiff%202018.pdf>

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

A range of actors and activities to address food insecurity were in place in Cardiff prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Food Cardiff

Food Cardiff was established in 2013 as a Sustainable Food Places partnership.¹⁰¹ It includes a working group focused on food poverty, the Food and Poverty group, which is a member of the Food Power network of food poverty alliances.¹⁰² However, it was shared that tackling food insecurity has been a key priority of the partnership since it was first

⁹⁹ <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-08-08-Cardiff-PSB-Well-being-Plan-ANNUAL-REPORT-english.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/about/>

¹⁰² <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/about/>,
https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/map/food_cardiff_food_and_poverty_group/

established. Over 2019 and 2020, 38 organisations were very involved with Food Cardiff and another 27 have engaged with the partnership but been more peripherally involved. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were about seven organisations involved in the food poverty working group specifically, including the Cardiff Council, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (Public Health Dietitians), Cardiff 3rd Sector Council, ACE, Business in the community, Albany Baptist Church, FareShare Cymru, and Cardiff Foodbank (Trussell Trust network).

Some key areas of work since the partnership was established have been:

- 1) Setting up and piloting a school holiday enrichment programme in 2015.
- 2) Outlining a 5-year plan for tackling food insecurity.¹⁰³
- 3) Developing and rolling out a maximizing family income programme. Working with the local health board, public health team, and the Cardiff Council, Food Cardiff developed a food-related benefits training programme. This initially provided supervisors of money-advice teams in the Council with a three-hour training session on Healthy Start, free school meals, breakfast clubs, and the school holiday enrichment programme. Supervisors, in turn, delivered training to their teams, who were then better equipped to advise people coming for advice on these benefits. This programme was later delivered to third-sector advice services as well.
- 4) Helping establish food pantries and community food retail projects. The first pantry they supported, The Dusty Forge, opened in June 2019. This project is detailed below.

Food Cardiff would also have regular networking meetings.

Cardiff Council

Strategy setting

It was shared by one council staff respondent that before the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity was “very much on the agenda of the Council.” (Council staff respondent). In November 2019, the Council published a food strategy and tackling food inequalities is one of the key priorities.¹⁰⁴ Actions proposed in the strategy included rolling out the School Holiday Enrichment Programme across more Cardiff schools and across more holidays, supporting the strategic roll out of community pantries, promoting and encouraging the uptake of food-related benefits via the Council’s community hubs, advice teams, and schools and social services, and promoting Living Wage accreditation.¹⁰⁵

The Council’s involvement in Food Cardiff, from helping form the partnership in 2013 to sitting on its Steering Group, is another way that the Council has been involved in work on food poverty, as was shared by one council respondent.

Community hubs, money advice teams, and financial support

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council operated “community hubs” across the city. These were often located in community centres, where there might be a library and/or leisure centre. The Council’s money advice team worked at these hubs, offering money

¹⁰³ <http://www.cardiffandvaleuhb.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/1143/Building%20Resilience%20Food%20Security%20Plan.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ <https://cardiff.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s35885/Cabinet%2021%20November%202019%20Food%20Strategy%20App%201.pdf?LLL=0>

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

advice, to ensure that people were claiming their full benefit entitlements and other forms of financial help, such as the Welsh Government Discretionary Assistance Fund. The Council also supported Food Cardiff's maximizing family income programme described above.

In-kind financial support from the Cardiff Council has also been available through a discretionary fund available to families moving into council-owned social housing, the majority of social housing in Cardiff. The fund provides a grant for people to purchase white goods, which are not provided in council properties. However, it was noted that the amount of money for these grants is limited and finite.

School food provision

Families eligible for free school meals in Cardiff apply through the Council's website. Working with Food Cardiff, the Council was involved in setting up one of the first, at-scale, holiday provision programmes in Wales, the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP). This programme received funding from the Welsh Government in 2017 and continued to do so through 2019.¹⁰⁶ For 2020, they had committed £2.7 million in funding for a summer holiday programme, but as outlined below, this was repurposed for free school replacements through the summer of 2020 due to COVID-19. The Welsh Government funding that goes out to local authorities is match-funded by local authorities and in each area, there is a steering group that delivers the programme. In Cardiff, Food Cardiff, Cardiff Council, Cardiff & Vale University Health Board's Dietetics team, and Sport Cardiff have been involved in the delivery of the programme.

Contracted Meals on Wheels

The local authority has a contracted Meals on Wheels service. It is run by a company called Telecare Cardiff.¹⁰⁷ To be eligible to receive their Meals on Wheels service, one or more of the following eligibility criteria had to be met:

- Having difficulty preparing a meal safely.
- Unable to shop for food.
- Liable to self-neglect or would eat an inappropriate diet without the service.
- Have a mental or physical disability.
- Needing support due to recovery from hospitalisation or illness; carer illness or holiday, or bereavement.

Costs for receiving just a meal delivered are £3.90, which includes free delivery and a welfare check as standard. This increases to £4.50 if dessert is also included.¹⁰⁸

Work with food banks and food pantries

One council staff respondent shared that before the pandemic and as described below, the Cardiff Council also worked with the Cardiff Foodbank to provide food bank referrals. As above, the Council ran community hubs; in addition to providing money advice, these were also places where people could access a referral to the Cardiff Foodbank.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.wlga.wales/food-and-fun-school-holiday-enrichment-programme>

¹⁰⁷ <https://telecarecardiff.co.uk/meals/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://telecarecardiff.co.uk/meals/#how-much-does-it-cost>

The Council also partnered with the Cardiff Foodbank to have money advice officers present in their food bank distribution centres. The Council funded staff from their money advice services team to visit each of the food bank's distribution centres. This was described by one third-sector respondent:

"A client would come in and have their food and would sit down and have a chat. They were offered the provision from the Council. They were able to, I mean I haven't got the figures now, but they've been able to either save or provide a huge amount of money over the months and the years that they've been doing it." (Third sector respondent)

The Council was also involved in financially supporting the setting up of food pantries (ACE and the Wyndham St Pantry, see below).

Allotment gardens

Another element of the Council's food work has been the oversight of allotment gardens. They have 28 allotment sites and 2,500 plots across Cardiff.

Cardiff 3rd Sector Council (C3SC)

The Cardiff 3rd Sector Council (C3SC)¹⁰⁹ has played an important role in supporting third sector organisations in Cardiff. Their work has included advocacy on behalf of third sector organisations, providing training, networking opportunities and funding, and providing support to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of third sector organisations' work in their communities. Whilst not involved specifically in food-related work before the COVID-19 pandemic, as below, they played a key role in the food response during.

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Public Health Division

In Wales, public health falls under the remit of local health boards. In Cardiff, there is a Public Health Division which includes a Public Health Dietetic team. The Cardiff Public Health Division was involved in providing funding or in-kind support for a number of food poverty initiatives in Cardiff prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have provided funding for food pantry set-up costs and have delivered the Maximising Family Income programme in partnership with Food Cardiff. They also have been involved in mapping and research on food insecurity. Lastly, they ran the Nutrition Skills for Life programme, which involved their dietetics team supporting food banks and food aid projects, as well as other community programmes, such as Flying Start,¹¹⁰ with Families First,¹¹¹ and various other Welsh Government programmes, to improve nutrition knowledge and cooking skills in areas of deprivation.

Food banks and other food parcel providers

Cardiff Foodbank

The Cardiff Foodbank is a member of the Trussell Trust network and has been in operation since 2009. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they operated a warehouse that holds 28-29 tonnes of food and seven distribution centres and had four staff and 180 volunteers. They

¹⁰⁹ <https://c3sc.org.uk/about-c3sc/>

¹¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/get-help-flying-start>

¹¹¹ <https://gov.wales/families-first>

have always operated according to the Trussell Trust food bank referral model, with about 90 organisations acting as referral agents (voucher holders) across the city. It was shared by a third-sector respondent that they have had to move from a focus on short-term crises to supporting people over a longer term because many income crises cannot be resolved quickly. The example provided here was the 5-week wait for Universal Credit. They only provide ambient food in their food parcels because they cannot store fresh food, but one third sector respondent emphasised that the food provided in food parcels are nutritionally balanced.

The Cardiff Foodbank is the largest food parcel provider in Cardiff and a part of the Food Cardiff network. Stakeholders affirmed that if someone in Cardiff called the Council or advice services prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be likely that they would receive a referral to Cardiff Foodbank. It was also reported that the Council community hubs, which, as above, are places where people can receive referral vouchers, are one of highest providers of referrals. The relationship between the Council and Cardiff Foodbank was described as an informal one, as they have not received funding for their food provisioning activities.¹¹² One third-sector respondent described the food bank's role as one piece of a "jigsaw puzzle" with their role to provide emergency food, with other organisations and the Council having their own roles, for example, in administering discretionary funds for people in financial crises. The food bank would signpost their clients on to other organisations and services when appropriate.

Independent food parcel providers

An independent food bank has been running from the the Al-Ikhlās Centre mosque.¹¹³ Before the pandemic, the eligibility criteria to use the food bank were either being on a low income or being a refugee or asylum seeker with a card to show status. The food bank would usually serve an average of 25 food parcels per week.

Community pantry or community fridge projects

The Dusty Forge

Established in 2019 and following a "Your Local Pantry" model, the Dusty Forge is a community food pantry run by ACE (Action in Caerau & Ely).¹¹⁴ People are required to be members and meet some requirements (e.g. living in Caerau & Ely, self-identifying as having difficulty affording food). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, members paid £5 per visit on an allocated day and were allowed to choose ten items from the food shop, with an estimated minimum value of £15. Their main supplier of food items is FareShare Cymru. One third sector respondent shared that the pantry was also involved in helping people access grants for the purchase of cookers and fridges, either through the Cardiff Council's scheme or a scheme, Building Blocks, from Save the Children.

Tremorfa Pantry

Stakeholders also referred to other projects giving out food but that would not consider themselves food banks. One example is Tremorfa Pantry, which started as a project

¹¹² It was reported that they did receive a grant from the Council to support work they were doing to address women not having financial access to sanitary products.

¹¹³ <https://www.alikhlas.org.uk/foodbank.html>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/>

supported by Cardiff Community Housing Association.¹¹⁵ It operates as a bit of a hybrid between a community pantry and food bank, where people go to choose food items to take home, but with the option to make a donation. They are a member of FareShare Cymru and also receive fresh produce from a community garden.

As outlined below, other pantries were in development before the COVID-19 pandemic but were first opened over the pandemic in spring or autumn 2020.

Meal providers

Stakeholders shared there were community cafes running various pay-as-you-can meals prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. One example was a business that ran a monthly community supper for families from a local school. Another council staff respondent shared how different faith communities had been actively running community meals before the COVID-19 pandemic. In our stakeholder workshop, one third-sector respondent shared that there were a number of organisations running lunch clubs for people who were aged 50+ and food provision for people living in hostels. Much of this community food provision was run by organisations that were members of FareShare Cymru. Another organisation highlighted by respondents in our workshop was the Oasis Centre in Cardiff, which provided meals to refugees and asylum seekers.¹¹⁶ This work was supported on a government contract basis as well as through charitable donations for those not eligible for council support.

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

As the above sections highlight, numerous organisations were engaged in programmes and projects aimed at responding to, or reducing risks of, food insecurity in Cardiff before the COVID-19 pandemic. One reason why there were concerns about rising food insecurity early in the pandemic is because it threatened how these programmes and projects could operate. Stakeholders shared that there were widespread concerns about the need to close community pantries and food programmes and a lot of uncertainty about what would be able to stay open. The closure of these projects would compromise food access for the many vulnerable people that relied on them as a source of low-cost groceries or meals. In a briefing note sent to Cardiff Council by Food Cardiff on 23rd March, it was highlighted that there were fears the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate food access issues due to increased demand from the food system (i.e. panic buying), a more limited availability of staff and volunteer resources, and the closure of public services that are food access points for vulnerable people (e.g. schools closed affecting access to free school meals, day centres for adults).¹¹⁷ Three main challenges were outlined:

1. People being unable to afford food in crisis
2. People who are unable to access food (self-isolation, service closures etc.)

¹¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/tremorfapantry/>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.oasiscardiff.org/>

¹¹⁷ Food Cardiff. "Cardiff Food Access and Covid-19, Note for Cardiff Council". Available on request.

3. Local food businesses unable to open (having knock-on effects on food supply, workers' income etc.)¹¹⁸ (Source: Cardiff Food Access and Covid-19, Note for Cardiff Council)

Other early signs that people were having difficulty accessing food was reflected in the volume of calls the Council was receiving related to concerns about food. For example, one third-sector respondent shared:

“The Council were...I haven't seen these figures recorded but they were saying that 80% of calls coming through to their advice line were around food. So we took that as a real indicator that food was a massive issue here.” (Third sector respondent)

Data provided by a participant from the Council suggested that in the last week of March almost 70% of the 1,548 calls made to the Council advice line related to food enquiries.

In our workshop, one council staff respondent shared that right at the beginning, there was a delay in support being made available, especially for people who were shielding. There were also concerns that because people had to move to home working and/or were having to shield that there would not be the staff, or volunteer capacity, to operate as usual, leading to reduced capacity to provide support.

One third sector respondent engaged in food parcel distribution described their feelings in the first week as “panic” and said, “we spent 24 hours in meltdown to be perfectly honest”. They were worried about their food supplies and how the lack of food in supermarkets would affect them, how need would increase, if they could continue to operate their model as usual, and what would happen if staff and volunteers got ill.

The Cardiff Foodbank also received an influx of calls for help, which they attributed to their well-known role in the city as an emergency food provider. They reported that in the first days, before free school meal replacements were announced, they were receiving requests from schools for food parcels for families entitled to free school meals.

Similarly, a third sector respondent shared that FareShare Cymru witnessed the closure of some of their member projects in the first weeks of the pandemic, while others put in immediate requests for a greater volume of food to be delivered. They also observed new projects opening and ones that had been in development accelerating their opening.

Other organisations, which had not typically engaged in food projects, also were receiving calls about food needs from people in the communities they worked with very early in the lockdown. One third sector respondent shared:

“For us it was a lot of calls from beneficiaries that we were getting. With kids being at home there was not enough food to feed the kids all the time. Most of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community [we work with are] taxi drivers and in shops and they were not having that income. They were calling us, and a lot of people from our Golden Year project [a life skills project for Black, Asian and minority ethnic women aged 50+] as well were hesitant to step out and shop for food for themselves because of the shielding, and the food that they were

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

receiving from the Council was not appropriate for them.” (Third sector respondent)

It was also reported that the Cardiff Third Sector Council was also receiving an unprecedented number of calls from people in the community:

“Very early at the beginning we started receiving lots of enquiries from community members, not only [third sector] groups, about people who were supposed to be shielding but had not received the letters...so there was a lot of confusion there and people wanting to know what was out there that they could receive, what support and where from. That was something completely new for us. We were inundated, suddenly, and not really sure...” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about support for people who were shielding were also quickly raised to the Public Health dietetics team. One respondent shared the queries that were received by the clinical dietetics team at this time:

“[We had] quite a lot of queries come into the clinical dietetics service about those with special dietary requirements and where they were going to be met. So special diets and things like that, where the national food parcels were not meeting their needs, particularly from paediatrics as well...there were clinical needs that were arising because of [the lockdown].” (Public sector employee)

One respondent who had been active in a local community group shared what he was hearing from people involved in various community projects early in the lockdown:

“Their neighbours are all telling them that this lockdown has really led to an emergency for them, for food in particular. They were not able to afford food, they could not get out, the shops were shut, all of the internet booking system was booked up...a range of different problems and this COVID combination, as we ended up calling it, to do with health, to do with self-isolation and to do with shielding... led to really a lot of need.” (Third sector respondent)

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

In response to these early signs, organisations responded in different ways. Some focused on playing a strategic role, helping link up and promote available food assistance across the city, looking out for gaps, and ensuring that safeguarding measures were in place. Others adapted their ways of working and others took on completely new roles in direct food provision. These are described by organisation below, highlighting new actions taken by pre-existing stakeholders and also highlighting new organisations that became involved in the food response over the spring and summer 2020.

Food Cardiff

It was shared with us that a first key action taken by Food Cardiff early in the COVID-19 pandemic was to use Twitter to flag actions being taken by organisations, businesses, and service providers to help link people with food. These included flagging things like groups

providing help with shopping, for instance. Food Cardiff saw themselves as having an important coordinating role. Given their membership and established relationships with various organisations, the public health board, and the local council, they were well placed to gather information on what different actors were doing and communicate this to others. This was seen as important for preventing duplication, as illustrated in the following quote:

“[Our coordinating role] enabled say [person name] from the cafe that I mentioned, wanted to set up her own provision. She could know what was happening elsewhere so as not to duplicate, and to target a different area.” (Third sector respondent)

A next key action was the writing of a briefing note for the Cardiff Council, which outlined the key issues Food Cardiff identified (as above) and their recommendations for what the Council should do.¹¹⁹ The main recommendations in this briefing note were for the Council to establish a COVID-19 Food Response group including staff from across council departments (e.g. welfare and money advice, sustainable development, adult social services, child services, and education) and from external organisations, including the Cardiff Foodbank, the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board, FareShare Cymru, and Cardiff 3rd Sector Council (C3SC). They also recommended that the Council assign a full-time staff member to lead the Council’s response in ensuring Cardiff’s residents can access food. In addition, they recommended the Council use city facilities to produce and deliver food for people in isolation, to provide quality advice to the public including money advice and to adapt services such as providing referrals to the Cardiff Foodbank to accommodate people who are self-isolating or unable to leave their homes. They also recommended that the Council play a role in bolstering local food production through the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring allotments remain open, identifying and advertising land that can be used for growing, and allocating space and staff resources for larger-scale food growing in parks.

As it happened, it was Food Cardiff that took the lead in setting up a Covid-19 Food Response Task Group, which included council departments, Cardiff 3rd Sector Council, FareShare Cymru, the Cardiff Foodbank, and Cardiff & Vale University Health Board.

Through April, Food Cardiff, in partnership with the Covid-19 Food Response Task group and with the Cardiff Council and Cardiff 3rd Sector Council also playing key roles, set up Cardiff’s “City-wide Food response.”¹²⁰ Here, the response was devised to respond to two main challenges:

1. People unable to afford food in crisis.
2. People who are unable to access food (due to self-isolation or service closures, for example).

One stakeholder shared with us that the model they developed was based on activities they were seeing in other cities, such as Bristol and Leeds.¹²¹ The aims were to develop a response that would:

¹¹⁹ Food Cardiff. “Cardiff Food Access and Covid-19, Note for Cardiff Council”. Available on request.

¹²⁰ <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/05/30.4.20-City-wide-food-response-6.1.pdf>

¹²¹ <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bristol%E2%80%99s-Covid-19-Community-Food-Response.pdf>, <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/leeds-local-response-19/>

- Increase the efficiency of food distribution routes, therefore increasing the amount of food available to those in need
- Maximise the amount of vulnerable people receiving support
- Connect smaller, local initiatives to the wider effort and enable new entrants to join in
- Ensure all elements of the response are safe and risk is managed (e.g. food hygiene, safeguarding, GDPR)
- Help provide the best possible food, considering the nutritional needs of those receiving support
- Embed co-production and principles of dignity for those receiving food and support

In Cardiff, the structure established involved identification of “Anchor” organisations and “Food Response Partners” in each ward (these were the same organisation in some wards). Details on the vision for this scheme was first laid out in a document published by Food Cardiff at the end of April and further details were shared with us by our interview participants.¹²² There were 11 anchor organisations across the city with responsibility for coordinating the local area volunteer response (see Figure 1). They were organisations that already had experience in safeguarding, training, and GDPR.

Figure 1: Role of anchor organisations in Cardiff’s COVID-19 Food Response.



Food response partners were involved in collecting and coordinating the distribution of food to other organisations and groups in their local areas. They were also involved in accepting referrals of people needing food or help with shopping and provided support for other organisations, community groups and grassroots movements involved in food distribution (for example, by providing advice on food hygiene or providing a physical space for cooking).

¹²² <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/05/30.4.20-City-wide-food-response-6.1.pdf>

The work of anchor organisations and food response partners was supported by organisations in the Covid-19 Food Response Group (referred to as “Key Partners” in Figure 1). Specifically, Food Cardiff continued to be a source of information and responded to offers of help and community requests. They also directly supported Food Response Partners. The Cardiff Council’s role in this scheme was to manage the “Together for Cardiff” volunteering portal and to provide staff resources to support anchor organisations and food response partners. One council staff member shared that in the first couple of months, their role was to act as a “go-between to smooth things out and get [the anchor organisations and Food Response Partners] to realise that they were both trying to do the same thing”. Another council member involved in establishing and supporting anchor organisations shared:

“I think what we wanted to do was try and support groups... It is, “How do we do that? How do we help them and how do we enable them?... On the anchor organisations’ set up... [we provided] support and an element of coordination for all of the volunteering going on, from grassroots all the way up to the more established groups, which is what we call the anchor organisations. I think that is probably the key task... Our first attempt at it was, “Right, can we get every ward covered?” Then we started thinking, “What wards need more help?” So we started to look at the data. Then it became quite clear it was a lot more complicated than we or anyone could possibly anticipate, first of all. We had to adapt, we had to evolve and work with what was potentially there already.”
(Council staff respondent)

The Cardiff 3rd Sector Council also supported the scheme with volunteers and providing best practice advice on managing volunteers. The Cardiff and Vale Public Health Dietetic team provided nutrition advice. FareShare Cymru supported the scheme by managing food supplies for their members involved in the scheme.

Important to note here that this response was viewed as a “back-up” to the Council’s response (described below), as illustrated in the following quote:

“These services were almost a back-up, in a way, because the Council had a really good triage system and food response system.” (Third sector respondent)

But another third sector respondent shared that this “city-wide food response”, and work of the anchor organisations in particular, was to help people who were self-isolating and could afford food, and who, for whatever reasons, did not want to engage with the services offered by the Council.

In October 2020, Food Cardiff reported that a total of 48 organisations plus 23 COVID-19 Mutual Aid support groups were engaged in a food response, either providing food parcels, community meals, and/or shopping services.¹²³ Their work was coordinated through the anchor organisations and food response partners.

Cardiff Council

¹²³ <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published/>

Helpline

Cardiff Council established an advice line which people could contact for any reason. The number of calls to the helpline, and those that related to food, are shown in the table below.

| | March 23-31st | April | May | June |
|--|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total calls to Council advice line | 1,548 | 6,273 | 4,747 | 3,670 |
| Food-related enquiries | 1,070 | 3,388 | 2,650 | 1,218 |
| Percent of total calls related to food | 69% | 54% | 56% | 33% |

Money Advice

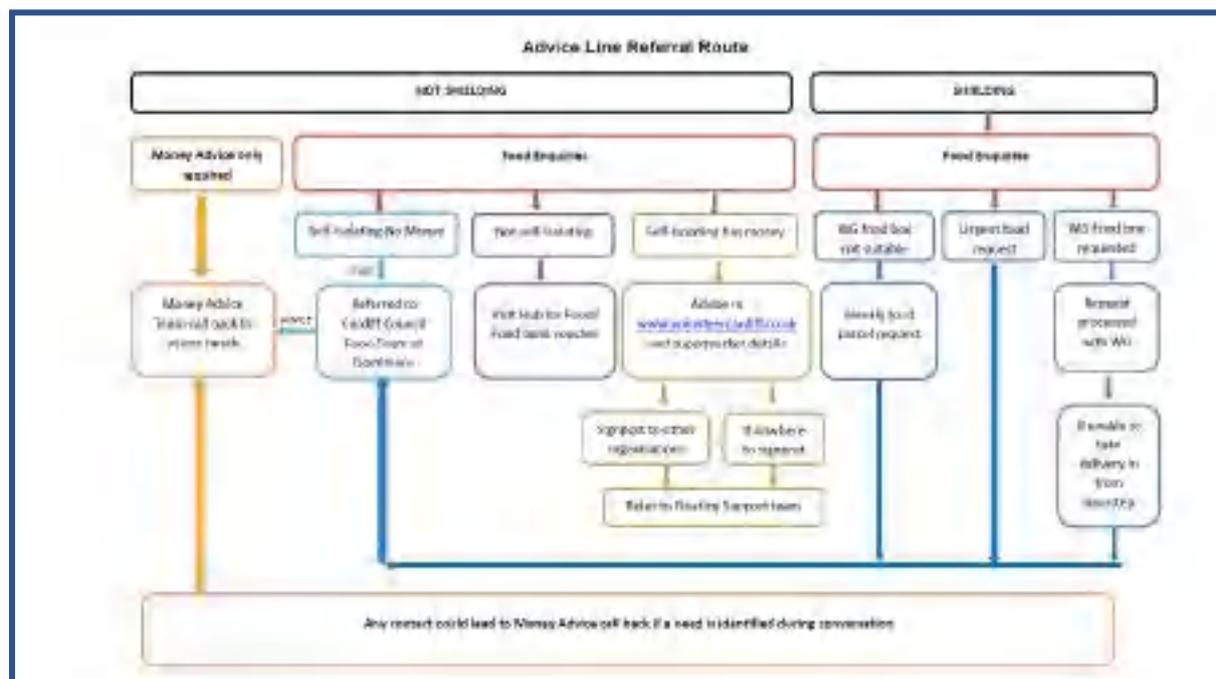
Food Cardiff reported that an important part of the Council's food response over March to June 2020 was to embed a cash-first approach in their work. The Money Advice Team was expanded over the lockdown period to enable them to take more calls, and they set up a triage system to help direct people towards correct benefit entitlements. It was shared in our workshop that they set up a website, www.cardiffmoneyadvice.co.uk, in the first weeks of the lockdown to provide simple and clear advice on money, benefits, and debt, and it also had a specific COVID-19 advice section.

Food boxes

One third sector respondent shared that very early in the COVID-19 pandemic, within the first 10 days of the national lockdown, the Council was busy with establishing and then delivering food boxes.

The Council set up a triage system that involved splitting people into the following groups: shielding and could afford food; shielding and couldn't afford food; self-isolating and could afford food; self-isolating and couldn't afford food; and not self-isolating but unable to afford food. The referral routes for these groups are outlined in Figure 1 and elaborated on below.

Figure 2: Referral pathways from calls made to the Cardiff Council advice line over the COVID-19 lockdown (April-June 2020).



Source: Food Cardiff and Food Sense Wales. "Cardiff Covid-19 Food Response: State of play March-June 2020" 8 Oct 2020.¹²⁴

The table below shows the referral outcomes of the calls made to the Council helpline that related to food.

| | March 23-31st | April | May | June |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Money Advice | 898 | 722 | 258 | 185 |
| Food bank voucher or referrals | 172 | 2,118 | 965 | 393 |
| Shielding (range of solutions) | 0 | 548 | 1,427 | 640 |
| | 1,070 | 3,388 | 2,650 | 1,218 |

Source: Data provided by Cardiff Council staff respondent by email.

As shown in the light blue box in figure 2, there was a Cardiff Council food team set up, which provided food parcels from a temporary warehouse, a former library store, on Dominions Way. As highlighted in the diagram and shared with us by a council staff member, the food parcels provided by the Cardiff Council from this warehouse were primarily for people who were unable to go out and struggling to access food, whether because they didn't have people who could help them, couldn't get a delivery slot, and also couldn't afford food.

"But if you were isolating and you couldn't get a food slot or you had no neighbours to help you...basically, if you were isolating and you couldn't afford food, then you were getting a food parcel from us [Cardiff Council]." (Council staff respondent)

¹²⁴ <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published/>

Over the pandemic, the Council's aforementioned community hubs became a place for food parcel pick-up and delivery, though fewer were operating than before the pandemic. As below, the Council also provided food parcels on behalf of the Cardiff Foodbank, saving people from having to receive a referral and then go elsewhere to pick up their food bank food parcel. But their hubs were also places where people could pick up a council food parcel.¹²⁵ This distribution began to be phased out in August, first by ceasing to advertise their availability but still providing if people expressed a need for them. In our workshop, it was shared by a council staff respondent that the Council continued to provide food boxes to people right through the autumn, particularly on weekends. The breakdown of the number of boxes provided by the Council is shown in the table below.

| | March 23-31st | April | May | June | Total |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Food parcels collected from Hubs | 87 | 318 | 113 | 33 | 551 |
| Food parcels delivered | 825 | 1,621 | 730 | 616 | 3,792 |
| Shielded food parcels delivered | n/a | 777 | 770 | 385 | 1,932 |
| | 912 | 2,716 | 1,613 | 1,034 | 6,275 |

Source: Data provided by Cardiff Council Staff respondent by email

Important to note is that 1,932 of these food parcels did go to the shielding population. Through the hotline the Cardiff Council established, people on the shielding list could register for a Welsh Government food parcel, but the Council provided their food parcels to people who were shielding if the Welsh Government boxes were inappropriate, if there was an urgent need for food, or if someone was unable to bring a food parcel in from their doorstep. For example, a third-sector respondent shared:

“If people couldn’t physically pick up a box from their doorstep, Cardiff Council would provide the boxes for them instead so that social services could go in with an actual box and make sure that it wasn’t just left on the doorstep.” (Third sector respondent)

Other concerns about the Welsh Government’s shielding boxes raised in a Food Cardiff report were the nutrition quality and quantity, particularly the lack of fruit and vegetables, that the size of the food parcel did not account for other household members, or consideration for dietary and cultural needs.¹²⁶ These concerns were also raised by our stakeholders, as reflected in this quote from a council staff respondent:

“I think our food parcels were better than the shielding food parcels because we took on board the advice of our dietary colleagues in the NHS... we got them to analyse, after a few weeks, what was in our food parcels for those isolating who couldn’t afford food, to make sure it was nutritious and balanced. We also tried to cater for dietary requirements, but that became very complicated, I've got to say. I'm not sure how successful that actually was. I

¹²⁵ <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published>

¹²⁶ <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published>

think they were often vegetarian. I think they were often halal and stuff like that, but I feel that's as good as you got.

The ones that came from Brakes [funded by the Welsh Government] were, literally, for a shielding person. There was not enough food in there for a week. I saw what was in one. There is no way that that was enough for even one person for a week, and if you're shielding... They were shielding with their whole family." (Council staff respondent)

When the Council could, they would provide food boxes to people who were shielding who requested an alternative and also provided feedback to the Welsh Government on the shielding boxes as shared below:

"It was something that we collected data on [later on] - people who wanted alternatives [to the shielding food boxes]. We fed that back [to the] Welsh Government, but obviously there was one box available, and it was to fit all. It was something we did not have much choice with. We did, where we could, provide alternatives, but obviously to an extent we were reliant on donations and the food that we had supplied to us to provide those alternatives." (Council staff respondent)

Our respondents shared that the Council also took an active role in making sure people on the shielding list were aware of help available. They phoned everyone on the shielding list and if no one picked up after three times, they would visit their home. The active role they took was described by one council staff member in the following quote:

"Proactively, as a local authority, [we could] hunt down the people we thought qualified [for Welsh Government shielding food parcels] if we knew that Welsh Government hadn't heard from them – to, basically, do a welfare check and make sure they were okay... It got to the point whereby, off of all these massive, cross-referenced lists, there were people from communities going out and door knocking, and trying to work out, "Is there somebody in here that needs help and is too scared to answer the door? Is there somebody in here who's had an awful fall and needs help? Is there, even worse, someone who has died at the property? Or do we think the person has actually gone to stay with their family for this period of the pandemic and there's no need to worry?" (Council staff respondent)

At the end of the shielding food box programme, in mid-August, one third sector respondent shared that the Council was concerned about whether or not people who were shielding were self-sufficient. It was reported that the Council called people on the shielding list again to let them know that the food box programme was ending and to offer support in other ways.

Of note is that the Council was not formally asked by the Welsh Government to step in and support the shielding food box programme, however, as shared below, the Council felt it was their responsibility to do so:

"With the letters that went out from Welsh government there was a lot of, "If you need more help speak to your local authority, here is a list". Obviously that placed the onus on us to provide additional information. But as soon as we would see

what was in the parcels and the fact that they were not covering an awful lot of scenarios for people, it was something that we tried to do, to help out where we could.” (Council staff respondent)

Whilst not solely to help connect people with food, it was shared that the Council was also involved in a tablet gifting scheme so that people without access to online services could gain access to these. This was highlighted as a key way to support people now having to access online supermarket deliveries.

One source of funding for the food boxes provided by the Cardiff Council was re-purposed funds that had been allocated to the Council before the pandemic to support action to tackle food poverty and address food insecurity as part of preparations for Brexit.¹²⁷ Support was also provided from a £50,000 grant from Admiral and as a result of a public appeal for donations for pledges and donations from the public.¹²⁸

Contracted Meals on Wheels

Information on the Meals on Wheels provider’s website posted on the 19th of March 2020 stated that their meal delivery service was operating as normal, however that precautions would be taken if someone was self-isolating, with delivery drivers no longer taking meals into someone’s home.

One third-sector stakeholder shared that the Meals on Wheels service in Cardiff was involved in delivering and providing food to places where homeless people were being housed, as well as continuing to provide food for their client base. It was also reported that requests for meal deliveries through this service went up significantly over the COVID-19 pandemic.

Free school meals

It was shared that one of the quickest things the Council mobilised was a response for children entitled to a free school meal. The Council was very concerned about what would happen to these children as a result of schools being closed as reflected in the quote below from a council staff respondent:

“As we went into the pandemic [and school closures], we realised, "Oh, my God, free-school-meals, what’s happening to kids who receive these?” (Council staff respondent)

Their first response was to start a “grab bag” programme, where parents could come to a school and pick up a takeaway lunch bag. This was described as a “knee-jerk” reaction by one council staff respondent, to get something in place quickly. However, it soon became clear that there were issues with people not wanting or able to pick up these grab bags for self-isolation reasons or because of the stigma of being seen going to school and picking up a lunch for your children. The Council also had the obligation to protect the identity of children receiving free school meals, and this method did not allow for this.

In response to these concerns, the Education Catering team and with support now being provided by the Welsh Government, the Council then started offering food vouchers.

¹²⁷ <https://gov.wales/child-poverty-income-maximisation-action-plan-2020-2021-html>

¹²⁸ <https://www.admiral.com/community-and-sponsorship/cardiff-food-appeal>

However, they were only redeemable in some supermarkets. It was shared by a council staff respondent that this was a concern because some low-cost supermarkets, like Lidl and Aldi, were not included. This system was used for a couple of weeks while the Council then devised their own scheme.

The system that was then offered was a direct cash payment system. Families received a direct money transfer to their bank account via Parent Pay (an online payment system already established for paying school fees). The voucher system was also still offered, but it was shared that most parents opted for the Parent Pay option. The value of support was £19.50 per week per child, covering both free school meal provision and breakfast provision.

It was noted that in some cases, food parcels may have been provided (i.e. in cases where a family was self-isolating or where children were known to social services).

As was the case country-wide, free school meal replacements were offered over the summer holidays. In a report published by Food Cardiff, it was highlighted that funding for holiday free school meals diverted funds from the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP).¹²⁹ Participants considered this problematic since the programme offers more than food, including enrichment activities and nutrition skills and because it also serves children that are not eligible for free school meals but who may be food insecure.

The Council also worked to ensure children from families with no recourse to public funds could access free school meal food parcels or vouchers over the lockdown.

One council staff respondent shared how challenging it has been for school catering since children went back in the Autumn 2020. Issues such as social distancing measures and small kitchens have made it challenging for them to operate at full capacity and offer a full menu. Further, children often are eating in classrooms to maintain classroom bubbles, which also limits what can be served. Free school meal replacements have been offered to families when their children cannot go to school because of the need to self-isolate. It was shared that supermarket vouchers are sent out in most of these cases.

The Council has also experienced a large rise in demand for free school meals. One council staff member shared the following figures with us:

- On the 23rd of March, 11,400 pupils claiming free school meals.
- 14th October, 13,400 pupils claiming free school meals.
- 6th November, 13,800 pupils claiming free school meals.

Allotment gardens

The Council had to close their allotment gardens early in the pandemic because there were concerns that the entry to allotments, most often through a single gate and requiring handling a padlock, could lead to the spread of the virus. Concerns were heightened because many of the people who have the plots fall into older age groups. However, the Council worked to open them again, ensuring that hand sanitizer was onsite, as it was felt that it was beneficial to open them both in terms of mental well-being and food provision.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Cardiff 3rd Sector Council (C3SC)

Though already mentioned in relation to their role in supporting anchor organisations and food response partners, the C3SC was also engaged in other work over spring and summer. They set up a service directory specifically focused on where people could receive help with food delivery and shopping during the spring lockdown.¹³⁰ They also supported many organisations that were newly providing food during the pandemic, as described below:

“We do not deliver food provisions directly to the community but we [support] lots of groups who were adapting, who had never provided food before, but now they were aware [of the need] and... then changed to provide food provision very quickly. Also, there were lots of different queries. We do administer some funding through the groups, so there were lots of enquiries back and forth to funders around whether they could change the project that they were delivering into a food type of delivery.” (Third sector respondent)

As highlighted in the above section about their role in supporting anchor and food response organisations, the Cardiff 3rd Sector Council was also involved in providing guidance on venue and volunteer safeguarding advice. They provided information briefs and virtual sessions on these issues over the pandemic. They also provided “Local Emergency Funding” and ran two grants schemes aimed at enabling groups to open safely and put in place Personal Protective Equipment and safeguarding requirements.

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Public Health Division

Over the lockdown, the Cardiff & Vale Public Health Dietetics team worked with the Council to ensure the food parcels they were providing to people who were self-isolating met nutritional, dietary and cultural requirements. They issued two guides: one provided suggested food items to make up a food parcel for one adult for one week¹³¹; the other outlined the most common special diets (i.e. Coeliac disease, Halal, Kosher, Vegan) and common food allergies, and then provided suggestions for food parcels for these special requirements. We were also told they conducted a nutritional analysis of the Welsh shielding food boxes to identify the nutritional gaps so that these could be addressed.

The team had to stop their Nutrition Skills for Life training, but at the time of the workshop (December 2020), had been developing the programme to be delivered online through a virtual programme.

In partnership with the Council and schools in Cardiff, the dietetics team was involved in setting up a new summer school programme, Cardiff Summer Squad. This was in place of the SHEP programme, which, as highlighted, was not funded by the Welsh Government in summer 2020 because all funds had gone into free school meal provision over the holidays instead. The Cardiff Summer Squad served children identified as vulnerable by Children’s Services. The programme ran for half days, with children either coming in the morning or afternoon (with breakfast provided in the morning and lunch provided to children in the afternoon). Physical activity, nutrition sessions and opportunities to play and engage with other children were also provided. It was funded through various pots of money from the Welsh Government and from across the Council.

¹³⁰ <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published>

¹³¹ Cardiff and Vale UHB Dieticians. “Suggested Food Items List for a Food Parcel”. 2020. Available on request.

Food parcel providers

The Cardiff Foodbank

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the food bank's usual ways of interacting with their clients, as shared below:

"We knew that we had to change what we were doing in that normally, when you have your voucher, you'll come to the centre, you come in, you have a cup of tea, a chat, sometimes mums in particular would be hungry and sometimes we had to give people, we've always had to do this, food themselves because they haven't eaten for a few days or something just as terrible. Then they would see the money advice person if they wanted to, etc. They would be with us for maybe up to an hour or something. [During the pandemic] we couldn't do any of that. We basically had to close the doors and have the voucher handed in almost around the door and the food handed out... for our volunteers in the distribution centres, it broke their heart. They were in tears all the time." (Third sector respondent)

The food bank kept six of their seven distribution centres open, running 9 of their usual 11 sessions each week, though there were instances when food bank centres were unable to operate temporarily (e.g. for one week) early in the pandemic as capacity issues were sorted out (see below). The one centre that had to close was because the church building that housed it was closed. From one third sector respondent's point of view, it was a benefit that many churches were not operating their usual activities such as services and nurseries because it gave the food bank distribution centre more room to operate, which was beneficial in light of social distancing requirements and the need to store more food at their centres.

Data shared for March to June 2020 showed that more than twice as many food parcels were given out by the Cardiff Foodbank in March and April compared to the amount given out in the same months in 2019. Children and adults received help from food parcels a total of 6903 times over March to May. The numbers were described by one third sector respondent as "through the roof" in April and May.

It was shared that though there was this increase in need, there was also an influx of food donations, and they did not struggle with their food supplies. However, they did face challenges getting food to everyone. One third sector respondent shared that a key challenge was how to get paper-based referral vouchers to people. The food bank received fewer referrals than usual from places that normally issued vouchers "face to face", and the food bank had concerns this meant there was unmet need. They experienced a drop in their numbers in the summer, and they attributed this, in part, to a decrease in referrals coming from some of their referrals agents that were not operating as usual, as shared below:

"But very definitely, our gut instinct, I don't have the evidence yet, our gut instinct is that there was quite a lot of unmet need because of the issue of voucher holder organisations not being able to get to individuals either because people were furloughed or they just didn't have the capacity to be able to do that." (Third sector respondent)

The food bank had also decided they were not able to offer a delivery service. To address both issues of access to vouchers and their inability to deliver food parcels, they worked with

the Council, giving them their food parcels to distribute from their community hubs. Partnering with the Council in this way allowed people to obtain a referral and food parcel at the same place at the same time. Further, the Council was able to use their delivery service to deliver directly to people who needed a food bank voucher and who couldn't leave their home. This could include people who were shielding, as was shared by one third sector respondent:

“If somebody that was medically shielding also was in emergency food hunger and [they] would have a voucher generated, they would count in [the food bank's] numbers.” (Third sector respondent)

Once restrictions on how often people could leave home were lifted, the distribution of food parcels by the Council on behalf of the food bank stopped.

Because Cardiff Foodbank had an abundance of food, they also shared their food with the Council and other organisations.

Another concern for the food bank, early in the pandemic, was the impact it would have on their volunteer capacity. As highlighted earlier, the food bank was highly dependent on volunteers, with only four staff. Though initially a concern, limited volunteer capacity did not end up being an issue for them, as described below:

“[The food bank] took the decision, even before the government said, to offer over 70s to step back for a season. It was causing much distress around the families because it was that unknown. They'd heard the virus hits older people... Then we were concerned that from a logistics point of view, we wouldn't have sufficient volunteers. But the brilliant thing was those that were furloughed then came forward. Some of them are now carrying on, in their spare time, to volunteer.” (Third sector respondent)

It was shared that the main thing they weren't able to offer over the pandemic was “extra support beyond the food parcel” (Third sector respondent). For example, they were unable to have staff from the Council's money advice team provide advice during open hours at distribution centres:

“The money advice officers, money advice team...they've been fantastic. Sadly, they can't come because of the model that we're having to be in now” (Third sector respondent)

When asked about whether what type of impact this might have had on their services, it was felt that this might have led to more repeat use, as people were not being signposted to other forms of support. However, it was also shared that the Council's helpline was available to people over this time and that other help was available from council hubs, where people were picking up food bank parcels directly.

To support the necessary adaptations to their service and handle the increased need for their services, the Cardiff Foodbank was able to apply for various grant schemes. These included grants directly from the Trussell Trust, grants from the Cardiff 3rd Sector Council, and donations from private companies that often provided in-kind items, such as a new delivery van, hand sanitised and personal protective equipment. They've also received support through “Local Giving”, an online website where individuals can set up monthly direct debits to support charities of their choice.

Independent food parcel distributors

The independent food bank at the Al-Ikhlās Centre mosque scaled up their operations over the COVID-19 pandemic to serve a wider range of people, open on more days and offer delivery. During the pandemic, it was shared that they “opened to all” (Third sector respondent – written submission). They served anyone made vulnerable to insufficient food access as a result of the pandemic, whether for financial reasons, because people were shielding, or because people were unable to go out for food or prepare food. They added a second weekly food parcel collection session and began a food parcel delivery service to people who were over 60 and isolating, people with underlying health conditions, and those on low or no income. This was primarily for people in their surrounding area.

Data shared by Al-Ikhlās centre on Facebook in August 2020 reported that over March to May 2020, they provided 1,427 food parcels. In comparison to their pre-pandemic figures, their weekly average rose from just around 25 food parcels per week to 200 food parcels per week.

The expansion of their services was, in part, enabled by the extra space they had for food storage and sorting, as a result of the Mosque’s closure. The main prayer hall was used for this purpose:

“The main prayer hall became a big food storage/sorting facility. It was quite amazing to see and quite emotional that it became such a vital space.” (Third sector respondent – written submission)

As demand reduced over the pandemic and with the reopening of the mosque when lockdown measures eased, their operations were scaled back again.

In addition to their scaled-up food parcel distribution, over Ramadan, they also provided takeaway meals, as a replacement for the hot evening breakfast meal they would usually serve their community during the month of Ramadan.

New food parcel distributors during the COVID-19 pandemic

Some new projects set up to provide food parcels during the spring lockdown were also highlighted by our research participants. One was a new food project set up in Butetown (Black, Asian and minority ethnic Covid-19 Food Rescue), which was the result of a collaboration between four organisations who had not previously engaged in food parcel distribution work, namely community organisations that worked with Black, Asian and ethnic minority households (Women Connect First, Hayaat Women Trust, Henna Foundation and Horn Development Association Cardiff). In our workshop, one respondent shared the following about this project:

“We sent out leaflets and informed people through social media, and the word was spread through word of mouth. We were getting a lot of requests, sometimes up to 300 a week. These were not organisations that had not particularly dealt with food before. Most of our projects were regarding healthy eating, so we do healthy recipes and we have afterschool clubs. Or we had projects for older women. But because of this sudden need for food among our beneficiaries and the people that were coming to us, we shifted most of our resources into food at that point in time.” (Third sector respondent)

They used the Butetown community centre as a base to distribute food parcels. One of their key aims was to provide culturally appropriate food parcels. They received donations from organisations and supermarkets and additionally purchased items from wholesalers to ensure cultural appropriateness. These were delivered by voluntary groups.

It was estimated that over April to June, they supported about 300 households with 2,000 food parcels.¹³² The recipients of these food parcels were primarily households from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (90%), including refugees and asylum seekers. Women in refuge from domestic violence and families with children experiencing sickle cell anaemia were also groups that were supported by this project. In June, this project received funding to be able to continue and employ a staff member.

Community groups, comprised entirely of volunteers, also formed over the pandemic to help support people with food and other help. One group was the Rumney Coronavirus Support Group. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, they set up a Facebook page for people in need and for the neighbours of people who were in need but not online, which quickly had 200 members. They also heard of people putting leaflets through the doors of their neighbours, offering to help, and this led to them wanting to set up a formal community group. During April and May, they formed 15 neighbourhood support teams, providing support to people in their neighbourhood, particularly targeting elderly and vulnerable people living in East Cardiff. While food provision was mostly “paid for” provision (i.e. help with grocery shopping), they also helped people pay for urgent essentials like food if they couldn’t afford it. The group received donations of surplus food from supermarkets and shops and also purchased food with grant money. It was reported that over April to June, they provided 79 households with 607 bags of food, which included food that was both paid for by recipients and foods donated for those who could not afford to purchase their own. It was shared by one third sector respondent in our workshop that it was important that this response was “neighbour-to-neighbour” and that “keeping it less formalised and more neighbourly” was important to them. More recently, this group received funding to set up a Your Local Pantry model and hire a pantry member. Building space has been provided by the Cardiff Community Housing Association.

Glenwood Church was provided as an example of a group who started providing food bags during the spring, and then became a member of FareShare Cymru. They also continued this work beyond the spring and at the time of our data collection, were looking to set up a pantry model.

More generally, in our workshop, it was shared that many groups that normally provided an array of services but not food before the COVID-19 pandemic were involved in a food response over the spring. One example was a mentor organisation and cultural group who provided food parcels and hot meals to people in their client community who they identified as vulnerable. It was shared that this was mostly done informally, and therefore went “below the radar”. (Third sector respondent)

Community pantry or community fridge projects

The Dusty Forge

The Dusty Forge food pantry moved to a delivery model service early in the pandemic. In the

¹³² <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/10/Cardiff-Covid-19-Food-Response-Report-V1.0-8.10.20-1.pdf>

report from Food Cardiff, it was highlighted that this was so that their most vulnerable members, namely those who were shielding and/or low-income families with children not eligible for free school meals, would still have access to their food (supplied by FareShare Cymru).¹³³ But as shared in our workshop, this also meant serving fewer people:

“It changed the nature of what we were able to provide (i.e. switch from a community shop to a delivery model), but it actually meant that we were able, with the same amount of food, to help less people, which was quite frustrating. We obviously noticed the need was increasing but our capacity to support people with the adapted model was actually less, or required more staff, more resources and more food to provide the support for the same number of people.” (Third sector respondent)

It was reported that over April to June, they supported 111 households with 583 food parcels. Parcels cost members £5 and members received about £25 worth of food: one ambient bag, one chilled/frozen, and one fruit and vegetable bag. In September 2020, they were able to open as a shop again, operating in a COVID-19-safe manner. Emerging as a new strand of work from their operations during the lockdown, however, they also have been offering a new food delivery service in partnership with the South Riverside Community Development Centre and Global Gardens and with support from Food Power, which provides pre-cooked meals for the community.

Tremorfa Food Pantry

From our desk-based research, we gleaned that the Tremorfa Food Pantry partnered with other organisations to run a COVID-19 food response from a children’s play centre over April to August.¹³⁴ By September 2020, they had returned to their previous location, Tremorfa Hall, and were open for food collections on Wednesday and Thursdays. Later announcements suggested that the Welsh firebreak in October and subsequent lockdown measures reduced their open days to just Wednesdays 10-1pm, but that they continued to operate. Other changes to their operations included having to pre-bag food rather than allowing families to choose items. Families were able to collect one bag of food and items from FareShare Cymru were shared as equally as possible. Over the pandemic, the Cardiff Community Housing Association supported the project by delivering food, and the project also received extra funding from the National Lottery. They additionally provided support to families who were shielding, and in June, it was reported that they were delivering about 250 food parcels each week.¹³⁵

¹³³ <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/10/Cardiff-Covid-19-Food-Response-Report-V1.0-8.10.20-1.pdf>

¹³⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/tremorfapantry/>

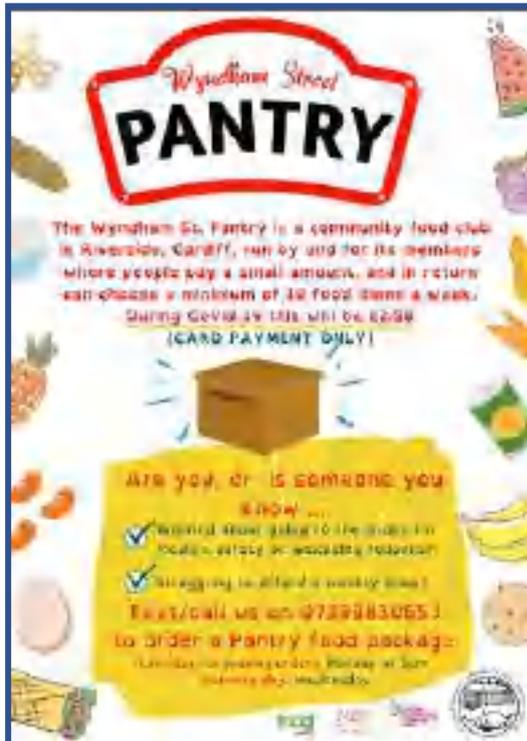
¹³⁵ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/coronavirus-unsung-heroes-national-lottery-22208601>

Wyndham Street Pantry

One food pantry, Wyndham Street Pantry, which South Riverside Community Development Centre had been in the early stages of developing before the COVID-19 pandemic with support from Cardiff Council, accelerated their plans to enable them to open in April rather than the planned start date of May or June. Rather than open as a pantry model, they opened as a delivery service, delivering 813 food parcels over the first three months.

Members paid a reduced weekly fee of £2.50 due to extra funding obtained from the

Figure 3: Wyndham Street Pantry promotion poster.



National Lottery Helping Working Families fund, and later, over July to October, the food parcels were free.¹³⁶ The target groups for these food parcels are people living in Riverside, Grangetown, Canton, and Butetown, and particularly people in these communities who support large households through self-employment or flexible work (i.e. zero-hours contracts) and also people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. As evident in their promotion poster (Figure 3), during the pandemic, they targeted people who were both worried about going out to shops as well as struggling to afford a weekly shop. South Riverside Community Development Centre partnered with many organisations and local volunteers at the start of the pandemic to enable them to implement their delivery as quickly as possible.

Llanrumney Food Pantry

A third food pantry¹³⁷ was started in Llanrumney, a ward in East Cardiff, in September 2020. It offers members 10 items valued at £15 to £25 each week for £5 and is supported by FareShare Cymru and part of the “Your Local Pantry” model.¹³⁸ As per the food pantry’s website, there are no strict eligibility criteria, other than that members must be residents of Llanrumney, though their aims are to reduce food poverty in Cardiff East and provide affordable and accessible food and household essentials to the local community.¹³⁹

Meal providers

FareShare Cymru reported the adaptations they saw among the projects they support over the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one of their projects that ran a lunch club for the elderly quickly adapted their service to deliver meals instead. Others that normally provided a meal service changed to a food parcel service because people were not able to come into centres for a meal. Others had to close, as shared by one third sector respondent in our workshop:

¹³⁶ <https://www.srcdc.org.uk/2020/04/30/wyndham-st-pantry-update/>, <https://foodcardiff.com/blog/new-cardiff-covid-19-food-response-report-published/>

¹³⁷ <https://www.llanrumneyhall.org/the-pantry>

¹³⁸ <https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/>

¹³⁹ <https://www.llanrumneyhall.org/the-pantry>

“There were, obviously, some groups as well that could not deliver what they were doing. I think a lot of those might fall into the 50-plus lunch clubs, because of the vulnerability of those groups they could not meet anymore. Some of them just stopped all together or just left it to online sessions to stay in touch, but other ones adapted to go and reach, and provide some food parcels to groups. So there is a variety.” (Third sector respondent)

It was shared that Women Connect First, one of the organisations working to provide food parcels in Butetown over the lockdown, also received informal referrals through word of mouth from neighbours and people involved in other programmes about elderly individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities who were unable to make use of the Wales shielding boxes and unwilling to reach out to other organisations because they did not want to give information out. This became a target group for meal deliveries, as described by one third sector respondent:

“We had to break those barriers to get in touch with them, and find volunteers that would be suitable to go and deliver foods, build that kind of trust with them, and check up with them.

Now what we have done is we cook ethnic food, and deliver freshly cooked food to these people on a daily basis around Cardiff. We will try to evolve our project as well to be able to reach everybody and make sure that people are eating healthy, because we know that even though we provide the boxes, some of them are ill or some suffer from arthritis and are not cooking regular meals. They are living off crackers and tea. So we have moved forward in providing hot meals.” (Third sector respondent)

One example of a new meal provider during the spring of the COVID-19 pandemic was a local school, Mary Immaculate High School, who used their facilities to prepare hot meals to elderly people or disabled who were shielding or not leaving their homes and who might struggle with meal preparation. Recipients were identified through the school’s partnership with Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale,¹⁴⁰ a local charity that helps support older people to repair, adapt and maintain their homes. The school paid for ingredients and provided infrastructure to prepare the meals. The Dusty Forge pantry also partnered on this project, providing delivery services. Of note Mary Immaculate High School is one of the few schools in Cardiff with a private catering contract, with most schools otherwise using Cardiff Council’s Education Catering.

Other third sector organisations

FareShare Cymru, who supports many of the organisations described above, also had to change the ways they did things over the COVID-19 pandemic. These included taking on new members quickly and having to do kitchen and premises checks online. This was at the same time that they were seeing increased demand from their existing members.

Food retailers and local businesses

We also heard about various ways that food retailers and local businesses responded over the spring 2020. One council staff respondent shared the following in our workshop.

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/en/your-area/care-repair-cardiff-and-vale/about/>

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Cardiff

The desire and ability to act quickly, and consequences of this

The desire to act quickly was keenly felt by stakeholders given the concerns about rising need and the signs of this very early on in the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the first actions described above emerged from a wish of “just wanting to do something” (Third sector respondent). One respondent described the work by the Council in the start of the pandemic in the following way:

“Actually, I think those 10 days [at the end of March], people were just head down, “We’ve got to do something.” (Third sector respondent)

As we saw in the responses enacted over the spring and summer, some were described as “knee-jerk reactions”. However, the ability to act quickly was seen as a positive, for example, in contrast to the Council’s usual ways of working:

“I think sometimes councils can be very slow and risk adverse, but we could not afford to be in this situation...different departments and organisations within the same umbrella sometimes, and teams...they were really good. They just found ways through issues as soon as possible. People thought about things really quickly.” (Council staff respondent)

Reflecting on what they quickly put in place in the early days, some respondents felt they wouldn’t have done things differently, even with the benefit of hindsight:

“I suppose one of the extra things to add, particularly right at the beginning, was that it felt like a knee-jerk reaction. Actually it was the right reaction. We’re not living now, so eight months later, thinking, “If only we had done X,” simply because we couldn’t have done X. We did what we did, I think, out of what we saw at the time and learnt from it and have built on it instead of gone down a different path.” (Third sector respondent)

But as we saw in the above section on free school meal replacements, some actions, such as how free school meals replacements were delivered at first, were felt to require a different approach as the limitations of early “knee-jerk responses” were realised.

Importantly, the urgency of the situation felt by some stakeholders caused them to feel panicked in the early weeks of the pandemic. Though it caused them to act quickly, it was not without stress and anxiety, as reflected below:

“If I’m honest, it was panic. It was the unknown. It was almost crashing down together, so will we have enough food? The need will be absolutely huge. How will we deliver the model? What will we do? Will we get ill? The need to prioritise and then not knowing which one was the most important was what panicked us. I think that’s probably right to say, panicked us psychologically to begin with.” (Third sector respondent)

The confusion of the first weeks

Perhaps contributing to a sense of panic in the first weeks was that many stakeholders described being confused about what actions were being taken, by who, and who had responsibility. The confusion was compounded by people switching to at-home working, which inhibited communication. Some of the following quotes illustrate what these first weeks felt like to respondents:

"I've got to say those first few weeks of the pandemic were absolutely bloody chaos...we are local authorities. We are not agile workers...I was kind of left in charge. I was like, "Okie-doke. So I'm being told we all need to ship out by the end of tomorrow...and we're all homeworkers after that. Good luck, folks, if you don't have laptops." So it was hard work, I think, for everybody involved in the local authority. Those of us of a certain grade, we did get laptops, but it was very difficult for the rest, trying to use their own phones, trying to use blinking Gmail. It did all get sorted out in a few weeks....so it was hard going for all the partners....so communications were crap to start with, to be quite honest."
(Council staff respondent)

"[It was} kind of, 10 days until we'd got a response [from the Council] but that period seemed such a long period where I was like, "They're doing something and we don't know what they're doing and we're not linked up. What's happening here? After that, it was fine. There was really good communication and collaboration afterwards but I remember, in that week, just being like, "Come on, we need to share what everyone is doing." (Third sector respondent)

"[In the first weeks], the world and his wife were coming to us...I immediately contacted...the Council because for us, that was unsustainable. I immediately contacted the cabinet member for education and said, "Help. It's not we want to say no but I think we now need to have that coordinated approach that says, "You can't come to a food bank because if you do, we can't do this other bit."
(Third sector respondent)

Who was supporting people who were shielding and who should be shielding was another point of confusion:

"Very early at the beginning we started receiving lots of enquiries from community members, not only groups, about not being about shielding, people who were supposed to be shielding but had not received the letters...so there was a lot of confusion there and people wanting to know what was out there that they could receive, what support and where from." (Third sector respondent)

The importance of stakeholders playing a coordinating role

Both Food Cardiff and respondents from the Council highlighted the importance of coordination over the spring and summer, and both saw themselves as having key roles in facilitating this. It was felt that coordination was needed to connect people, businesses, and organisations who wanted to help with the people who needed help, to maximise the supply of food, donations, and people power, and ensure that there wasn't a duplication of effort. These feelings were reflected in the follow quotes:

“We had loads of offers of support and loads of people who we knew needed support, how do you match-make that?” (Third sector respondent)

“I know some groups that would usually get donations off of supermarkets had to find other ways of getting that food into the people that they were supporting, such as care homes etc. That is where we started helping out, in terms of the Council and other partners, trying to link people together, to help them to enhance what was already going on. If we knew people were local to each other we would put a rugby club in touch with a mosque, that is quite a good example.” (Council staff respondent)

New relationships and future impacts of these

Though pre-existing relationships were flagged as important, others highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic also brought groups together who had not worked together before, as shared in the following quotes:

“I could endlessly list some fantastic work that started happening. First of all, people linking up and starting to talk to each other, that possibly never talked to each other before. Adapting what they were doing... so it could be a local café that had not done volunteering before suddenly would talk to some volunteers and open a kitchen.” (Council staff respondent)

“Groups got together and set up their own network, regular meetings, strategies and it was brilliant to see.” (Council staff respondent)

Others felt that the pandemic would bring about even closer working, even if groups had been part of the Food Cardiff partnership before. For example, one third sector respondent who had been a part of the partnership shared:

“I think, looking to the future, I think we will be working more closely together. I could almost see a food hub arrangement if you like. We’re more than happy [to] work with anybody. It’s not that we want to be on our own. It’s just that that’s the way that it’s been up until now.” (Third sector respondent)

New ways of working and the need to establish new ways of responding to food needs

As reflected in our descriptions of the various new roles, new projects, and new ways of working that happened in response to the pandemic, it is clear that stakeholders involved in emergency and community food provision in Cardiff had to be incredibly adaptable and flexible over this time, though this was a major challenge:

“A lot of our work was face-to-face... obviously staff having to adapt as well, and...where we rely on volunteers for some of our services and staff...a lot of our staff and a lot of volunteers were shielding, so it was actually the staffing side of it...rather than just the food itself. It is actually the whole logistical side of it.” (Council staff respondent)

On reflecting on their work in food parcel distribution, one third sector respondent shared:

“It’s led to different ways of working, in other words, reacting to the need that COVID has brought about. We all talk about the new normal...In the warehouse for example, we would have 8 volunteers on a session or even up to 12. Now we’ve had to do it differently. We can only have 6 because of what we know. Therefore that’s then led to a different way of organising a particular area of the work. It hasn’t expanded, it’s changed.” (Third sector respondent)

It was also shared that adaptations had to be made all the way through the spring and summer:

“We just had to keep adapting it as things changed really. Things like volunteers and when we had staff who were redeployed we had to move our services around to fit all those kinds of circumstances as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Responsibility

Another theme that emerged from our interviews and workshop were questions about who should have had responsibility for different aspects of the food response during the pandemic and who was best placed to reach different groups of people. One feeling expressed by a couple of respondents was that in some areas of Cardiff, the council was not seen as the appropriate provider of a response because people would not want to engage with the Council:

“It’s quite an interesting kind of power dynamic, isn’t it, as to who hands out the voucher and where they’re handed out from? And does the person feel comfortable there?... I’ve heard mixed reviews from the communities [about council hubs]. Some still see that it’s not for them. So when we did the pandemic work, clearly, the Council hub wasn’t the right place for Butetown. For example, there’s a community centre there that’s run by the local community. That was the main point of contact.” (Council staff respondent)

“Sweeping statement: I would say multicultural areas have community networks already set up for themselves. Your traditional white poor areas, there is a little bit of an attitude of, “You need to do it for us.” (Council staff respondent)

“Certainly from Cardiff Council, we know sometimes that people do not want to come to us because they think, “They will ask about my rents arrears. They will ask about this with my children. I am worried about this. I do not want to go to Cardiff Council.” So it is really a question of trying to build up that trust with some of the organisations and with individuals as well, and making it clear that our money advice team is independent, that they will refer with consent, but ultimately they are there to help people get the help they need.” (Council staff respondent)

“Traditionally we have always done all kinds of benefit take up campaigns for various things; we have put things out on social media, in with other letters, if you like, and that kind of information. But we still have a core of people that do not engage. So perhaps if we can utilise the links that some of the smaller organisations have with the community and say, “You know what, they will help you sort this out” or, “We can signpost you to other organisations if you do not want to go to the Council.” (Council staff respondent)

Still others felt that it was critical that the Council play their role:

“My jigsaw piece is providing that emergency food with other things but I’m linked with somebody next door, their jigsaw piece, on the Council and they’ve done their bit. They’re not going to do my work and I’m not going to do their work, if that makes sense.” (Third sector respondent)

Others raised that the difficulty of having volunteers involved in food provision to vulnerable people, flagging the benefit of the Council working with the Public Health Dietetics team.

“There is also that assumption that the people putting the parcels together are aware of what those special dietary requirements might be...we were lucky we had those links (between public health and the Council) and we did work together. But it is not up to volunteers to decide what is appropriate and what is not appropriate with regards to a special diet or, “Can they have this? Can they not have that?” I think there is a lot of responsibility and onus on someone then to have that.” (Public sector employee)

Looking ahead

Participants shared that there are ways they worked before the pandemic that they are eager to return to. The move to online delivery of services was not felt to be an adequate replacement for face-to-face delivery, mostly because of the potential for digital exclusion. People have also missed in-person meeting, events, and community engagement workshops. While the focus on COVID-19 has been understandable, others flagged that there is a need to also return to the more general aims, for example, of the Food Cardiff partnership.

At the time of gathering this data, Wales was not in a national lockdown. It was unclear whether a new lockdown would be imposed, but trends in the infection rates suggested this might be imminent. When asked about their concerns looking ahead, our respondents felt that most people working in food provisioning expected the need for their service to increase because of the economic situation and the end of support packages and buffers put in place to date, such as protections from evictions. The need to connect people to support that could deal with underlying financial issues was identified as critical.

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

Over the course of our interviews and workshop, various reflections were offered on how organisations, the Council, and the Welsh Government responded 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, as outlined in our methods. Responses to these questions and participants reflections on the responses enacted in Cardiff over the spring and summer are outlined below.

Enablers of the food response over spring and summer 2020

Reflecting over the range of responses enacted over the spring and summer, our respondents highlighted some key factors that they thought enabled the actions taken:

- People power – in the form of redeployed staff and the number of volunteers that came forward from the community.
- Local intelligence – it was felt that the existence of community groups with “local intelligence” meant responses could reach people that would have otherwise have “fallen through the cracks”.
- Adaptability – the ability of community and volunteer groups to adapt in a fast paced and changing environment was highlighted as an enabler of the response.
- Partnership working – as already highlighted, both existing and new partnerships were seen as critical.
- Funding and infrastructure – it was flagged that funding was provided for additional costs, that warehouse space was donated to allow for food storage, and that organisations received food support from major retailers. The Cardiff Foodbank in particular flagged that they received more donations than they ever had before, both in terms of financial donations and food donations.

The importance of pre-existing relationships and benefit of working together

Elaborating on the importance of partnership working indicated in the bullet list above, various stakeholders talked about the influence of pre-existing relationships on the responses enacted over the spring and summer and how this enabled their response. Many of these existed because of the Food Cardiff partnership. It was felt that this partnership meant that a Covid-19 Food Response Group could quickly be established and allowed for greater coordination and clear roles to be delineated, as shared in the following quotes:

“Objectively, [if I] think about what would’ve happened if it wasn’t for the partnership in place, I think there would be a lot less coordination and there might be a bit more tension between groups, like between the local authority and the third sector and the grassroots.” (Third sector respondent)

“That taskforce that was set up right at the beginning was hugely helpful, the Food Cardiff one, because not only did it alleviate anxiety but you knew that 1) you weren’t duplicating what somebody else was doing, 2) the gap was identified and then a solution was found. Then we knew that what we were doing was alright. We didn’t have to expand into it.” (Third sector respondent)

Examples were shared about how pre-existing partnerships strengthened the responses that various groups put in place. The following examples were shared:

“I think our food parcels were better than the shielding food parcels because we took on board the advice of our dietary colleagues in the NHS, who also sit on the Food Cardiff partnership. So again, the benefit of the partnership.” (Council staff respondent)

“Because [the Cardiff Foodbank] had that partnership arrangement with the Council where they were doing home deliveries...for those medically shielding people, they provided food. For those that would need a food bank and voucher but couldn’t leave their home, they provided food. We gave them [food bank]

food for them to distribute on our behalf. That worked really, really well. They've got their centre, they deliver. They've got the proper safeguarding things in place and all of that." (Third sector respondent)

Interestingly, one council staff respondent felt that a formal partnership was not necessarily what led to groups working together, as reflected below:

"But whether you have a formal partnership or not, I think there are still those community connections and the link between the local authority and those community groups anyway." (Council staff respondent)

Barriers to enacting responses to concerns about food insecurity over spring and summer 2020

Though challenges have already been highlighted, some of the key barriers identified by our stakeholders to enacting a response were:

- Quickly changing information that made it difficult to plan and prepare a response.
- Need for safeguarding and Health & Safety checks – in particular, it was flagged that many informal groups and volunteers did not have these checks in place.
- Reliance on online communication – it was flagged that a lack of access to online communication meant that responses and communications did not reach some groups.
- Lack of personal protective equipment – particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, it was difficult for some groups to get a hold of masks and sanitizer.

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Shielding food boxes

The provision of food boxes for people who were shielding from the Welsh Government was clearly a concern for many of our stakeholders. This has already been highlighted through describing the confusion about provision for people who were shielding at the start of the pandemic, concerns about what was being provided in the Welsh food boxes in terms of nutrition quality and quantity and ability to meet cultural and dietary needs, and how Cardiff Council had to step in to provide alternative food boxes for people.

New groups engaged in food provision

Although not raised by many research participants, there were some concerns about new organisations getting involved in food provisioning over the pandemic. Some of these related to whether or not they had adequate Health & Safety protocols in place and also safeguarding protocols. Scepticism about their legitimacy was reflected in the following quote:

"Particularly through the COVID times, there have been lots and lots of local support, organisations or people out of their own kitchens, which has been fantastic, but we sometimes have been a bit concerned about who they are and whether it's legitimate, etc." (Third sector respondent)

Short-term nature of funding

In general, it seemed that people felt there was an abundance of food donations and funding available to support their projects and work over COVID-19, though for some programmes, this meant having to seek out multiple sources, as was the case for funding the summer school holiday programme. However, it was raised that much of the funding was only provided for the short-term, and it was unclear whether projects would continue to be supported into the future. This concern was also raised in Food Cardiff's Cardiff-wide city response report.¹⁴¹

Food-focused nature of responses

Many people raised that over the course of the pandemic, there was a lack of focus on the underlying drivers of insufficient access to food. In part, this was due to how frontline services were less available over this time and the inability of organisations to offer the usual face-to-face advice and signposting that they usually do. The following quotes illustrate these concerns among our research participants and felt by their volunteers:

“That’s one of the continuing messages I guess through the whole pandemic is the support that volunteers want to give. Yes, they give food but the frustration that they can’t really do anything else.” (Third sector respondent)

“Also it is about having a bit of a holistic aim and wider view as well. You know, the concentration, and very rightly so, was on food and food poverty, but I think what would be good to do differently next time is to look at the bigger picture... But also, organisations working with people with substance misuse, gambling, alcohol consumption, etc., who were raising a lot of concerns. The same with the organisations who were providing advocacy type of services as well, they were very concerned that the services had gone down at a time when they should have been up.” (Third sector respondent)

Another concern was that even though food was provided, that it was not always of the best quality. Here, the focus on meeting caloric needs meant nutritional needs may have been overlooked:

“[It shouldn’t be] just food at any cost. We have got the right to good nutritious food and we need to make sure that we are actually meeting those nutritional requirements, particularly with COVID where we have seen huge inequalities in how it affects people based on their obesity levels and what their nutritional intake is like. I think we need to ensure that whatever response it is, is actually meeting the nutritional needs for the people rather than just filling them up.” (Public sector respondent)

Underserved areas and groups

As pre-existing partnerships were highlighted as so key to establishing responses to concerns about food access over this time, it was felt that it was harder to support and coordinate responses in some places than others. The Council and Food Cardiff felt quite

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

confident in identifying anchor organisations and food response partners in some places, but in others, it was not always clear which community-based organisations could take lead roles.

“But in some other parts of Cardiff, such as Butetown, Splott, off the top of my head, Pengam...we have got lots and lots of great groups, but not necessarily one that would take a lead. So in terms of the anchor organisation network, we were having a bit of a headache in terms of some places, like Butetown, “Who do we link in with there?” We had a few ideas, like maybe speaking to housing associations, but what I found interesting, and really to get to the point, is Butetown organised itself. Many of these groups got together and set up their own network, regular meetings, strategies and it was brilliant to see. It obviously removed a headache from us. It meant we had just one way to communicate with all that activity going on in Butetown rather than several different areas that we have had to look at doing. So I did not necessarily see that in some other parts of Cardiff, but it was very interesting to see in Butetown.” (Council staff respondent)

“I think when we were envisioning it at the beginning, it was going to be quite simple to get a list of organisations per ward, they would be the point of contact, and we would link up. It was much harder to put things in boxes like that. For example, it was not necessarily ward level for some of the organisations, and a lot was more self-organising.” (Third sector respondent)

It was shared with us that many of the well-established community development organisations in Cardiff that acted as anchor organisations, such as ACE and SRCDC, were Communities First organisations¹⁴² and located in the Southern Arc. These were also organisations that the Council and Food Cardiff already had working relationships with. We asked whether it was harder to identify anchor organisations outside of the Southern Arc, and it was felt that it was, however, it was also pointed out that mutual aid organisations were equally active in areas outside of the Southern Arc.

Along the same lines, it was flagged that some individuals and groups were harder to reach than others over the pandemic. When asked using a Mentimeter poll whether people going without food by not receiving help is a significant problem in Cardiff, participants did not strongly disagree with this statement, though they also did not strongly agree. It was felt that some groups may not have received adequate support over the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these were identified in the following quotes:

“I think it is still people who are most vulnerable who have been affected the most, and I think they fall through the net a bit on some occasions. We had people who had sensory incapacities, who use BSL communication, etc., who were missing out on a lot of information... they did not know what was happening. We also had engagement with people with learning disabilities as well, who really felt let down by not being able to access the information. Sometimes that relates to food as well, because they are not able to communicate in the same way.” (Third sector respondent)

¹⁴² <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Communities-First/Cluster-Maps>

“But we did find people that, for whatever reason, were just struggling to reach the outside world. It could have been to do with internet access or it could have been just that they were disconnected from their network of support.” (Council staff respondent)



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Derry and Strabane Case Study

Gordon, K., Loopstra, R., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Derry and Strabane Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Derry City and Strabane | 1 |
| Data overview..... | 5 |
| About Derry and Strabane..... | 5 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 7 |
| Derry City and Strabane District Council..... | 7 |
| Local Community Growth Partnerships | 7 |
| Emergency food distributors..... | 10 |
| Social supermarkets | 11 |
| School meal provision | 11 |
| Western Health and Social Care Trust | 12 |
| Meals on Wheels..... | 12 |
| Meal providers | 12 |
| Early signs of food access issues in the COVID-19 pandemic | 13 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic | 14 |
| Derry City and Strabane District Council..... | 14 |
| Local Community Growth Partnerships | 15 |
| Social supermarkets | 20 |
| Emergency food distributors..... | 21 |
| School meal provision | 22 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Derry and Strabane | 22 |
| Reflections on the national food box delivery scheme | 22 |
| Speed of response..... | 25 |
| Known locally and local knowledge..... | 26 |
| The response in urban and rural areas..... | 27 |
| Physical or financial access barriers | 28 |
| Fear for the future..... | 29 |
| Longer term outcomes..... | 30 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 32 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer 2020 | 32 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 2020 | 34 |

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

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

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

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

The Derry and Strabane District Council area is split into eight local community planning areas: four are District Electoral Areas (DEAs) in Derry City, three are more rural DEAs and the last is Strabane Town. Each of these areas have an established Local Community Growth Partnership. These partnerships brought together statutory organisations (e.g. the Housing Executive, Department for Communities, Education Authority, Western Health and Social Care Trust and other), business, community and voluntary organisations, elected members for the DEA and interested citizens.¹⁴³ These Local Community Growth Partnerships, which usually met on a monthly basis, played a key role in delivering on the Local Community Growth Plans that are in place for each of the areas.¹⁴⁴ These plans focus on three pillars of wellbeing; social, economic and environmental.

At a more local level there are also five Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRA) within the Derry City & Strabane District Council area. Four are located in Derry City (Outer North, Outer West, Triax Cityside, Waterside) and one in Strabane. The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is funded by the Department for Communities and led by the Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department of Western Health and Social Care Trust in partnership with local community organisations.¹⁴⁵ The purpose of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is to reduce the social and economic inequalities; to work in partnership with communities to identify and prioritise needs and co-ordinate interventions designed to address the underlying causes of poverty.¹⁴⁶

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

¹⁴³ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Plans](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Plans)

¹⁴⁴ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards), <https://growderrystrabane.com/how-were-making-it-happen/local-growth-plans/>

¹⁴⁵ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/Neighbourhood-Renewal-Programme>

Partnership in the Outer West, Triax Neighbourhood Management Team in Traix Cityside and Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership (WNP) in the Waterside.¹⁴⁷ One NRA is located in Strabane, which is served by both the Strabane Health Improvement Project and Strabane Community Project.¹⁴⁸ Some of these partnerships provided emergency food aid prior to the pandemic. For example, the family support hub at GSAP distributed 576 seven-day food parcels in 2018/19.¹⁴⁹ Prior to COVID-19, WNP supported on average 15-20 families/individuals with the provision of food. Strabane Community project ran a social supermarket and a food bank amongst a suite of other support.

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

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

The Western Health and Social Care Trust provided a Meals on Wheels service covering an area which includes Derry and Strabane. In addition, the Food and Nutrition Team, in partnership with Derry and Strabane District Council, created a booklet which contains both nutrition and food safety information to assist local food banks and organisations who may be making up and/ or preparing food parcels for their local community.¹⁵⁰

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

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

The key role which the Council played in the response was the provision of funding for community resilience planning in the seven DEAs and Strabane Town. At a council meeting on the 26th of March councillors agreed to provide £280,000 to support community led responses to assist the most vulnerable during the pandemic. This was intended to support the work being undertaken by Local Community Planning, Neighbourhood Renewal Groups, rural networks and the community-based volunteer initiatives that emerged in the early weeks of the crisis.¹⁵¹ The funding could be used for a range of responses of which food

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.shantallow.net/>,
<https://www.facebook.com/ballymagroartyhazelbankcommunitypartnership/>,
<https://www.triaxneighbourhoodmanagementteam.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/watersidenp/>

¹⁴⁸ <http://strabanecommunityproject.org.uk/services/index.html>,
<https://www.facebook.com/StrabaneHealthImprovementProject/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.shantallow.net/about-us>

¹⁵⁰ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/eat-well/>

¹⁵¹ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

provision may have been one component. The Local Growth Partnership in each of the areas appointed a lead organisation to receive the funding.

The Council also acted as a conduit between the organisations doing the last mile delivery of the food boxes provided through the national scheme (see later section), and the suppliers ordering centrally the number of boxes required and distributing these to the DEAs as well as divvying up the referrals received through the national helpline to the organisations doing the last mile delivery. In addition, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, funding was provided to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in the evenings and weekends.¹⁵²

Each of the Community Growth Partnerships developed a 'Community Resilience Plan' in response to the pandemic for each of the DEAs, designed to protect those most in need and focus on supporting isolated and vulnerable people. The Community Resilience Plan included actions such as providing access to food, medicine and cleansing materials; developing activities to deal with mental health and wellbeing; and connecting isolated people, family members and friends with the wider community.¹⁵³ Although a number of organisations were involved in delivering the Community Resilience Plan, the Local Community Growth Partnerships nominated a lead organisation to draw down the funding provided by the Council and to coordinate the response in the area to make best use of resources. As part of this response the partnership also designated an organisation to take the lead on the food response.

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

Strabane Community Project led the food response in Strabane Town and similar to the food lead organisation in the Derry City DEAs they established a local helpline and co-ordinated other local groups to aid the response, including the provision of food parcels. They also expanded their existing Meals on Wheels service. In the three rural DEAs the Council funding was channelled through the 'Rural Area Partnership in Derry', to which a range of community organisations and groups could apply for grants.¹⁵⁴ Each of these three rural

¹⁵² <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

¹⁵³ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/communitysupport>

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.rapidni.com/>

DEAs received £27,000 in total, split across 25 organisations which received grants of between £1,000 and £5,000. As with the urban DEAs the main forms of support with food were food parcels and hot meal delivery although support with shopping, for people who were unable to go to the shops was also an important feature of the response in the rural areas.

In addition to the responses delivered to fulfil the Community Resilience Plans, the relevant actors involved in delivering the food response in each of the DEAs led on the 'last mile' delivery of the weekly grocery food boxes provided by the national initiative of the Department for Communities. This scheme provided weekly food boxes to people who were shielding and unable to access food through other means and people who were not shielding but were in critical need of food.¹⁵⁵ The 'last mile' delivery approach meant the local actors took the role of delivering the boxes to the individual households from a central hub.

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

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

Data overview

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

The case study draws from the following data sources:

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

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

All participants were invited to share other reports/documents that were relevant to the project. Key pieces of data shared include a report written by one of the research participants titled 'Research Paper and Proposal for an Access to Food Pilot', this included a mapping of the organisations in Derry City providing responses to food during the pandemic and an 'Overview and Summary of the Community Resilience Fund' distributed in the three rural areas of the district. In addition, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic with a particular focus on the information available of the Derry City and Strabane District Council website. Lastly, during the workshop, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. Other data included comments submitted via the 'chat' function and emails which were sent with additional comments following the workshop. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Derry and Strabane

As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the

Food Power network, areas that were either predominantly urban or rural, and evidence of economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. The claimant rate reflects people either receiving Jobseeker's Allowance or receiving Universal Credit and expected to be looking for work. Derry and Strabane was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 68%.

Derry City and Strabane, located in the northwest of Northern Ireland, has a population of around 150,000 people. 22% of the population are aged 0-15, 63% are 16-64, 14% are 65-84 and 2% are 85+. ¹⁵⁶

Levels of deprivation across the country are reported in the 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures' which splits the country into 890 Super Output Areas (SOAs). Derry City and Strabane District has 75 SOAs. In 2017, Derry City and Strabane had 20 of the 100 most deprived SOAs, accounting for 27% of its 75 SOAs, and five of the 10 most deprived SOAs. ¹⁵⁷

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



Map of Northern Ireland Councils and Derry City and Strabane District¹⁵⁸

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

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2019-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/NIMDM17-%20with%20ns.pdf>

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/local-government-maps>

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

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

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

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed an 87% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.¹⁵⁹

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

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

Derry City and Strabane District Council

Prior to the pandemic the Council was not heavily involved in direct food provision however they did provide substantial funding to advice services and were, therefore, supporting welfare, debt and employment advice. The advice organisations to which they provided funding include Advice North West, Dove House Advice Services and Resource Centre Derry.¹⁶⁰

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

Local Community Growth Partnerships

Each of the 8 areas noted above (7 DEAs and Strabane Town) have a Local Community Growth Partnership. These partnerships aim to bring together statutory organisations (e.g. the Housing Executive, Department for Communities, Education Authority, Western Health

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

¹⁶⁰ <https://advicenorthwest.com/>, <https://dovehousecommunitytrust.org/projects/adviceservices.html>, <https://www.resourcecentrederry.com/>

and Social Care Trust and other), business, community and voluntary organisations, elected members for the DEA and interested citizens.¹⁶¹

“As part of our community planning process, we have set local growth partnerships in each of the DEAs, district electoral areas. So, we had those community planning partnerships in place representing the community, elected members, and statutory representatives” (Council staff respondent)

These Local Community Growth Partnerships, which usually meet on a monthly basis, play a key role in delivering on the Local Community Growth Plans that are in place for each of the areas.¹⁶² These plans focus on three pillars; social wellbeing, economic wellbeing and environmental wellbeing. In the urban areas the establishment of the Local Community Growth Partnerships built and expanded on the existing Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (see below). In rural areas, where there was no existing Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships the Local Community Growth Partnerships were built up from scratch.

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

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships

At a more local level there are also five Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) within the Derry City & Strabane District Council area. Four are located in Derry City (Outer North, Outer West, Triax Cityside, Waterside) and one in Strabane. The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is funded by the Department for Communities and led by the Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department of Western Health and Social Care Trust in partnership with local community organisations.¹⁶³ The purpose of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is to reduce the social and economic inequalities which characterise the most deprived areas; and to work in partnership with communities to identify and prioritise needs and co-ordinate interventions designed to address the underlying causes of poverty.¹⁶⁴

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

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

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

¹⁶¹ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Plans](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Plans)

¹⁶² [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards), <https://growderrystrabane.com/how-were-making-it-happen/local-growth-plans/>

¹⁶³ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/Neighbourhood-Renewal-Programme>

| Neighbourhood Renewal Area | Key Organisation/ Partnership | Details |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Outer North | Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP) ¹⁶⁵ | A core community support agency working with local residents, community/voluntary sector groups and statutory/private organisations to help improve the social, community, economic and physical regeneration of the area. |
| Outer West | Ballymagroarty and Hazelbank Community Partnership ¹⁶⁶ Rosemount and District Welfare Rights ¹⁶⁷ | The aim of the Ballymagroarty Hazelbank Community Partnership is to lessen the effects of deprivation in the area by contributing positively to the social economic and environmental regeneration of the area. Provision of a community hub. The hub provides a range of services including welfare rights project, legal access project, employability and skills training, programme of activities for children and families, and other services. |
| Triax Cityside | Triax Neighbourhood Management Team ¹⁶⁸ | Overall ethos is to recognise and address the challenges faced across the communities they support. |
| Waterside | Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership (WNP) ¹⁶⁹ | The aim of the organisation is to transform the area into a safe place, which people will choose to live in, invest in and visit. The partnership is heavily involved in liaising with statutory, private sector and government. Local organisations are responsible for delivery 'on the ground'. ¹⁷⁰ |

As can be seen these organisations have wide regeneration aims, of which food may play a part without necessarily being a specific focus. We learned that at least two of these partnerships provided emergency food aid. The family support hub at GSAP have been providing emergency parcels since 2010. In 2018/19 they distributed 576 seven-day food parcels and in 2017/18 the equivalent figure was 276 parcels.¹⁷¹ Prior to COVID-19 WNP supported 15-20 families/individuals on a weekly basis in relation to the provision of food. This would have been a mix of food parcels from the Churches Trust (see section below) and the issuing of food parcel vouchers for the Apex food bank.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.shantallow.net/>

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/ballymagroartyhazelbankcommunitypartnership/>

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/charity-details/?regid=102878&subid=0>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.triaxneighbourhoodmanagementteam.com/>

¹⁶⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/watersidenp/>

¹⁷⁰ https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/ccni_ar_attachments/0000101469_20190331_CA.pdf

¹⁷¹ <https://www.shantallow.net/about-us>

¹⁷² 'Research Paper and Proposal for an Access to Food Pilot' – available on request

One NRA is located in Strabane, which is served by both the Strabane Health Improvement Project and Strabane Community Project.¹⁷³ The latter plays a key role in supporting people experiencing food insecurity, providing a wide range of services across Strabane Town and into the nearby rural areas. Services listed on their website are Strabane Food Bank, fuel stamp scheme, lunching club, Meals on Wheels, Western Health and Social Care Trust's sitting service, home maintenance (Handy Man Service), befriending, Good Morning Telephone Alert Service, Rummage charity chop, Strabane unemployed resource centre and volunteering. They also operate a social supermarket (see section below for more details). As can be seen from this, Strabane Community Project undertake direct food provision through the food bank, lunch clubs, Meals on Wheels and the social supermarket, as well as providing a holistic suite of support services for people experiencing poverty and food insecurity.

As the rural areas are less deprived, they are not categorised as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. However the 'Rural Area Partnership in Derry' (RAPID) consists of representatives from community organisations, statutory authorities, the private sector and special interest groups with the primary objective of halting the social and economic decline of the rural communities and facilitating sustainable social, economic and cultural development.¹⁷⁴ Funders for the partnership include Derry City & Strabane District Council, Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs, Department for the Economy and the Health & Social Care Board.¹⁷⁵

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

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

Emergency food distributors

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

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

“Prior to that, the Churches Trust, the four churches, they just discretely... There was no funding involved. They would have discretely took collections through the churches, and that's what we liked about them 10 years ago, and they discretely

¹⁷³ <http://strabanecommunityproject.org.uk/services/index.html>,
<https://www.facebook.com/StrabaneHealthImprovementProject/>

¹⁷⁴ <http://www.rapidni.com/>

¹⁷⁵ <http://www.rapidni.com/AboutUs/Funders.aspx>

would have delivered to us food parcels for families. Families came here to get them, or we delivered them, and we have been doing that for years.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

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

Social supermarkets

Two social supermarkets are located in the area, both part of the Northern Ireland Executive Department for Communities’ pilot scheme of five social supermarkets, launched in 2017. The rationale for the pilot was the hope “that rather than an emergency short term response, a Social Supermarket model can provide people with a pathway out of poverty by recognising that access to affordable food is only one factor and that access to and uptake of a wraparound service to address advice needs, training, skills, healthy eating etc. may provide a more holistic approach to a transition out of poverty.”¹⁷⁶ There are core elements to the Social Supermarket model: an access criteria (e.g. households in receipt of welfare benefits); that support is provided for a time limited period only; there is a financial cost to the member to access the social supermarket; and access to the food is dependent on the client availing of the wraparound service.

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

School meal provision

42% of school aged children in Derry and Strabane were entitled to a free school meal.¹⁷⁷

News reports provided some insight into activities that provide food for school children during the school holidays. Two holiday schemes targeted at low-income households were piloted in 2019. Firstly, a pilot of a ‘Healthy Summer’ programme ran in the Summer of 2019 targeted at children who are eligible for free school meals. The programme was run in partnership between the Northern Ireland Executive’s Urban Villages Initiative, Business in the Community NI and local businesses to provide 30,000 meals through a diverse range of community-based initiatives in Belfast and Derry.¹⁷⁸ Secondly the Fuel for Fun programme by the Education Authority provides healthy lunches to children aged 4-11 participating in summer programmes being delivered by the Education Authority managed youth centres. The programme aimed to deliver over 23,000 lunches to 1,400 young people throughout July

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/social-supermarkets-pilot-programme-screening.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ <https://eanifunding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Derry-and-Strabane-Local-Assessment-of-Need-2020-2023.pdf>

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.bitcni.org.uk/post-news/businesses-helping-provide-a-healthy-summer-for-local-children/>, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/urban-villages-initiative>

and August 2019.¹⁷⁹ Local community organisations also offered summer schemes and a range of holiday clubs run during school holidays, many of which provide food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.¹⁸⁰

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Derry and Strabane is covered by the Western Health and Social Care Trust who provide health and social care services across the area. The Food and Nutrition Team, in partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council, created a booklet which contains both nutrition and food safety information to assist local food banks and organisations who may be making up and/ or preparing food parcels for their local community. The Community Food and Nutrition Team also provide 'Making the most of your Food Parcel' recipe books.¹⁸¹

The Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department co-ordinates and supports projects in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, described above.¹⁸² The Trust also provides a Meals on Wheels service (described below).

Meals on Wheels

The Western Health and Social Care Trust provide a Meals on Wheels service covering an area which includes Derry and Strabane. As of March 2017 the Trust was providing 913 households with the service. The Trust has an arrangement with a range of providers to provide the service, providing fresh meals on a daily basis. Service users are charged a maximum of £1.50 per meal.¹⁸³ Strabane Community Project also provided a Meals on Wheels service. One participant reflected that the Meals on Wheels service was not as well developed in the rural areas compared to urban areas.

Meal providers

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

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

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

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/08/20/news/free-meals-for-thousands-of-children-to-fight-holiday-hunger--1688701/>

¹⁸⁰ http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

¹⁸¹ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/eat-well/>

¹⁸² <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

¹⁸³ <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/meals-on-wheels>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So that was a big thing for us and I think particularly in the first week or two, and self-employed individuals who were starting to get really scared, who live on a weekly

basis expecting a salary to come in, have kids and were panicking, going, “How the hell, I have no money coming in at the end of the week and I need food.” So in the first week or two that was our initial influx of phone calls from public workers and self-employed.” (Third sector respondent)

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

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

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

Derry City and Strabane District Council

The key role which the Council played in the response was the provision of funding for community resilience planning in the seven DEAs and Strabane Town. At a council meeting on the 26 March councillors agreed to provide £280,000 to support community-led responses to assist the most vulnerable during the pandemic. Initially £15,000 was allocated to each of the DEAs with a further £80,000 to be released on a rolling basis subject to need and the availability of other regional funds. The investment was designed to support the work being undertaken by Local Community Planning, neighbourhood renewal groups, rural networks and the community-based volunteer initiatives that emerged in the early weeks of the pandemic.¹⁸⁴ The funding could be used for a range of responses of which food provision may have been one component.

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

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

The Council also acted as a conduit between the organisations doing the last mile delivery of the food boxes provided through the national scheme (see later section) and the suppliers,

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

ordering centrally the number of boxes required and distributing these to the DEAs as well as divvying up the referrals received through the national helpline to the organisations doing the last mile delivery.

In addition, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, funding was provided to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in evenings and weekends.¹⁸⁵ Subsequent to these initial funding packages the Council have provided funding for a range of other initiatives including a community recovery programme, an access to food programme (described later), and a digital connectivity programme.¹⁸⁶

Local Community Growth Partnerships

A Community Resilience Plan for each of the DEAs was developed and signed off by members of each of the 8 Local Community Growth Partnerships and other local organisations. The plans were designed to protect those most in need, focusing on supporting isolated and vulnerable people; providing access to food, medicine and cleansing materials; developing activities to deal with mental health and wellbeing; and connecting isolated people, family members and friends with the wider community.¹⁸⁷ Although a number of organisations were involved in delivering the Community Resilience Plan, the Local Community Growth Partnerships nominated a lead organisation to draw down the funding provided by the Council and to coordinate the response in the area to make best use of resources. Organisations and groups who were providing support in their own local area during the pandemic were advised to contact the relevant lead organisation for support and overall co-ordination.¹⁸⁸ This wide range of organisations involved in delivering the response included sporting organisations, youth groups, religious groups, residents' associations, community associations, family centres, community playgroups and others. The way in which the Community Resilience Plan was delivered differed across the four Derry City DEAs, the three rural DEAs and Strabane Town. These are described below.

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

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

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-approves-Community-Recovery-Plans-in-respo>, <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Schools-delighted-to-receive-IT-equipment-to-assis>

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/communitysupport>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/COVID-19-Community-Support/Support-for-Community-Organisations/Area-Lead-Organisations>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Community Resilience Plan – Strabane Town

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Last Mile Delivery of Northern Ireland Executive grocery boxes

In addition to the responses delivered to fulfil the community resilience plans the relevant actors involved in delivering the food response in each of the DEAs (the food lead in the 4 Derry City DEAs, Strabane Community Project in Strabane Town and the 'community hubs' in the 3 rural DEAs) lead on the 'last mile' delivery of the weekly grocery food boxes, provided by the Department for Communities. This scheme provided weekly food boxes to people who were shielding and unable to access food through other means and people who were not shielding but were in critical need of food.¹⁸⁹ The operation of the scheme differed across the local authority areas throughout Northern Ireland. The 'last mile' delivery

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Social supermarkets

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emergency food distributors

The 2019-2020 financial statements of the Foyle Foodbank provide some insight into the impact of the pandemic on the food bank.¹⁹⁰ The statements report that food stocks were maintained as a result of the ‘continued generosity of the people of the North West’ as well as the ability to access some bulk supplies of food from a local Tesco store, which was made possible through the Trussell Trust network. The food bank also experienced an increase in financial donations through individual donations or fundraising activities. It is also reported that the food bank “wasn’t overwhelmed in the early stages of the pandemic by a massive increase in demand for food” and this was attributed to the “many local food bank initiatives have sprung up”.

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

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

¹⁹⁰ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ujokymKtrujfd5mGgQBZD04sBOaE3ULT/view>

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

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

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

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

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

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

School meal provision

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

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Derry and Strabane

Reflections on the national food box delivery scheme

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

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

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

Referring specifically to the rural areas another participant said,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Later they said,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Speed of response

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Known locally and local knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The response in urban and rural areas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The same participant said:

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

Physical or financial access barriers

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fear for the future

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They continued,

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

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

Longer term outcomes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participants’ answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer 2020

Resources

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

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

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

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

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

Collaboration across government and the community and voluntary sector

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

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

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

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

Reducing barriers to accessing support

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

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

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

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

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

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 2020

Lack of Triage/ Lack of coordination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Individual and organisational burnout

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Herefordshire Case Study

Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Herefordshire Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

There appeared to be a lack of coordination between different programmes and some stakeholders expressed concerns about the duplication of provision and lack of communication between actors. On the other hand, this may reflect the rural nature of the county and localised nature of organisations working in different market towns. However,

one lesson identified by the Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance out of the pandemic was the need for the alliance to resume activity and have a coordinating role.

| | |
|---|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Herefordshire | 1 |
| Data overview | 5 |
| About Herefordshire | 5 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 7 |
| Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance | 7 |
| Herefordshire Council | 8 |
| Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS) | 9 |
| Food parcel providers | 9 |
| Diocese of Herefordshire | 11 |
| Meal providers | 11 |
| Other actors | 12 |
| Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic | 12 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic 14 | |
| Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance | 14 |
| Herefordshire County Council | 14 |
| Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS) | 19 |
| Food parcel providers | 19 |
| Community pantry or community fridge projects | 22 |
| Meal providers | 22 |
| Other third sector organisations | 24 |
| Other community hubs | 25 |
| The local response | 26 |
| Fundors | 27 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Herefordshire | 28 |
| Struggle of food banks to maintain food supplies but increased awareness-raising | 28 |
| More engagement from the Council | 28 |
| Encouragement of local level responses | 29 |
| Limitations of the Westminster Government shielding food box programme | 29 |
| Rural concerns | 29 |
| New vulnerability to food insecurity during the pandemic | 30 |
| Unmet need | 30 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 32 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer | 32 |

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 34

Barriers to the food response over spring and summer 2020 36

The present and looking ahead 36

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

food and hosting pay-what-you can community meals every 6 weeks to two months.¹⁹¹ A local caterer, Bake and Create, provided a “Meals on Wheels” service, at a cost of £4.25 per person.

Herefordshire also had a Food Poverty Alliance, a member of the Food Power Network, established in January 2018 with members including the Brightspace Foundation,¹⁹² the Diocese of Hereford, Herefordshire Housing (Connexus),¹⁹³ Hereford Food Bank,¹⁹⁴ Herefordshire Voluntary Organisations Support Service (HVOSS),¹⁹⁵ Herefordshire Council (Welfare and Public Health departments), Herefordshire Green Network,¹⁹⁶ and Ledbury Food Bank.¹⁹⁷ In 2019, the Alliance conducted a mapping study to map risk factors for food insecurity across the county. The Alliance met regularly over 2019.

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

Herefordshire County Council

The Talk Community programme was relied on to provide what was described as the Council’s “Tier 1” approach, aimed at prevention and action in the whole population. The approach was described as a “strength-based approach, enabling people to make their own resilience plans, depending on trusted friends, family, neighbours and their local community”.¹⁹⁸ This was reflected in a letter sent to all residents on the 20th of March, where residents were urged to “Create your own plan”, referring to the need for them to identify what support they can call on from family, friends, neighbours, or people in the community if they needed to self-isolate. But it was also highlighted that people should contact the Council if further support was needed.

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

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

¹⁹¹ <https://growinglocal.org.uk/about-us/>

¹⁹² <https://www.brightspacefoundation.org.uk/>

¹⁹³ <https://connexus-group.co.uk/>

¹⁹⁴ <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/>

¹⁹⁵ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>

¹⁹⁶ <https://hgnetwork.org/>

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

¹⁹⁸ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

Council scheme stopped, parcel recipients were supported through the “Shield Buddies” programme, which comprised 50 redeployed council staff who provided social contact and facilitated access to support where needed, including support with shopping if required.

Many schools worked hard to provide replacements for free school meals and the form of this provision varied across the schools including schools purchasing supermarket vouchers online and sending them to eligible families, packed lunches for collection from school, and food parcels / hampers delivered to households. In addition, the Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks and other organisations who were offering support to families.

The Council also provided support for food banks, facilitating access to supermarkets and other food retailers and linking volunteers who responded to their calls made through the Talk Community programme with food banks. They also provided support for organisation and groups newly providing a food service, supporting a coordinated response to avoid duplication, advising on nutritional requirements and identifying families that may be in need of support. Finally, the Council populated the WISH website with directories of available groceries, food and ready meals delivery; supermarket priority shopping hours; and food banks for Hereford City and each of the market towns in Herefordshire.²⁰⁰

Existing food banks

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

Other Actors

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

¹⁹⁹

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

²⁰⁰ <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/coronavirus/coronavirus-local-community-information/>

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

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

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

Data overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

About Herefordshire

As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, areas that were either predominantly urban or rural, and evidence of economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. The claimant rate reflects people either receiving Jobseeker’s Allowance or receiving Universal Credit and expected to be looking for work. Herefordshire was selected due to the presence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly rural. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 144%.

Herefordshire is a county located in the West Midlands. The local authority is Herefordshire Council, a unitary authority. It has a population of 192,800, of whom 34,800 (18%) are 70 years of age or older.²⁰¹ It is classified as a largely rural area and has very low population density, with 53% of the population living in areas defined as rural.²⁰² Hereford City is the only city in the county, with a population of 61,400 (just under 1/3 of the county's population). Besides Hereford City, there are market towns (pictured in Figure 1), with the largest being Leominster (12,200), Ross (11,400) and Ledbury (10,100).²⁰³ Importantly, Herefordshire was described as "food-producing county" (Third sector respondent), with access to an abundance of local food.

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

One respondent described Herefordshire in the following way:

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

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

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

Compared with other areas of the West Midlands, Herefordshire has higher levels of fuel poverty, lower levels of earnings, and worse housing affordability.²⁰⁴ Geographical barriers to services has been flagged as a reason for Herefordshire's poorer rankings in England's Index of Multiple Deprivation.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Source: nomisweb.co.uk

²⁰² <https://understanding.herefordshire.gov.uk/quick-facts/>

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ <https://understanding.herefordshire.gov.uk/quick-facts/>

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Figure 1 Hereford City and market towns in Herefordshire County.



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

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

Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance

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

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

It was established, with Food Power financial support, as a Food Power network member in 2019.²⁰⁶ Its members have included the Brightspace Foundation, the Diocese of Hereford, Herefordshire Housing (Connexus), Hereford Food Bank, Herefordshire Voluntary Organisations Support Service (HVOSS), Herefordshire Council (Welfare and Public Health departments), Herefordshire Green Network, and Ledbury Food Bank.²⁰⁷

One of the alliance’s first projects in 2019 was to conduct a mapping study, working with a local organisation called Data Orchard, to map risk factors for food insecurity across the county.²⁰⁸ Using a variety of potential indicators for food insecurity (e.g. fuel poverty, child obesity data, benefit claimants, no access to a car, and multiple deprivation rank), the project

²⁰⁶ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>

²⁰⁷ <https://www.brightspacefoundation.org.uk/>, <https://connexus-group.co.uk/>, <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/>, <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>, <https://hgnetwork.org/>, <https://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

²⁰⁸ <https://www.dataorchard.org.uk/case-studies/food-poverty-mapping-project>

scores lower-super output areas into rankings of risk out of 5, providing an indication of where prevalence of food insecurity may be higher.²⁰⁹ The alliance also met regularly over 2019 to help facilitate communication between the Council, food banks, and other organisations working across the county. They were also trying to work on more consistent ways of gathering data across different organisations. Since funding ran out at the end of 2019, the group was less active going into the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Herefordshire Council

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

Work with food banks

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

Talk Community Hubs

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

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

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

Local welfare provision scheme

Details on the Herefordshire Council's website suggested that they have had a form of local welfare assistance available for “residents in an emergency”, though what constituted an emergency is not specified.²¹⁰ We were told that each case is judged on its merit and a common sense approach taken, with ‘emergency’ broadly being would the client could not

²⁰⁹ <https://data-orchard.github.io/pages/hfds-food-poverty/index.html#10/52.0909/-2.7013>

²¹⁰ <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/support-emergency-welfare-support>

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

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

However, it was noted that they would not provide cash or loans and the fund was not available to help with rent or rent in advance. People were also not eligible to receive help if they had already received help through the scheme in the past six months.²¹¹ Signposting to other agencies and support networks would also be given including a referral to the food bank.

Meals on Wheels

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

Wellbeing Information and Signposting for Herefordshire (WISH)

WISH is owned by the Herefordshire Council and has been a source of to support the health and wellbeing of all adults, children, young people and families.²¹² As outlined below, the website was used to provide information on food access options over the pandemic.

Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS)

We learned of the HVOSS through our desk-based research. They are a support service for charities. The work they outline on their website includes providing information, guidance, and support to volunteers, charities, voluntary and community groups in Herefordshire.²¹³ As below, they were a key organisation in recruiting volunteers to help with food support over the pandemic, but as they did not participate in our research, we did not learn if they were involved in any work to address food access issues before the pandemic.

Food parcel providers

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

²¹¹ <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/support-emergency-welfare-support/2?documentId=56&categoryId=200207>

²¹² <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/>, <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/wish>

²¹³ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>

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

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

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

Hereford Food Bank

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

Ledbury Food Bank

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

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

On their website, they outlined the need to have a referral voucher from one of their referral agencies, however, they also offered people the opportunity to come in to speak to a food bank volunteer, who could then also provide a referral voucher upon assessment of their situation.²¹⁴ An authorised voucher entitled people to receive a weekly food parcel for 6 weeks, which could be collected on Wednesday or Friday mornings in Ledbury. They also operated a sub-branch in Bosbury.

Bromyard Food Bank

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

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

²¹⁴ <http://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

Details on their website outlined the ability of people to self-refer themselves by calling, email or visiting their Facebook page.²¹⁵ This would be followed up with a call by trained team members who would assess needs. Referrals were also received from social services, the HOPE Centre, Citizens Advice, or Christians Against Poverty. Upon the needs assessment, food parcels would be delivered weekly to the recipient for five weeks, after which time, another referral or assessment was required.²¹⁶

Ross Community Larder

The Ross Community Larder operates similarly to a food bank, requiring referral vouchers from social service agencies and serving people in financial hardship.²¹⁷ It was considered a food bank by our research participants. The food they provide is sourced from food collections from Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, and a community garden, as well as donations from the public.

Diocese of Herefordshire

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

Meal providers

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

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

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

Some other meal programmes were mentioned, though these happened less frequently. One was community lunches that were provided free at the The Kindle Centre every six weeks, which targeted older people (over 60s).²¹⁸

²¹⁵ <https://bromyardfoodbank.co.uk/where-we-are-and-how-to-contact-us/>

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ <https://rossparishes.uk/the-community-larder/>

²¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/>

Growing Local

Growing Local has been a community interest company operating in Herefordshire since 2009.²¹⁹ They are involved in a number of initiatives, including running a vegetable bag scheme and running land-based activities to teach schools and community organisations about local, seasonal food.

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

Meals on Wheels Herefordshire by Bake and Create

From our desk-based research, we learned that in 2018, The Royal Voluntary Service, which has previously provided a Meals on Wheels service in Herefordshire, stopped their service.²²⁰ A local caterer, Bake and Create, began to provide the service instead from April 2018. Meals have been offered to people for £4.25.²²¹

Other actors

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

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

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

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

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

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

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

²¹⁹ <https://growinglocal.org.uk/about-us/>

²²⁰ <https://www.herefordtimes.com/news/16188393.businesswoman-steps-provide-meals-wheels-service/>

²²¹ https://www.facebook.com/MealsonWheelsherefordshire/?ref=page_internal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance

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

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

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

Herefordshire County Council

Talk Community Helpline, Response teams, and Volunteer recruitment

The Talk Community programme in Herefordshire was relied on to provide what was described as the Council’s “Tier 1” approach, aimed at prevention and action in the whole population. The approach was described as a “strength-based approach, enabling people to make their own resilience plans, depending on trusted friends, family, neighbours and their local community”.²²² This was reflected in a letter sent to all residents on the 20th March, where residents were urged to “Create your own plan”, referring to the need for them to identify what support they can call on from family, friends, neighbours, or people in the community if they needed to self-isolate. But it was also highlighted that people should contact the Council if further support was needed: “If there are gaps in your plan and you need further support, please contact the Herefordshire Council Talk Community team using the details below.”²²³

²²²<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²²³https://www.hvoss.org.uk/media/88164/resident-letter-20032020_CX-final-version-for-printing.pdf

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

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

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

In addition to providing support for people calling in need of help, the Coordination Centre also received calls from people willing to volunteer in response to a call from the Council, with over 1,300 people reported to have been recruited to volunteer.²²⁴ These volunteers were deployed to provide support to people without access to other forms of support, with collection and delivery of food being a main service.

During the spring, the helpline would also refer people to Talk Community Response teams. These were 70 council staff employees who were deployed as “Community Link Workers”. They worked at the ward level and worked with parish councils, local community organisations, and volunteer networks. These roles were not intended to provide a new direct service, but rather to work “strategically with Herefordshire’s established voluntary, community and faith organisations to inform, support, and coordinate the community response.”²²⁵

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

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

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

Support for people who were shielding

In response to the Westminster Government announcing guidance for people who were shielding, the Herefordshire Council established their own approach, called “Project Shield”.²²⁶ Part of this programme was working to identify people who fell into the extreme clinical risk group. In a report produced by the Council, this was described as very

²²⁴<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

challenging due to multiple lists and changing information from the Government.²²⁷ The Council worked with the local NHS and through community link workers to identify 9,000 people who were shielding, up from an initial count in March of about 3,300.²²⁸ Once this list was established, 50 council staff were redeployed to contact this group, and volunteers recruited through the Talk Community programme were trained to become “Shield Buddies”, providing social contact and facilitating access to support where needed.

The Herefordshire Council established an “Emergency Delivery Hub” or “Hub Centre” at the Halo leisure centre on 28th March.²²⁹ This service provided food parcels to people on the NHS shield list and was described as being a “stop-gap” until the Government’s shielding food box programme was established. The Council provided food parcels until people received a food parcel through the national scheme. They also supported people to sign up for the national scheme. However, this continued past the start date for the Government’s programme because of a “delay in people signing-up for food parcels and a delay in delivery” and also because in early April, “some deliveries of the government parcels [were] missed as the task was moved from one supplier to another.”²³⁰ For these reasons, this provision ran from the end of March till the end of May. People were referred to this provision through the Council’s Talk Community Helpline if they were on the shielding list and could not receive help with food from friends, families or the wider community. People were therefore asked if they had received a letter advising them to shield from the NHS, and their response provided the proof of eligibility. Food parcels contained a range of fresh and ambient produce, although this was varied depending on households needs. Recipients were contacted each week to check whether they still required a food parcel, and during this contact, they were able to select the items for their food parcel. This also allowed specific needs to be met such as additional people in the household and specific dietary requirements.

As of the 30th April, it was intended that the service would reduce, being placed instead by “Shield Buddies”, who could help provide shopping to supplement the Government’s shielding food parcels where required.²³¹ It was reported in a Council News bulletin that after acting as a food distribution centre, the Halo leisure centre then became a PPE distribution hub.²³²

Free school meals

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

²²⁷ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/news/article/1007/leisure-and-local-authority-come-together-to-contribute-to-covid-community-effort>

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

In addition, the Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers.²³³ To support these households, the Council also engaged with the Rotary who were providing food parcels (described later). Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks who were offering support to families that were in need but not currently eligible to free school meals. This activity was reported on by the Council:

“The Council has also issued a fresh contract (time limited) to offer wrap around care in two towns for 8.00am to 6.00pm shift workers and offered Free School Meal (FSM) vouchers to over 40 families at risk of food poverty. We have engaged with the voluntary sector to support families of the shielded or for whom the national FSM scheme was not available.”²³⁴

Support for food banks

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

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

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

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

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

²³³ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²³⁴ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

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

Support for third sector organisations newly offering food and food parcels

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

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

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

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

Support for people leaving hospital

In a council report, a new programme called “Talk Community Home Safe” was described, which targeted people who were being discharged from hospital but who didn’t require a formal package of care. Volunteers from the Diocese of Hereford were deployed, who delivered “packs of essential food” which were supplied by the Council.²³⁵

WISH

Directories of available groceries, food and ready meals delivery; supermarket priority shopping hours; and food banks for Hereford City and each of the market towns in Herefordshire were made available on the WISH website over the pandemic.²³⁶

²³⁵ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

²³⁶ <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/coronavirus/coronavirus-local-community-information/>

Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS)

One of the first actions by the HVOSS was to provide a briefing note on the potential impacts of coronavirus on the community sector in Herefordshire.²³⁷ They outlined the potential impacts of small staff teams, typical of third sector organisations, being unable to work due to childcare responsibilities, and also volunteers not being available for the same reasons, as well as health risks of older volunteers. The potential increase in demand for services was also highlighted.

The HVOSS worked with the Council to coordinate volunteers. They set up a registration page for “COVID-19 Response Volunteers”. They also worked as part of the Talk Community Herefordshire response and connected people who wanted to volunteer with Talk Community groups working in local areas.²³⁸

Food parcel providers

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

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

They were also described to have adapted their services quickly:

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

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

Food banks also tried new ways of sourcing food, given the difficulty of obtaining food donations from supermarkets or purchasing from them in the early weeks of the pandemic. For example, they newly tried to purchase food from wholesalers. They also considered applying for funding from DEFRA’s Food Charity Grant but the model was described as ill-matched to their needs:²³⁹

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

²³⁷ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/media/87192/potentialimpactscommunitysector.pdf>

²³⁸ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/categories/covid-19.aspx>

²³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-apply-for-the-food-charities-grant-fund>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hereford Food Bank

It was shared that the Hereford Food Bank lost 50% of their volunteers due to shielding. To adapt to a smaller workforce, they switched to a delivery-only model. Food parcels could be requested by email or phone and then were delivered by local taxi firms.²⁴⁰ They continued to require referrals from social services agencies, GPs, churches, or schools.

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

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

Leominster Food Bank

In addition to running their usual food bank sessions on Tuesday and Fridays, which require a referral voucher to access food parcels, the food bank started to also offer a free “food share” at the end of March. The food available includes food past their best-before date, such as bread, fruit and vegetables, donated from local supermarkets.²⁴¹ It is noted on their website that a referral voucher is not required to access this food, but that the availability of food cannot be guaranteed.²⁴² We learned that over the course of the pandemic, Leominster Food Bank worked hard to be able to access food from FareShare as well.

Ledbury Food Bank

While we did not hear directly about how Ledbury Food Bank changed their services, an article in the Ledbury Reporter shared their determination to stay open over the pandemic, despite facing the challenges of losing volunteers due to the need for them to shield or self-isolate and an increase in demand.²⁴³ In a Coronavirus Information bulletin, they shared that

²⁴⁰ <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/corona-virus>

²⁴¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1866719913610250/permalink/2749454438670122/>

²⁴² <https://www.leominsterfoodbank.org/>

²⁴³ https://www.ledburyreporter.co.uk/news/18320915.ledbury-food-bank-vows-show-must-go-despite-coronavirus-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR3xMY5dglF61_ARwNJa1Nr4uSYTsCWolzHxHGTvdAykGwDVnYAsWksd-Fk

they would maintain their usual hours for food parcel collection, but that rather than having people coming in to choose items, people would receive a pre-packed bag of essential items. They could then additionally fill out a shopping list of items, which volunteers would then prepare and provide to them.

Ross Community Larder

While we did not speak to the Ross Community Larder directly about challenges they experienced over the pandemic, an early post on their Facebook page shared that their team had been reduced to only three volunteers who were not shielding or self-isolating.²⁴⁴

Community pantry or community fridge projects

The Living Room

We heard about one new community larder starting in Hereford City during the pandemic, The Living Room. The project runs a cafe that is open to members of the public; in turn, proceeds fund a community larder, training, peer support groups, and counselling and mediation services, targeted towards people on low incomes.²⁴⁵ It was delayed in opening due to the pandemic, so only opened in October 2020. On their Facebook page, the Living Room's Community Larder is described as being open to anyone. A membership is required for £5, and then, for £5 per week, people can receive a bag of groceries.²⁴⁶

Before opening the cafe and community larder, and over the spring and summer, the Living Room also provided food parcels to people in financial need (no referral required) and food parcels for families during the school holidays. People were encouraged to get in touch with them by email or Facebook to receive access to this assistance. The project receives food from FareShare as well as surplus food from supermarkets.²⁴⁷

Ross Food Hub

A new community food sharing project was also established in Ross in the autumn. Sourcing food from a community garden and from four supermarkets, the Ross Food Hub started offering fresh food for anyone to collect four mornings of the week from their "Zero Waste" stall in the autumn 2020.²⁴⁸ It was reported that in their first week in the autumn of 2020, they served 40 people.

Meal providers

Hot meal providers serving people who were vulnerably housed in Hereford City faced similar workforce challenges, since they were mostly run by older people, and their premises were also not of sufficient size to accommodate social distancing. One provider noted above, St Peters, were able to make adjustments and continued to offer a Sunday takeaway meal. However, most of the hot meal provision was coordinated centrally through the Salvation Army:

²⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsofRossCommunityLarder/posts/842013906293461>

²⁴⁵ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/featured-a-partnership-with-passion-for-tackling-food-poverty-in-herefordshire/>

²⁴⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/TheLivingRoomHereford>

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ https://www.facebook.com/Zero-Waste-Stall-101041668532996/?ref=page_internal

“Over the peak of it all, we managed to get a single provision, if you like, a single provider centred around the Salvation Army who had a mobile unit. Then the volunteers that were able to still help worked together with that unit.”

No referrals were needed or requested for this provision and it was open to anyone to attend.

One provider was also described as delivering lunches (soup and sandwiches) to one residence where homeless people had been housed over the crisis, but this was described as “a handful of meals” (Third sector respondent), so small in scale.

Growing Local

Growing Local repurposed funding that they usually use to run family cooking workshops and programmes for families and children to instead provide free food parcels to families. They purchased food with these funds and sent out regular meal kits, as well as extra ingredients, to about 120 families.

The meal boxes were described as providing:

“Totally local food. Really, really healthy, fresh ingredients. Again, they sent out recipe cards and video links for people to watch how to actually cook these meals.” (Council staff respondent)

This was another example where the Council was involved in coordination, linking this initiative with families in potential need. Potential beneficiaries were identified through Children’s Services and Public Health Nursing Service (school nurses and health visitors). Schools also provided names of families who had previously been entitled to free school meals. They were mostly new families who Growing Local had not worked with before:

“They were new families that were referred to us through particularly the early help team with the Council, the children with disabilities team, Home-Start Hereford and also lots of primary and secondary schools as well nominated families that they thought could really do with taking part.” (Third sector respondent)

Meals on Wheels Herefordshire by Bake and Create

From our desk-based research, we learned that the Meals on Wheels service by Bake and Create continued to be offered over the pandemic. A statement on their Facebook page on 16th March 2020 outlined that they continued to offer the service, with extra measures in place such as sanitising hands and implementing a “strictly drop and go service”, except where additional help for clients was needed.²⁴⁹ They also offered their services to people who were self-isolating.

HOPE Community Centre Meal Provision

The HOPE community centre in Bromyard began to offer weekly hot meal deliveries in July, serving families. Over July to December 2020, about 3,000 meals were delivered through

²⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/MealsonWheelsherefordshire/posts/1110660515939821>

this programme. In addition, the centre also provides lunch boxes to families in receipt of free school meals over the holidays.

Dixie's Hot Meal Provision

Another example of a specific hot meal delivery service that started over the pandemic was Dixie's Hot Meal provision. In a news article,²⁵⁰ it was described as an initiative started by an individual named Dixie Furnell, who created a Facebook group called Dixie's COVID19SOS. He received the help of 28 volunteers and through social media, received donations to support the provision. This was specifically targeted towards older people who were unable to go shopping, and provided meals for free. Over April to July, it was reported that 25,000 hot meals were delivered through this initiative.

The Kindle Centre Picnic Boxes

Another project we heard about was the Picnic Box project, which operated from 24th July and through the summer holidays.²⁵¹ It was run by the Kindle Centre, a community centre run by the South Wye Development Trust that ran a variety of health and wellbeing programmes before the pandemic, targeting people disadvantage, vulnerable and social excluded people in South Wye.²⁵² Their picnic box project was aimed towards families that had members who were furloughed or who had recently lost job. People could email the centre to make a referral. The project was funded by Herefordshire Community Foundation.²⁵³

Other third sector organisations

The Hereford City Rotary Club

In mid-April, it was reported that after being approached by a Hereford Council member about helping vulnerable people in the pandemic, the Hereford City Rotary Club would provide an emergency food parcel scheme.²⁵⁴

The food parcels were prepared and packed by the Rotary Club with food purchased from wholesalers and local businesses. Help was provided by three local businesses to coordinate the food purchases and packing, provide warehouse space for storage and packing, and provide vehicles for delivery.²⁵⁵ Donations to fund the purchase of foods were provided by the Council as well as a range of businesses and local foundations.

Food parcels were offered to families through the Council, as described:

“We were contacted to ask whether the families that we work with in the children's centres are part of the early help umbrella – who are identified through an early help assessment and so not only in the early years and in the children's

²⁵⁰ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/news/news-hereford-mans-community-group-creates-25000-free-meals-for-vulnerable-people/>

²⁵¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/posts/1277810989244871>

²⁵² <http://www.kindlecentre.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/>

²⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/posts/1277810989244871>

²⁵⁴ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/community-hereford-city-rotary-club-launch-emergency-food-parcel-scheme/>

²⁵⁵ Ibid., <https://www.rotary-ribi.org/clubs/page.php?PgID=817892&ClubID=605>

centres, but in the wider early help team that work with families with older children. We were offered the opportunity to have these food parcels from the Rotary Club...we would give numbers each week of families, vulnerable families that we knew would benefit from a food parcel. Then, [the food parcels would] be taken to the head office in Hereford city. Then, my team and other family support workers from the early help service would go and collect them and deliver them to the families directly. That happened right throughout the summer holidays and, actually, it started prior to the summer holidays. I can't remember the dates, but, yes, well before the summer holidays, actually...working closely with the families, we were really able to target those that needed it most and then those that needed it less, we would reduce [how frequently they received them]... and we liaised closely with Public Health, who liaised with the Rotary Club, so that we were able to manage that as best we could." (Council staff respondent)

The Council also supported them to enhance the nutritional content of the food boxes:

"[The Rotary Club] gathered a list of items to go in the food boxes, which was similar to what goes in the food bank boxes. So, we worked with them just to adapt them a little bit. So, there were more fresh fruit and vegetables, so we could use a bit more local produce, and so that we could include some recipe ideas and encourage those families to cook, rather than just eat from the tins, kind of thing." (Council staff respondent)

Data shared with us from the Rotary Club showed that over March to August, they provided 3075 food parcels to 652 families.

Other community hubs

Though at times overlapping with Talk Community Hubs, we heard about many community hubs operating across the county that may have become engaged in a food response. One specific example, the Ross Community Development Trust, is outlined below, but in general, these were described as informal, with communities providing support in various ways, as described:

"I think there are loads of community hubs throughout the county; they're not necessarily Talk Community ones." (Council staff respondent)

"My understanding is that they were helping with food distribution where it was needed and where people could pick up and it was just access to food, they helped in that way. So, I think it was variable, from what I'm picking up. They were different everywhere. Local communities just got on with it according to need and assessed as they went along, etc. As in, you know, "Call this number if you need help to get your food," you know, they would help with that. If you needed delivery, they would help with that. It depended on what was needed and different groups did different things...I don't know how many there would have been across the county, but there were loads in rural areas and in cities as well, but people are very resourceful when these things happen and they just adapted according to what they had and what they felt they could manage" (Third sector respondent)

Of note is that the Council was actively encouraging community groups and individuals to become Talk Community Hubs over the pandemic.²⁵⁶ Promotion information on the Council's WISH website stated:

"A Talk Community Hub can be developed alongside existing community settings, such as village halls, community pubs, organisations, shops or centres, which are already at the heart of the local community, or they can be something completely new. Herefordshire Council can provide support to nurture and further develop these settings, to help meet the needs of the local community and enable residents to better look after their own health and wellbeing.

It might be that you already offer a variety of daily activities, a weekly coffee morning or monthly lunch club within your community, in which case being a Talk Community Hub could enhance this further, by incorporating more elements to help the people you support."²⁵⁷

The "no size fits all" model of the Talk Community hubs was emphasised, with each hub being described as "developed to meet the individual needs of different communities, therefore unique to each community."²⁵⁸ The listed benefits of becoming a Talk Community Hub included potential funding from the Council, training for volunteers or staff, promotion via the Council's WISH directory, and growth and sustainability.

Ross Community Development Trust

The Ross Community Development Trust was identified as a new organisation that was set up during the pandemic. They established a small call centre and engaged in the delivery of food to people who could not go out for food. This was not free food, but rather was food ordered from supermarkets then delivered to people who were shielding or isolating.

The local response

Even before the pandemic, it was felt that a lot of informal food provision was happening across Herefordshire. Though not possible to quantify the extent to which this would have increased over the pandemic, it was felt that the pandemic made this informal provision more visible, as described:

"Prior to COVID, there was lots of invisible help going on...I know it's happening now because I know that staff at our place and elsewhere in Bromyard and in the community are doing that food shopping and cooking and providing meals for families, and relatives and friends, which doesn't come under an official form or scheme, but is a big part, particularly when you talk about the hinterlands and the rural communities." (Third sector respondent)

One example of a local neighbourhood response was featured on the "Your Herefordshire" news website on 16th April, describing a group that called itself "Helping

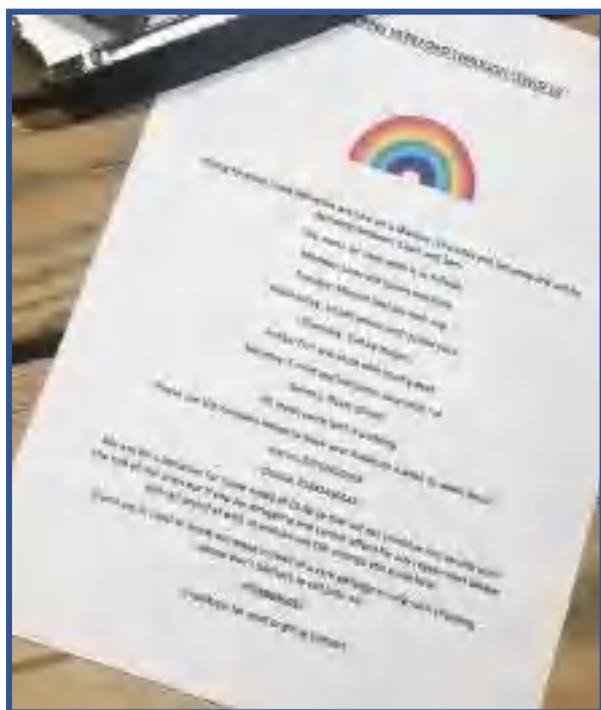
²⁵⁶ <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/talk-community-hubs/become-a-talk-community-hub/>

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

Hereford Through COVID-19”.²⁵⁹ The group promoted its help on Facebook and described itself as “a group set up to help the elderly and vulnerable and support key workers.”²⁶⁰ They provided food care packs and hot meals, with the latter prepared by chefs from local food businesses. A donation of £2.50 was asked for meals, though exceptions may have been made for people facing financial hardship. A flyer advertising what they offered the week of 9th April is pictured in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Meals available for delivery from the “Helping Hereford through COVID-19” Facebook group on the 9th of April 2020.



Funders

The Herefordshire Community Foundation ran a Coronavirus Response Grant programme (funded by the National Emergencies Trust Coronavirus Appeal fund)²⁶¹ over April 2020 to August 2020, giving out a total of £305,448. Their data was made publicly available through the <https://data.threesixtygiving.org/> website, highlighting how they funded the provision of food parcels from food banks and numerous organisations to offer food and medicine delivery.²⁶² They also supported the provision of meals from the Salvation Army targeting people who are vulnerably housed, the City of Hereford Rotary Club’s meal parcels for families, The Living Room, and hot food delivery from Meals on Wheels by Bake and Create.

²⁵⁹ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/community-community-group-donates-food-to-vulnerable-people/>

²⁶⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/245615750173245/about>

²⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/HerefordshireCommunityFoundation/posts/1572992299523156>

²⁶² <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ocHsmXqFY57EQvMo8736pQX4uflt-MT7cOwDvkH62NI/edit#gid=104821847>

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Herefordshire

Below, we summarise some key themes we identified in our interviews, workshop, and desk-based research in Herefordshire.

Struggle of food banks to maintain food supplies but increased awareness-raising

In Herefordshire, the struggle of food banks to access food supplies over the first months of the pandemic was notable, with many having to make considerable efforts to find new ways to source food and making appeals to the public. They particularly struggled to make use of government funded initiatives, as they, at first, appeared unable to benefit from funding for food provided to FareShare because FareShare did not operate in the area, and also because the small-scale nature of the food banks operating across the county meant they did not have the infrastructure or demand to qualify for DEFRA's Food Charity Grant scheme. It was also noted that as many of the food banks were not registered as charitable organisations, further precluding them from the scheme.

However, though there was a struggle to maintain food supplies early in the pandemic, it was noted that through increased awareness-raising, donations from the public increased over the pandemic, with many more regular collections now occurring:

“From a community point of view, our local church group every week, now, collects food donations for the food banks. Now, that wasn't going on before to the same extent that it is now because I think that this raising of awareness and understanding and response is having a ripple effect. So, I think this is happening widely across the diocese now, that there are regular collections for the food bank, where maybe they weren't before.” (Third sector respondent)

This also appeared to be the case for donations from supermarkets, with many more coming forward to help support food banks:

“Something that I'd noticed, the general, kind of, understanding and awareness of food poverty because of the COVID crisis has changed. When we first set up the Food Poverty Alliance over two years ago, I remember talking to supermarkets and trying to get their food surplus supplies and they weren't very interested, it was too much hassle. Now, it's very different. I'm getting emails from Asda Community Fund saying, “Do you know anyone who wants to apply for this funding? We're giving away food to vulnerable communities now.” That's one change.” (Third sector respondent)

More engagement from the Council

Similarly, some respondents expressed feeling like the Council was more engaged with food banks as a result of the pandemic. This was expressed in the following quote:

“Nobody from the local authority was involved or interested in where the food banks were, or what they were doing, until COVID hit and then suddenly I'm getting lots of, “Can I come and sit in on your meetings with the food banks, get an idea of what's happening?” and so forth. So things are much more

connected.” (Third sector respondent)

Encouragement of local level responses

The Council's Talk Community Hub programme placed particular emphasis on the ability of local communities to respond to the needs they identified over the pandemic themselves. This approach appeared to reflect what happened in communities as well:

“Local communities just got on with it according to need and assessed as they went along, etc.” (Council staff respondent)

Limitations of the Westminster Government shielding food box programme

While there were not many concerns highlighted from our research participants about the shielding food box programme, it is notable that the one form of direct food provision that the Herefordshire County engaged was food parcels for people who were shielding in the first six weeks of the pandemic. It was highlighted that the response was enacted because the Government's shielding boxes were not signed up for fast enough, nor were they distributed fast enough or consistently in the first weeks.

We also heard from one stakeholder that there were concerns about the contents of the boxes:

“I haven't got any empirical evidence, but, anecdotally, we heard that people were saying, “Oh, the food that was coming in the boxes wasn't necessarily suitable for, you know, dietary reasons...” There was one chap who'd got tins and he was disabled and couldn't open the tins or something.” (Third sector respondent)

We also heard about food from the shielding boxes ending up in food banks because people couldn't use it, and when asked what aspects of responses to food insecurity should not be continued into the future, our respondents listed the national food box scheme.

Rural concerns

The rural nature of Herefordshire was raised as a factor that shaped both reasons for food access issues over the pandemic and also the nature of responses enacted. For example, access to food early in the pandemic was an issue because in rural areas, there are fewer places for food banks to access food:

“The supermarket shelves [were] clearing, and there was very little to purchase, and so [food banks] needed to buy more but there was less available. In a lot of these market towns, it's a long way to go to another supermarket. And even then you're not going to get maybe anything different.” (Third sector respondent)

The “rural premium” of living in rural areas was also raised as a driver of food insecurity in Herefordshire:

“And then lack of transport: if you have a job you need a car, and if you're out not in the city, you can't get about. There is one train line that goes north to south but if you're not moving between those two towns that it stops at then it's no use. So, you know, you have to run a car. And often it's oil heating out in the rural areas...”

They reckon it's over or around £3,000 per household for that rural premium of living out in [rural areas] and that isn't allowed for in wages or benefits, is it?"

As already raised, the sparse population and costs of delivering services to rural areas were also thought to be a barrier to attracting funding to address food insecurity in rural areas.

"It's so sparsely populated and spread out, that pockets of deprivation, even on the scale that they do on the super low output areas and things, it's really difficult to pick up, because often it can be just spread everywhere...[We] find it difficult to attract the funding, so we can never make a big enough difference because we don't hit enough numbers...And it is difficult to deliver because it is so rural. Combine expensive delivery with lack of numbers, it's really a challenge to get funding." (Third sector respondent)

As before, the rural nature of Herefordshire was also thought to have contributed to the lack of coordination of different responses to food insecurity over the pandemic:

"There are lots of things happening and did happen, which is fairly typical of our rural area, in that communities get on with it and respond to the crisis, but it's not necessarily very well-coordinated or linked up." (Third sector respondent)

New vulnerability to food insecurity during the pandemic

Over the course of our interviews and workshops, our participants identified new vulnerabilities to food insecurity that they hadn't seen before. The need for access to the internet over the pandemic was one, since so many services had moved online. This vulnerability was compounded by the closure of public spaces where wi-fi had formerly been freely available (e.g. libraries). Another was the specific vulnerability to food access issues during the pandemic caused by the inability of people, especially older people, to access food through their usual channels:

"But in Hereford [Food Bank], they certainly saw a surge in March, April and May. A massive surge. What they also saw was that the demographic was slightly different. So, for example, they were not used to seeing older people there so much. They suddenly appeared because they did not know how to do online shopping." (Third sector respondent)

"Elderly people who rely on that support from others to provide food or deliver food." (Council staff respondent)

In general, it was felt that food access issues were affecting a much wider number of people in Herefordshire:

"So many people have needed help that aren't used to asking for help, because it has involved a much wider part of society than before."

Unmet need

We asked respondents about whether they felt there were individuals that may have been overlooked by responses and the extent to which they felt hidden hunger was a problem in Herefordshire. Some were sure this was the case:

“There’s a hidden bunch of people that have never accessed help and probably still are invisible to us. That has been my main concern that, you know, with the isolation ripping through, it’s really hard, isn’t it? If you’re not seen or known about...how do you know if you’ve not got the ability to engage through a screen or access services or knowledge through the Internet?... I reckon there are still quite a few people, however hard we try, that are still really isolated and just on the edge, which is horrible to think.” (Third sector respondent)

The difficulty in identifying groups who might be in need over the pandemic specifically was highlighted, though it was felt that frontline workers play a key role:

“Because quite often, people who are in need, not all of them know how to or are willing to access support. Maybe through the stigma, or pride, or just not knowing, whatever it might be...There are certain people within communities that know - they know who are vulnerable...The nurses, the local health visitors, that is the word I was looking for, are quite often right in the thick of it.” (Third sector respondent)

It was also felt that some of the ways that food banks operate is a barrier to people accessing food assistance, as reflected in the following quotes:

“So [at Ross food bank] they’re helping, they said, between 20 and 25 people per week. I just thought with a population of nearly 11,000, that’s not necessarily meeting some needs. So, I thought we needed to, kind of, change the story a bit, really, as well as a lot of the food is the typical food larder stuff...I know there’s some fresh stuff, but it’s mainly tinned dried items. So, there’s this thing about nutrition there. They were just open Tuesday mornings, so there’s something there about accessibility...I think the whole thing about the language, food larder, food bank, for a lot of people, has a lot of baggage and having to queue up somewhere outside of a known place...” (Third sector respondent)

“I would [agree] with that and that’s something we’ve been talking about at the food banks, about dignity, and accessibility and being more open in how they think. Some of them are beginning to address that.” (Third sector respondent)

In response to concerns about unmet need in Ross, the Ross Food Hub and “Zero Waste” project was launched, and as described, the demand for this food was taken as evidence of greater need in the town than was being reflected by the food bank’s numbers:

“So, that’s why we’ve done something, a community garden, and... really going for zero waste, which means anyone can come, whether you’re struggling or not, so making it a safer place. That’s open four mornings a week and we’ve already helped 40 people in our first week. So, I just think there’s a change, really, going on, but even a greater need, as well, I think.” (Third sector respondent)

As reflected in the above quote and in the following, a shift in provision to food share models built on the premise of addressing food waste was thought to be one way of reducing shame of accessing food assistance and reaching more people:

“So, Leominster food bank has a regular table offering of any surplus food, and all FareShare food and things like that, that they put up in different places at different times that goes out and anybody can come. It’s about, “This is going to

waste if people don't take it," and anybody can. So, that's a good thing as well."
(Third sector respondent)

Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020

Over the course of our interviews and workshop, various reflections were offered on responses to concerns about rising food insecurity over this time. In addition to freely offered responses, we also used Padlets to gather responses to targeted questions asking respondents to reflect on the responses put in place over the spring and summer (as outlined in the Methods section).

Participants' answers and reflections on responses enacted in Herefordshire over the spring and summer are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

Adaptability of organisations

The adaptability of organisations, and the speed at which they adapted, was praised by some of our stakeholders. This was mentioned in particular reference to food banks:

"They were able to adapt. Sometimes that meant a change of leadership, managing person leading it, sometimes it was volunteers, and in some cases it was both. So they went through a huge overhaul, in the short space of time, as well as having to adapt their delivery model." (Third sector respondent)

"It's quite unbelievable what they coped with in a very short space of time, and how they managed to adapt, being agile enough to turn it around and deliver, particularly to deliver, is quite amazing." (Third sector respondent)

The ability of organisations to reshape and remodel quickly was highlighted as an enabler of the food response seen in Herefordshire over the spring and summer of 2020.

Need to adapt brought about changes that were overdue

Some stakeholders reflected on how the pandemic accelerated changes in organisations that were for the better and that otherwise, may have taken a long time to implement:

"I think the communities continue to be resourceful and, to some extent, self-sufficient, because that's the model they have had to be, and you see that in them, but they have also learnt to cooperate and take on board some new ways of working...I have to say some of the shakeout of old ways of working has also been helpful." (Third sector respondent)

"And the opportunity to accelerate change that you wouldn't have got ten years ago... We talk about dignity and we talk about different ways of delivering it, some organisations get that better than others. I had an observation that for

some food banks it was all about food. Do you know what I mean?” (Third sector respondent)

With reference to the new single provider of hot meals for people who were vulnerably housed in Hereford City, it was shared that this was something that had been advocated for but it took the pandemic to make it happen:

“We were finding that rough sleepers were being trawled around the city and, well, the safeguarding, the issues that go with that, and it was much better to manage if it was centralised. I’d been trying for years to encourage them to cooperate together and have a central provision where we could then add in some helpful things like mental health workers and that sort of thing, and that was just a step too far for them... But when the pandemic hit, by default we got there very quickly.” (Third sector respondent)

Positive feedback from recipients of programmes

Some of our stakeholders shared the positive feedback they received from recipients of various responses enacted over the spring and summer. One came from a council staff respondent who was involved in identifying families to receive food parcels from the Rotary Club:

“I have to say, you know, it was so well appreciated and there was lots of fresh food in there as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Features of Herefordshire’s response to food insecurity that should be continued into the future

In the Padlet, a number of items were listed that were features of responses seen in response to food insecurity in Herefordshire that should be continued into the future:

- Focus on healthy local food/importance of food
- Early identification of where resources are and where to get them
- The ability to pull community together and to lead and own what is needed locally.
- Growing your own
- Stronger community feel
- Ability to adapt
- Community support in rural areas
- “Family focus”
- Community food hubs and use of surplus food
- Healthy food education projects
- Looking for more sustainable long-term ways of meeting food needs – local growing of food and connecting producers with those who need food locally.
- The local authority working closer with charities and food supporting organisations, understanding the needs better.

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Lack of coordination

One concern raised by participants was a lack of coordination between different organisations engaged in the food response in Herefordshire over the pandemic. The consequences of a lack of coordination were identified as two-fold: one, that in some areas, there was a duplication of responses, with the same groups being targeted; but two, that the lack of coordination also meant that gaps in responses could not be identified and filled:

“Talk Community was a good idea in principle but [it] lacked a coordinated response... If every agency provided guidance on how they operated and what they could provide, this would have given a clearer picture of what Herefordshire was capable of and what was lacking.” (Anonymous quote from Padlet)

“I was just going to say that [The Rotary Club] started [food parcels] in the pandemic because I think they wanted to respond in some positive way. [They] jumped in and started this provision, which we didn’t know much about until we heard it was being rolled out. So, it was difficult to coordinate with and understand exactly how it was fitting and who was getting [what] to make sure we weren’t either, you know, missing people or the opposite.” (Third sector respondent)

“Duplication took place in the provision of food during school holidays. Information sharing, even if it was only postcode data, would have helped identify multi-agency involvement.” (Anonymous quote from Padlet)

“I think during COVID it definitely showed us that there were a lot of organisations out there with an interest in food and supporting the food poverty agenda. It was quite quickly apparent that not everybody knew what everybody else was doing. That there did need to be some kind of coordination or at least some discussion. I think as a local authority, we did have more of an overview of what was going on than others. But still because organisations were funding these things themselves, it was up to them what they were doing.” (Council staff respondent)

“We also had a lot of third sector voluntary organisations who stepped up and wanted to offer food and food parcels. There was a lot of that going on. So, coordinating and not managing it, because we did not want to manage it, but trying to ensure there was not overlap and that everybody was getting support. Rather than a small number were getting a lot of support. That was challenging maybe at times.” (Council staff respondent)

The lack of coordination between different actors was attributed to the need to act quickly by one respondent, who also felt that ultimately, it was a positive that there were so many different organisations engaged in the response:

“The difficulty was that there was very little planning time. It was- It needed doing now. Everything was immediate. So, to coordinate the response was a massive task. We were lucky that we had so many organisations that were willing to do so many things.” (Council staff respondent)

Similarly, although it was felt that food parcels provided by the Rotary Club happened without consultation, it was felt that ultimately, it was positive how quickly they set up and provided this support:

“But, anyway, it is completed now and they did a great job of organising it very quickly, and getting it up-and-running, and delivered and linking in with the Council, which is fabulous.” (Third sector respondent, speaking about Rotary Club food parcels)

Another respondent reflected on how the lack of coordination reflected the nature of the rural area:

“Although not very well-coordinated, there are lots of things happening and did happen, which is fairly typical of our rural area, in that communities get on with it and respond to the crisis, but it’s not necessarily very well-coordinated or linked up. That’s not a surprising picture to me, I would say.” (Third sector respondent)

The move to pre-packed food parcels and loss of non-food support

Pre-packed food parcels were identified as one adaptation made by food banks that was not a positive one over the pandemic.

“I think the delivery model of everything packed up, no choice, has not been helpful. I don't know when we will lose that and whether we can move to something.” (Third sector respondent)

Similarly, the shift to “doorstep” pick-up models was viewed as a negative adaptation made by food banks but required by the pandemic:

“The Ross Food Larder - I know they did move to, like, an outside stall very early on, so it’s much safer, but then they did have to stop things like tea and toast they were doing in the local church hall or whatever. So, straightaway, you stop that whole sense of community connecting relationship thing, really. It’s “take your items and go”, really.” (Third sector respondent)

Other features of the response that should not be continued into the future

From our Padlets, the following features of responses enacted over the pandemic were identified as things that should not be continued into the future:

- National food box
- Bringing food into the county from outside providers to meet local need when we could have enhanced local provision and supply over longer term.
- Judgement on why people are asking for help
- Duplication of services
- Organisations popping up to provide support that don’t consult with others already doing this, leading to duplication in some cases.

Barriers to the food response over spring and summer 2020

The following points were listed as barriers to implementing responses to concerns about food insecurity over the pandemic:

- Lack of sign posting. Community members being sent from pillar to post.
- Herefordshire faced delays in setting up power to bulk buy food with local supermarkets. This resulted in multiple trips to supermarkets creating increased COVID risks to staff and volunteers.

The present and looking ahead

Looking beyond the pandemic, our stakeholders mentioned some specific areas of work they hoped to do or had already started. It was felt that the pandemic had raised the profile of poverty in Herefordshire, which could lead to more engagement from the Council with the issue. One stakeholder mentioned working to link schools to food banks more closely or to set up their own food banks, as well as food banks newly looking at providing money advice services at their food banks. Isolation was another focus that food bank providers were looking to address. As before, a move to food share models focused on reducing food waste and involving people being able to choose their items was also highlighted as a direction for some food banks for the future, with the idea that these models reduce stigma associated with food banks.

The Herefordshire's Food Poverty Alliance re-launch in July 2020 included setting new terms of reference including having a remit that is wider than food poverty, with the aspiration to implement a Sustainable Food Places model in Herefordshire. Their new remit was described as:

“It is fair to say [the Alliance] has got a wider remit now. Within the remit, there is still quite a strong focus on food poverty and the health aspects of food and nutrition. But being a rural county as well, we are a food-producing county. The wider remit includes, why are there people struggling to access food in a food-producing country? So looking at it in a wider-systems approach really.” (Third sector respondent).



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Moray Case Study

Gordon, K., Loopstra, R., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Moray Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

Pre COVID-19 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.²⁶³ 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.

²⁶³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

| | |
|--|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Moray | 1 |
| Data overview | 4 |
| About Moray | 4 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 6 |
| Moray Food Plus | 6 |
| Fairer Moray Forum | 8 |
| Moray Council | 9 |
| School food provision | 9 |
| Contracted Meals on Wheels | 9 |
| Meal providers | 9 |
| Early signs of food access issues in the COVID-19 pandemic | 9 |
| Financial vulnerability | 9 |
| Restricted physical access | 10 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic 11 | |
| Moray Food Plus | 11 |
| Moray Council | 17 |
| School food provision | 21 |
| Fairer Moray Forum | 21 |
| Local community organisations | 22 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Moray | 24 |
| Benefits of a local response | 24 |
| Contact and engagement | 25 |
| Mobilised communities | 26 |
| Fairer Moray Forum subgroup | 27 |
| Moving out of full lockdown | 27 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 28 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer | 28 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer | 29 |

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.²⁶⁴ 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

²⁶⁴ <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.²⁶⁵ 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.

²⁶⁵ <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.

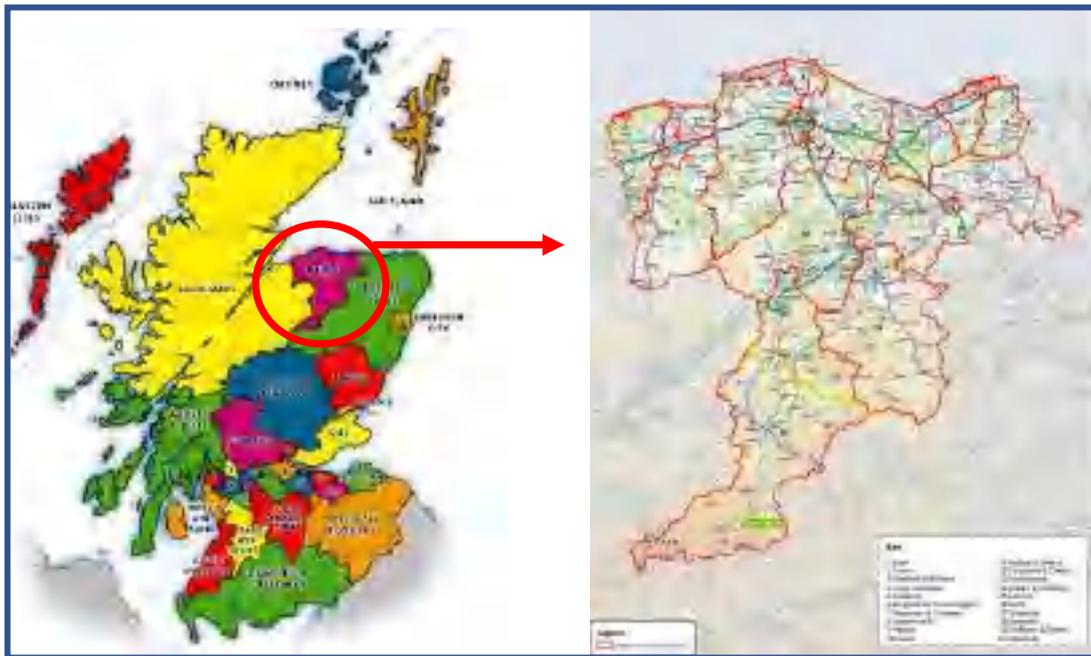
In addition to primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research had a particular focus on the information available 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 Area²⁶⁶

On 30 June 2019, the population of Moray was 95,820. 21.6% of the population were aged 65 and over.²⁶⁷

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.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, the

²⁶⁶ http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_45710.html

²⁶⁷ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/moray-council-profile.html>

²⁶⁸ <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.²⁶⁹

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.²⁷⁰ 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.²⁷¹ 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).

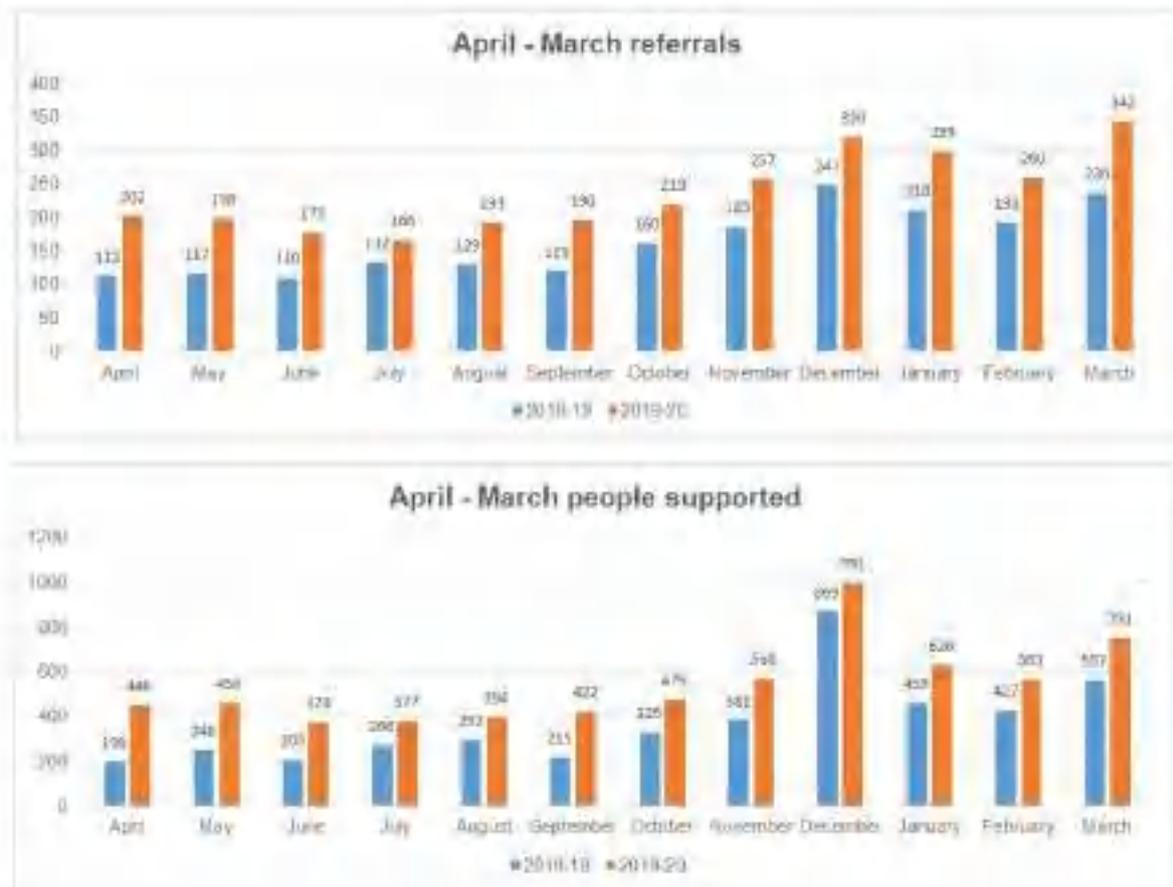
Moray Food Plus ran the only food bank in the local authority area, providing support across the region in the form of emergency food parcels for people in crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the service worked on a referral basis from a range of agencies (about 50) and also accepted self-referrals. 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

²⁶⁹ <http://www.moray.gov.uk/minutes/data/CB20180419/5.%20Understanding%20poverty%20in%20Moray%20-%20Appendix%201%20-%20Poverty%20Profile.pdf>

²⁷⁰ <http://www.moray.gov.uk/minutes/data/CB20180419/5.%20Understanding%20poverty%20in%20Moray%20-%20Appendix%201%20-%20Poverty%20Profile.pdf>

²⁷¹ <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, 2019-2020.²⁷²

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.

²⁷² <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.²⁷³ When the Scottish Government introduced statutory requirements to reduce levels of child poverty this became a key focus of the Forum.²⁷⁴

The Fairer Moray Forum registered as an alliance with the Food Power network and received financial support to develop a food poverty action plan.²⁷⁵ 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.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ <http://morayfoodplus.org.uk/final-poverty-strategy-action-plan.pdf>

²⁷⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

²⁷⁵ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/about/>

²⁷⁶ <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.²⁷⁷ 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.²⁷⁸

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.

²⁷⁷ http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_49552.html

²⁷⁸ <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.²⁷⁹ 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)

²⁷⁹ [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

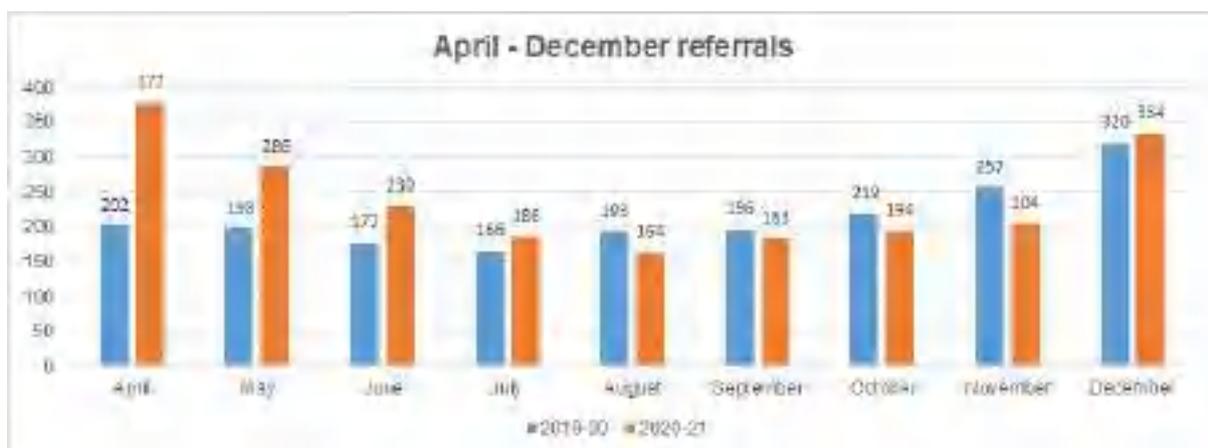
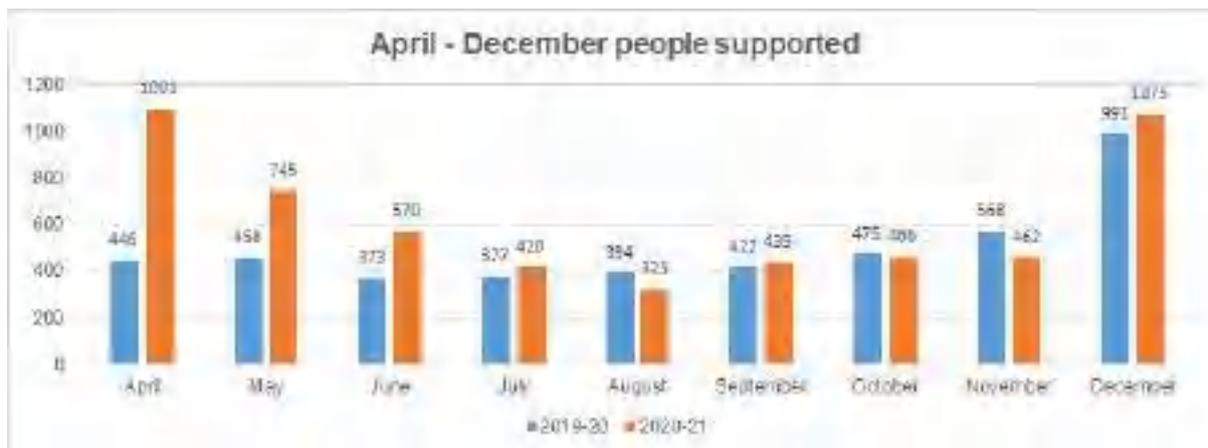
From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic Moray Food Plus was a key actor in supporting food access across the region. They made a number of changes to their services as a result of the pandemic and the conditions imposed by national lockdown, described in more detail below: they continued with an adapted 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.²⁸⁰ 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.²⁸¹ 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

²⁸⁰ <https://www.gcah.org.uk/>

²⁸¹ <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.²⁸² 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.

²⁸² <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.²⁸³

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.

²⁸³ <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.²⁸⁴ 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.

²⁸⁴ <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://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)



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Swansea Case Study

Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Swansea Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Swansea did not have a food poverty alliance or food partnership, though early conversations were happening among Swansea Council staff and community organisations about starting one. Swansea Council did not have dedicated resources for work related to food poverty, but food poverty fell under the Council's "Tackling Poverty" priority. Responses to food poverty included providing referrals to food banks from various departments across the Council, keeping a list of food banks and other free food projects updated on the Council website, and recently, administering a Food Poverty grant with Brexit preparedness funding from the Welsh Government.

Across Swansea, the Council had Local Area Coordinators who worked in neighbourhoods to support vulnerable people in accessing support where needed and helping them find solutions to challenges they were facing. This role included providing support to people using food banks. The Education team at the Council had an "opt out" rather than "opt in" approach to free school meal entitlements, reflecting their wish to ensure low-income families were accessing the help they were entitled to.

There was a mix of food banks in the Trussell Trust network and independent food banks operating. The Swansea Foodbank operated seven distribution centres before the pandemic, and there were approximately six independent food banks operating. In addition to food banks, a community fridge had recently started, and there was a long-standing "food share" project operating from Blaen-y-maes drop-in centre, which also redistributed surplus food. In addition to take-home food provision, Swansea had an active informal network of meal providers who served people who were vulnerably housed and/or isolated every day of the week.

Early in the pandemic, two main concerns were raised as signs that vulnerable people may not be able to access sufficient food over the pandemic. These were: the inability of frontline services like food banks and meal programmes to run due to the loss of volunteers; and insufficient supplies of food for food banks.

In response to these concerns, two major new initiatives were launched in Swansea.

One was the Swansea Together project, an initiative led by Matthew's House (a meal provider) but done in partnership with the Council, the Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS), local business and community groups, and other meal providers, resulted in the daily distribution of meals to people living in temporary accommodation around the city.

The second was the establishment of four food distribution centres by the Council. These housed purchased and donated food in community centres to ensure that food banks were able to maintain an adequate supply of food to distribute over the period from March to August 2020. In addition, when needed in emergency, the Council also provided "crisis packs" for individuals and families facing acute insufficient access to food and who were unable to go to the food bank.

Another important source of food support for food banks in Swansea was from the SCVS, who funded FareShare Cymru memberships for seven (rising to 12) food banks and other food aid providers from April 2020.

Partly attributed to the support from the Council, most food banks remained open over March to September and very few switched to delivery services. They did, however, switch to “doorstep collection”, which impacted the other social services and signposting services they provide.

In addition to these city-wide initiatives, the emphasis was on local action in Swansea. Whether from local businesses, community groups, or neighbour-to-neighbour, it was felt that much of the food response happened at the local level, enabling people to access groceries if isolating and other forms of food help as needed. The outpouring of support from the public and businesses was noted and evident from the number of people recruited for volunteering by the Swansea Council for Voluntary Service over this time.

Key reflections made by our respondents were how well groups from across different sectors worked together; the speed with which Swansea Together and council food distribution hubs were established; and the need to return to having spaces (food bank and drop-in meal programmes and cafés) where people accessing food provisioning services could once again benefit from the social and health services offered in these places. The Swansea Food Poverty Network has now also been established and is meeting monthly, bringing together the various stakeholders that worked on food poverty responses in Swansea over the pandemic.

| | |
|---|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Swansea | 1 |
| Data overview | 5 |
| About Swansea | 5 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 7 |
| Swansea Council..... | 7 |
| Swansea Council for Voluntary Service..... | 9 |
| Swansea Bay University Health Board Nutrition and Dietetic Service..... | 10 |
| Food banks and other food parcel providers | 10 |
| Swansea Mosque Foodbank..... | 11 |
| Community pantry or community fridge projects | 11 |
| Meal providers | 11 |
| Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic | 13 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic 14 | |
| Swansea Together (a city-wide partnership with Matthew’s House, Swansea Council, Swansea Council for Voluntary Service, and others) | 14 |
| Swansea Council..... | 17 |
| Swansea Council for Voluntary Service..... | 24 |
| Swansea Bay University Health Board Nutrition and Dietetic Service..... | 25 |
| Food parcel providers..... | 26 |
| Community pantry or community fridge projects..... | 29 |
| Meal providers | 30 |
| Other third sector organisations..... | 30 |
| The local response..... | 30 |
| Food retailers and local businesses..... | 31 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Swansea | 32 |
| The panic of the first weeks..... | 32 |
| The role of Local Area Coordinators | 32 |
| New ways of working..... | 33 |
| New actors engaged in food provision..... | 33 |
| Funding and food donations..... | 34 |
| Limitations of the Welsh shielding box programme | 35 |
| Target groups of concern..... | 35 |
| A lack of understanding of impacts of food provisioning activity..... | 36 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 37 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer | 37 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Enablers of the food response over spring and summer 2020 | 38 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 2020 | 40 |
| The present and looking ahead | 41 |

Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Swansea

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in Swansea 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

Swansea Council's approach to food poverty prior to the pandemic came under their wider "Tackling Poverty" strategy. Their more direct responses to food poverty included providing referrals to food banks from various departments across the Council and keeping a list of food banks and other free food projects updated on the Council website. In 2019-20, they also administered a Food Poverty grant, which was funded by Welsh Government and available for organisations in preparedness for Brexit. Across Swansea, the Council also had 'Local Area Coordinators' who worked in neighbourhoods to help vulnerable people access support and find solutions to challenges they were facing. This role included providing support to people using food banks. The education team at the Council had an "opt out" rather than "opt in" approach to free school meal entitlements, reflecting their wish to ensure low-income families were accessing the help they were entitled to.

A range of food responses were provided by organisations in the third sector. There was a mix of food banks in the Trussell Trust network and independent food banks operating. The Swansea Foodbank operated seven distribution centres before the pandemic, and there were approximately six independent food banks. In addition to food banks, a community fridge had recently started, and there was a long-standing "food share" project operating from Blaen-y-maes drop-in centre, which distributed surplus food. In addition to take-home food provision, Swansea had an active informal network of meal providers who served people who were vulnerably housed and/or isolated every day of the week. Of particular note for this study is Matthew's House, which ran a "Pay-as-you-feel" meal programme accessed by a range of people including those who were vulnerably housed, such as living in temporary accommodation, B&Bs, hostels, rough sleepers, people living in poverty (particularly people experiencing loneliness and social isolation), and sex workers. On three days a week, chosen to complement when meal programmes were running from other locations, Matthew's House served between 250-350 three-course meals each day.

Other actors included the Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS) who have been a source of support for third sector organisations, providing information and advice, and advocating on behalf of the sector. They became involved in campaigning on ending holiday hunger and fed into the development of the School Holiday Enrichment Programme.²⁸⁵ In addition, they held and distributed food parcels on behalf of the Swansea Foodbank. The Nutrition and Dietetic team from the Swansea Health Board provided training to staff from the SCVS through their Nutrition Skills for Life programme and worked with them on food and nutrition projects.

²⁸⁵ <https://www.wlga.wales/food-and-fun-school-holiday-enrichment-programme>

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Swansea Together

One of the first responses to concerns about rising food insecurity in Swansea during the pandemic was the Swansea Together project, led by Matthew's House. Matthew's House initiated this project as, although in the early days of the pandemic they continued to provide meals via a takeaway service, their clients were expressing significant concerns about where they could access food on other days of the week since other meal providers were not operating. In response, Matthew's House organised a meeting on the 18th of March to bring together other meal providers, representatives from the Council, SCVS, an NHS homeless outreach nurse, and other organisations involved in supporting people who are homeless. Within days, the devised programme was up and running, delivering hot meals to people in temporary accommodation. Meals were prepared in five venues across Swansea (including Matthew's House, the catering company Goggi's a community interest company, The Shared Plate, the Mecca Bingo Hall and the Swansea City AFC and Community Trust).²⁸⁶ The programme ran from the 23rd of March through to August and expanded over this time to provide meals to a wider range of people who were identified through referrals. Over 12 April 2020 to the end of August, the Swansea Together campaign supplied a total of 23,185 meals.²⁸⁷ The delivery of meals was slowly phased out over the last month, replaced by takeaway pick-up instead.

Swansea Council

As well as their participation in the Swansea Together programme, the Council undertook a number of actions to support people with food access. A key part of this was the establishment of four food distribution hubs, primarily set up to support food banks. The hubs, located in community centres, became a storage point for food purchased by the Council from local suppliers as well as donations from businesses. This food was then distributed to food banks, the Swansea Together project and the range of other community food responses operating at a local level. The rationale for this approach was to firstly provide a 'Covid safe' way for organisation to access food and to provide community organisations with a secure and reliable source of food. The Council also started distributing food directly to people in need from the hubs if they were experiencing an acute emergency where referral to a food bank would not be appropriate given the urgency of their situation. The Council also allowed food banks and other food aid projects to repurpose funding they had been awarded for Brexit preparedness towards the COVID-19 response instead.

In addition, the Council set up a Food Administration Team, made up of approximately 14 redeployed council staff from a variety of departments. The team actioned support for people requiring food related support, who were referred to the team from the Council's support helpline. The support provided depended on the persons situation: people who had money but were unable to go out were referred to the SCVS or Local Area Coordinator (see below) for help with shopping, people who were facing financial difficulties were referred to a food bank or received a crisis food parcel from the aforementioned hub if necessary; people who

²⁸⁶ <http://www.goggiscuisine.co.uk/>, <https://www.thesharedplate.co.uk/about>

²⁸⁷ Swansea Council. Coronavirus Support Analysis. Provided by research participant.

were shielding were signposted the national Welsh Government food parcel scheme (which from June was delivered by the Council). The Council's Helpline, Food Administration Team, and food distribution centres all ran through to the end of the shielding scheme in Wales (mid-August).

The Council also expanded the Local Area Coordinators team, increasing from 16 Local Area Coordinators to 38 and covering all geographic areas of Swansea. Local Area Coordinators provided help with shopping, were involved in local volunteer coordination, continued to provide support to local food banks, and engaged in outreach so that community members would know what help was available. They also played a coordination role, especially where neighbourhood and community groups were already active in responding.

The nature of replacements for free school meals evolved over the spring. Initially, cold lunches were offered, requiring families to collect these from schools. Due to concerns about social distancing and low take up, this changed to the provision of weekly shopping bag for families to pick up on Mondays, enabling them to prepare food themselves at home for the week. This food bag system was only in place for a short period of time, as the Council then started providing a cash replacement instead, depositing money directly into parents'/guardians' bank accounts. A number of organisations in Swansea also successfully lobbied the Home Office to allow the free school meal allowance to go onto Aspen Cards to support families of asylum seekers and refugees.²⁸⁸

Other actions by the Council were support for the establishment of a Food Poverty Network, supporting increased awareness and applications to the Welsh Discretionary Assistance Fund and the provision of a hospital discharge service, providing hot meal deliveries for people being discharged from hospital.

SCVS

SCVS played a key role in the recruitment of volunteers over the spring and summer, who were then allocated to the various responses happening across Swansea, including the Swansea Together programme. SCVS was also an important source of funding for organisations. They covered the membership fees of FareShare for 12 organisations, allowing them to receive food every week over April 2020 to March 2021. They also used this funding to provide food parcels themselves to people who could not physically go out to shop, had no means of doing an online shop and/or had no financial resources to purchase food temporarily.

Food banks

The Swansea Foodbank closed about half of their distribution centres. Those that remained open switched to a model where food parcels were distributed from the doorstep of the centre. This was in stark contrast to pre-pandemic when centres operated alongside a cafe and provided a wider range of support. Use of the food bank was high through April and May, but stabilised in the following months. Independent food banks variously adapted their services, with some continuing to operate collection but with social distancing measures in place and possibly requiring pre-booking, and others offering delivery. An additional four

²⁸⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

independent food banks started operating over the course of the pandemic.

Other responses

An existing 'foodshare' project and the Swansea community fridge adapted their services as was necessary, such as providing parcels for collection outside of the venue and allowing community volunteers to collect parcels on peoples behalf. Neighborhood responses, often informal street level support, was also a key source of support for people and local food businesses in Swansea adapted quickly to lockdown conditions, offering takeaway and delivery services within two weeks of the start of lockdown.

Data overview

The full methodology for the local area case study research has been published alongside this report in the Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix. This is available on the project website. Details of the data collected for this particular case study is reported below.

The following case study draws from the following data sources:

- One interview with one person and one interview with two people conducted with representatives from Swansea Council, Swansea Council for Voluntary Service, and Matthew's House.
- One workshop conducted with 7 participants of whom:
 - 3 worked for Swansea Council (one previously interviewed)
 - 4 worked or volunteered with third sector organisations or voluntary groups (one previously interviewed)

In addition to these research participants a further 36 people including from the Council, food aid projects and other third sector organisations were suggested as potential participants by initial interviewees, but did not do so, as shown in table 1. The Swansea Health Board Dietetics Team were not initially suggested to be invited, however they were invited to feed into the research later and subsequently provided data by email correspondence.

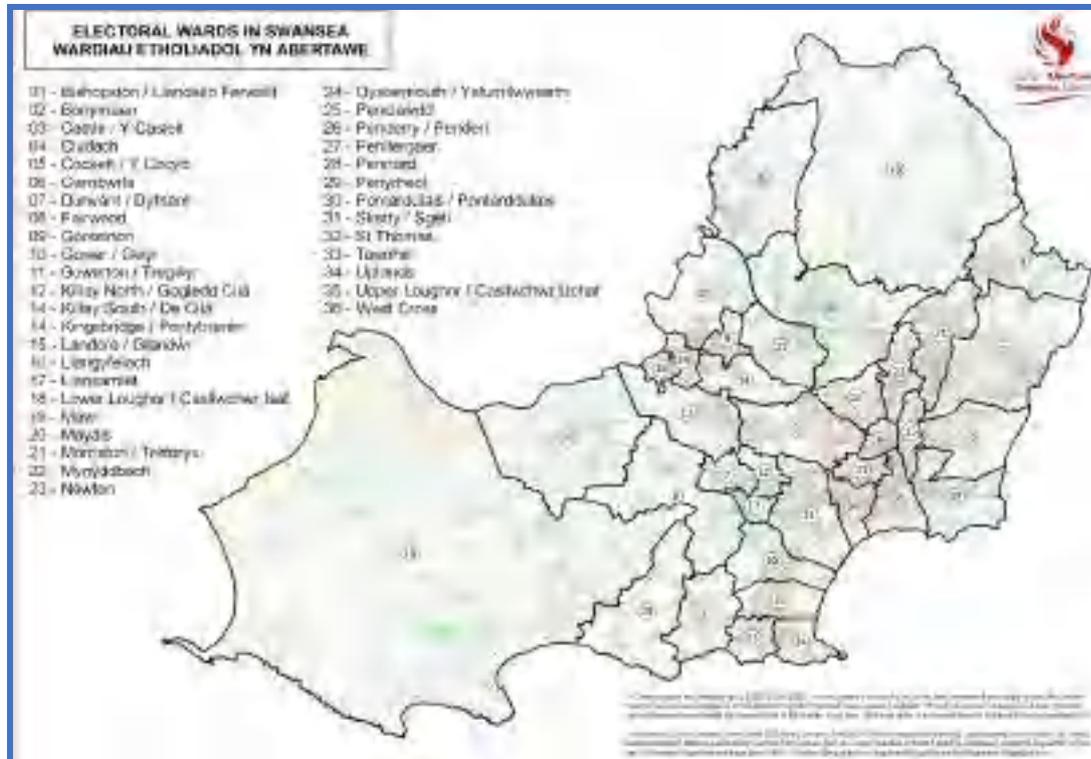
In addition to primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify further sources of information about activities and groups active in responding to food insecurity before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sources such as project reports and action plans were also shared by research participants. Lastly, during the workshop, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Swansea

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. Swansea was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 79%.

Swansea is the second largest city in Wales and has a population of about 247,000 people, of whom about 35,720 are 70 years of age or older.²⁸⁹ There are 36 electoral wards, as shown below:²⁹⁰

Figure 1: Electoral wards in Swansea.



Source: <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/wardmaps>

According to Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation data from 2019, of the 148 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) in Swansea, 17 (11.5%) were among the 10% most deprived areas in Wales, which is a proportion that is above the average.²⁹¹ However, at the local authority level, Swansea has a lower proportion of LSOA among most deprived than seven other local authorities in Wales, including Cardiff (18.2% of LSOA among most deprived).

Before the pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Swansea was 3.3% in January 2020, but this rose to 5.9% in July 2020. It was shared by some of our respondents that according to the Department for Work and Pensions, Swansea fared better economically than other areas in Wales, and our respondents attributed this to Swansea having some major employers, such as Amazon, who took on new workers over the pandemic.

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 37% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

²⁹⁰ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/wardmaps>

²⁹¹ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/wimd2019>

²⁹² <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic

Swansea Council

Addressing poverty

The Council has a Swansea Poverty Partnership Forum, facilitated by their Tackling Poverty Service. The group met quarterly and brought together organisational stakeholders to “align resources and develop collaborative working on the tackling poverty agenda.”²⁹³

In 2017, the Council published a “Tackling Poverty Strategy”, outlining a three-year plan over 2017-2020.²⁹⁴ Among the many actions outlined in the strategy, there was the goal to continue to deliver advice services for council tax and housing benefit entitlements and to continue to provide support and advice to council tenancy in arrears and with financial difficulties; and a plan to newly target services around income maximisation. The plan also included expanded Local Area Coordination approaches (described below).

Support workers from the Council also may have helped people make applications to the Welsh Government’s Discretionary Assistance Fund.

It was highlighted that food fell under the Tackling Poverty remit, though without dedicated resource:

“We don’t have a dedicated team looking at food poverty within the Council... We have done in the past, we don’t at the moment. Food poverty does fall under the tackling poverty priority, but we don’t have a dedicated resource looking at food. Obviously, when COVID - hit, access to food became a priority for Swansea Council.” (Council staff respondent)

Local Area Coordinators

The Council has had Local Area Coordinators that work across the city in wards offering help and support to community members.²⁹⁵ They support older people, disabled people, people with mental health problems, and their families and carers. Their work involves supporting people to access information, being a listening ear and supporting people to make choices and feel more in control, and helping find ways for people to do the things they need or want to do, develop and use personal and local networks, and access support and services where required. They are able to visit people in their homes, and people who are isolated are a key target group.

Food banks have been one place where Local Area Coordinators work. In a case study of the role of local area coordinators, shared in the Council’s Poverty Strategy, a Local Area Coordinator met someone in a food bank and helped him to identify useful resources for

²⁹³ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/povertypartnershipforum>

²⁹⁴ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/povertystrategy>

²⁹⁵ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/localareacoordination>

addressing his housing and transportation issues.²⁹⁶ One of our respondents also shared their experience of working as a Local Area Coordinator in a food bank:

“There have been frequent occasions at Gorseinon Foodbank where I’ve been in attendance and somebody can’t walk home. They’ve managed to get down on crutches or off a bus and managed to make the walk and they’ve got the food parcel. They just can’t carry it home because there are three big bags of tins. Somebody there, either one of the volunteers or on occasion I’ve transported people back to their house.

It’s often on that drive home back to their house with the food parcels that there might be a bit more of a conversation around the circumstances that have arisen to need them to go to the food bank. It’s whenever those conversations start, we can look at ways to resolve that in the long term.” (Council staff respondent)

School food provision

Families eligible for free school meals in Swansea apply through the Council’s website and most schools also had breakfast clubs.²⁹⁷ The Council’s education department had the following approaches to school provision and working with schools, as described by one council staff respondent. This quote also suggests that schools were also involved in food parcel provision to families in need at times:

“Prior to COVID pupils could get entitlement for free school meals. What we worked with our benefits team on is that it would be an opt out rather than an opt in. If parents are applying for Council Tax benefit or anything else through the Council, unless they’d checked a box to say they didn’t want to be eligible for free school meals, we’d automatically give the child that entitlement.

As well as that, our schools work well on admission promoting free school meals, putting leaflets out to everybody that’s applying to try and get that entitlement up as high as they can. Obviously, the point of that is to get a hot meal in the child while they’re at school. This wouldn’t have covered at the time then holidays, if somebody was off ill or whatever.

All bar one of our primary schools runs the free breakfast club as well. I think the intention of that was more looking at areas of poverty and things like that. I think it’s developed into becoming more of a childcare type approach in a lot of cases. We offer that free food there...

We also supported schools administratively with the free school milk. All children then in the infant’s section had an entitlement to a milk allowance every day. With schools as well, a lot of them do have links with Asda, Tesco and the like. I know they do work with families themselves that are the more needy, the supermarkets and they do get food through the school that they’ll hand out to parents.” (Council staff respondent)

²⁹⁶ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/povertystrategy>

²⁹⁷ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/freeschoolmeals>

The Council was also involved in school holiday provision through the Welsh Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP). It ran for the first time in Swansea in 2019, and the Council was intending to run it again in 2020.

Meals on Wheels

The Council has not had their own or a contracted Meals on Wheels service. Our respondents did not know of any council services aimed at addressing potential barriers to physical access to food for older people or people with disabilities before the pandemic.

Work with food banks and food poverty organisations in Swansea

In late 2019/early 2020, the Swansea Council's Tackling Poverty Section administered a Welsh Government grant scheme intended to help organisations prepare for the potential impacts of Brexit on their food supplies and demand. In Swansea, this fund was called the Food Poverty Grant and about £111,000 was available for organisations to apply for. The Council distributed these funds to food banks and other organisations involved in food poverty work in Swansea. This included funding for the launch of Swansea Community Fridge (see below).

The Council was a referral agent for food banks. Requests for help with food access due to a lack of money across the Council were likely met with a referral to a food bank, as reflected in the following quote:

“The Council didn't provide food. Frontline council staff would have made a referral to a food bank. Most food banks in Swansea require a referral, so support workers can make referrals for people, and there are a number of food banks that will take self-referrals. For example, in our contact centre in our main civic building, the team there would have (pre-COVID), have been able to give food bank vouchers. That's if someone is saying, “I don't have the money to buy food,” then a food bank referral can be made. Unfortunately, that is the situation. What we need is people to have enough money to buy food and not have to have food banks.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council kept an up-to-date list of food banks on their webpage, providing details on opening hours, referral requirements, and contact information.²⁹⁸

Swansea Council for Voluntary Service

The Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS) is an umbrella organisation for the third sector in Swansea. It is a source of support for third sector organisations, providing information and advice, and also advocating on behalf of the sector.²⁹⁹ It is also involved in direct project provision for the Swansea community in various ways. Their work specifically related to food poverty is described below.

The SCVS has been a part of the Swansea Poverty Partnership Forum and in 2013, became involved in campaigning on ending holiday hunger. They fed into the development of the

²⁹⁸ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/foodbanks>

²⁹⁹ <https://www.scvs.org.uk/>

SHEP and a cross-parliamentary review on holiday hunger. In addition, they held and distributed food parcels on behalf of the Swansea Foodbank:

“We’ve always had an active part in hunger and food poverty for the last decade. To the point where in 2015 Swansea CVS started providing its own food parcels because as a CVC we’re quite unusual. We have a lot of frontline projects within our CVC. Those frontline staff were seeing those food poverty needs as well. In partnership with the Trussell Trust, we started collecting food parcels. We always had a supply in the office for the projects to be able to access and take out to families they were working with.” (Third sector respondent)

Swansea Bay University Health Board Nutrition and Dietetic Service

In Wales, public health falls under Health Boards, not local authorities. We received written input from a representative of the Nutrition and Dietetic team about how they supported responses to concerns about food access over the pandemic. Before the pandemic, it was shared that they had provided training to staff from the SCVS through their Nutrition Skills for Life programme and worked with them on food and nutrition projects:

“We often work together as partners on food and nutrition projects therefore links with SCVS has been well-established and communication channels open [before the pandemic]” (Public Sector employee – Written submission)

Food banks and other food parcel providers

Swansea has many food banks in the Trussell Trust network and independent food banks. They were described as providing both food parcels as well as social support before the pandemic:

“In terms of the food banks, the food banks that I’ve attended in Swansea are always more than just food. The one in Gorseinon, which is a Trussell Trust one that I’ve been going to for about five years now, has got a café there. It’s a place for people to socialise, which is often as important as the food. The volunteers then can strike up conversations. They’ll be aware of the regular people who come in. They’ll be aware if something has gone worse in people’s lives. Then they’ll help them address that...” (Council staff respondent)

Swansea Foodbank

Swansea Foodbank is part of the Trussell Trust network and has eight distribution centres across the city. In addition to offering food parcels from their distribution centres, they also have provided food parcels for organisations to be available for their clients. These included SCVS, as mentioned, as well as health visitors and the Council. This was so clients could be provided with food parcels upon these organisations meeting with them or in emergencies when food banks were not open.

Independent food parcel providers

Before the pandemic, it was shared that there were six independent food banks operating. Below, we provide some details of two independent food banks.

Swansea East Side food bank

One example of an independent food bank operating in Swansea is Swansea East Side Food Bank. They have been operating since 2014 and accept self-referrals as well as referrals from organisations. Before COVID, they had already felt their food bank project had reached its limits, as shared below:

“We know our patch, I think, well enough to take self-referrals, but we don’t advertise it. Before COVID we got to a point where we were thinking this has grown to a point now where it’s actually blocking the other things I want to do. We’re based in a little mission hall sort of chapel. It was just taking up more and more space.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to providing food, before the pandemic, they partnered with Shelter Cymru, Mind Cymru, and the University Law Clinic, to offer debt advice, mental health support, and legal advice from their food bank, respectively.

The Swansea East Side food bank also provided “emergency food boxes” to the Red Cross local office and Police Community Support Officers.

Swansea Mosque Foodbank

From our desk-based research, we learned about the Swansea Mosque Foodbank, which began operating in January 2015.³⁰⁰ They have required a referral voucher from social service agencies for people to access food. They have provided pre-packed boxes of food items intended to last recipients for two weeks.

Community pantry or community fridge projects

Blaen-Y-Maes Drop-in Centre’s Foodshare

The Blaen-Y-Maes drop in centre opened in 2012 and runs a food sharing project, described variously as a food co-op, “foodshare”, or food hub. From our desk-based research, we gathered they distribute surplus food provided from Lidl and Marks and Spencer. They have not operated a referral system, and it did not appear that membership was required.

Swansea Community Fridge

The Swansea Community Fridge is a project run by the housing charity Goleudy in Swansea.³⁰¹ The project received support from the Council’s Food Poverty grant to launch in 2020. Their mission is to distribute fresh food that would otherwise go to waste for free to the community. The project collects food from retail businesses, restaurants, and individuals. There is no membership fee to access the fridge, nor eligibility criteria to access the food. People are instructed to only take what they need.

Meal providers

Our project stakeholders highlighted that there was a lot of food provision available to people who were vulnerably housed in Swansea before the pandemic. Hot meals were available seven days a week from different agencies. Below, we describe the work of two of these projects.

³⁰⁰ <https://www.swanseamosque.org/foodbank>

³⁰¹ <https://goleudy.org/>

Matthew's House

Matthew's House began operating a meal programme, Matt's Café, in March 2017. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was shared with us that Matthew's House was running what they called "outreach days" on three days of the week, specifically chosen to complement when meal programmes were running from other locations. This involved serving meals to people from 10am to 3pm. Usually around 250 three-course meals were served in a day to 150 to 180 people, but this could have been up to 350 meals. About 40 people would be served at a time. The meal programme ran on a "Pay-as-you-feel" basis with no expectation that everyone will be able to pay. The demographic of people who would come for the meal programme was diverse, including people who were vulnerably housed, such as people living in temporary accommodation, B&Bs, hostels, rough sleepers, people living in poverty (particularly people experiencing loneliness and social isolation), and sex workers.

Matt's Café was run mostly by volunteers, over 100, referred to by one third sector respondent as their "army of volunteers". It had only two staff members. The food that made up their meals was mostly "intercepted food waste" (Third sector respondent), which they collected from supermarkets around Swansea. Before the pandemic, they were collecting food 26 times per week.

In addition to offering meals, they provided what they referred to as their "dignity packs", which included sanitary and hygiene items. They also had a shower that rough sleepers could use and a laundry service. People were welcome to stay and 'hang out' in the café, having a cup of tea, chatting with volunteers, or reading a paper.

They also used their food resources to support other organisations. For example, they would provide meals for asylum-seeker support groups or Women's Aid.

Zac's Place

Our desk-based research identified Zac's Place is an urban mission church and outreach for people who are poor and marginalized, particularly people who are vulnerably housed.³⁰² Before the pandemic, they provided many services for people from their centre, including meal provision alongside other health and social services. This included a daily breakfast provision for rough sleepers from 7.30 a.m. to 9 a.m. On their website, it was reported that about 25 people would receive breakfast on a typical morning.³⁰³ They also ran a soup kitchen on Thursday evenings, providing up to 45 meals each session.

Other meal providers

Other meal programmes operating across the city targeted people vulnerable to social isolation. Swansea University Discovery Student Project ran a large community meal programme. The Older People's Information Centre (TOPIC) provided meals to older people who found it difficult to provide themselves with adequate food. The Swansea Carers Centre provided support and meals to people with dementia. Faith groups and the Christ Well Café were other types of organisations running community meals for people facing inadequate food access.

³⁰² <http://www.zacsplace.org/about-us/>

³⁰³ <http://www.zacsplace.org/zacs-place-3/supporting-those-in-crisis/>

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

One council staff member reached out to food banks in mid-March to gather their key concerns. Three areas of concern were identified:

“Number one was supply of food. [Two], expecting or anticipating a potential increase in demand because of what was happening with the pandemic. [And three] volunteers, many of which are vulnerable themselves. Food banks rely on volunteers, the ability to stay open and keep doing what they do. For me, I think those were the three areas of concern.” (Council staff respondent)

These were echoed by our respondents who worked in food banks, as shared below:

“I think pretty much instantly we had about three times as many people come in for food [to our food bank]. There were definitely a few weeks where we were holding our breath and thinking, how is this going to work? Just straightaway our donations dropped right off because our donations come from often groups of people who meet together either in workplaces, churches or social groups. Obviously, those groups weren’t meeting. Even if people did want to donate, they couldn’t get the type of food we wanted or we needed from supermarkets, like tins of tomatoes. There were definitely a few weeks where our stocks depleted incredibly rapidly.” (Third sector respondent)

An independent food bank also described the increase in need for their services, not only from people who were financially vulnerable, but from people just unable to access food:

“Yes, we saw the spike [in early demand]. We had people ringing up because they just weren’t able to get food. They said, “We can buy it from you.” We said, “We just can’t handle that, I’m sorry. We can’t account for it. We’re a charity, we’re not a marketing business.” (Third sector respondent)

Meal programmes having to close was another key indicator that people would not be able to access their usual sources of food in Swansea. As shared, this was mostly due to a dramatic fall in volunteer capacity:

“We had 90 volunteers roughly. Overnight, over a week, we lost about 50, 60. And you could probably say that to every other outreach [was affected in the same way]. Because of the age of volunteers often, and the vulnerabilities of volunteers... in general, most volunteer groups lost about 70% of their workforce. And I know another group who had 11 volunteers, so when you lose 70% of them, they had 3 left, and they had to close.” (Third sector respondent)

In turn, these closures translated to concern about where the usual patrons of these meal services would be able to access food. One third sector respondent shared that in the early days of the pandemic, he was seeing “panic” in the eyes of people they had been serving over the past years, as shared in the following quote:

“It was just mass worry. People were like, “Where am I going to eat tomorrow? What am I going to eat now?” And we didn’t plan for this. Nobody planned for it, did they?... it was panic, mass panic in the eyes of people we had been looking after for the last 12, 24, 36 months. And when people are coming to you, going,

“What do we do?” and they are people you already look after, people you already support...” (Third sector respondent)

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Swansea Together (a city-wide partnership with Matthew’s House, Swansea Council, Swansea Council for Voluntary Service, and others)

One of the first responses to concerns about rising food insecurity in Swansea during the pandemic was the Swansea Together project. Because it featured so prominently in our data collection, it was one of the first food-based responses set up in Swansea, and involved numerous actors, we describe it here.

Swansea Together was initiated very early in the pandemic by Matthew’s House in response to seeing people who were vulnerably housed being unable to access usual daily meal provision offered across the city. In March, Matthew’s House initiated a takeaway service instead of closing, but as above, their patrons were coming to them saying that did not know if or where they would be able to get a meal the following day.

In response, Matthew’s House organised a meeting very early (18th March), bringing together their network of people and organisations who they worked in coordination with across the city. This included other meal providers, representatives from the Council, SCVS, an NHS homeless outreach nurse, and other organisations involved in supporting people who are homeless, such as Crisis. The aim was to provide a meal service to ensure that people who are vulnerably housed, many of whom had been moved off the streets and put into temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfasts and hostels, were still able to have regular access meals.

Within days, the programme was up and running, delivering hot meals to people in temporary accommodation:

“I think he called that meeting on 18th March, by the Friday the 20th, we’d put the call out for COVID volunteers, and I’m pretty sure the first volunteers were allocated and the first lot of meals were being prepped on week beginning 23rd March.” (Third sector respondent)

Matthew’s House led the project, coordinating the daily delivery of meals around the city. There were significant challenges to ensuring meals could reach people, as shared in the following quote:

“We didn’t cook every day of the week, but we logistically managed and delivered every day. It was a logistical nightmare... We had to gain the trust and confidence of housing agencies, to get the details of where people are staying, who is staying where. And when you work with vulnerable people, there are a lot of things where they’ve been kicked out of this B&B and now, they’re moving into this one. So, every single day, we had to be ready between 6:00pm and 7:00pm to get the distribution lists for when the volunteers turned up at 7:00am the next morning to start the cooking, to know where, how much, when. And you would have some B&Bs, one day there would be 26 people in there, the next day there

would be 13. And there were two fires during the first four months, so B&Bs, 3:00am, you'd have 15 people being put somewhere else. So, they were mad days..." (Third sector respondent)

The project delivered about 150 meals a day. Matthew's House did about 30-40% of the cooking and the remaining meal preparation happened in four other venues across the city.³⁰⁴ These included Goggi's (a catering company in Swansea) and The Shared Plate (a community interest company that does catering and runs a community café in Swansea).³⁰⁵ Other venues included the Mecca Bingo Hall, which provided its facilities and food to prepare meals, and the Swansea City AFC and Community Trust. The Swansea City AFC's head chef and catering team cooked about 180 meals in the Liberty Stadium on Saturdays, which were then packed and distributed by the Swansea Together team.

In addition to the logistics of delivering food, another challenge was where to receive and store food donations and surplus food from supermarkets. Due to potential COVID-19 transmission from food packages and loss of volunteer force to continue to pick up surplus food, Matthew's House stopped picking up surplus food from supermarkets at this time:

"One of the decisions I made in early days was, "I don't know where that food is coming from." I wasn't happy with food coming into the building, that 400 panic-buyers had picked up and put back, walked past. And I couldn't keep it safe. We also lost about 70% of our collectors as well, so we couldn't keep up with that collection, even if it was there and it was safe, straightaway." (Third sector respondent)

Described later below, the Council set up food distribution hubs during the pandemic. This idea was described as first coming from Matthew's House, since they needed safe places to store food:

"I coordinated with the Council, I said, "I need these centres all over the city, donation hubs." So, the public can donate food. And [the Council] did, they opened four of them... So, when Costa shut down, they delivered everything there. And then what happened was I'd call them and go, "What have you got? I need this, this and this," and then the Council drivers would drop a van of all donations down. We came up with an idea of we needed rotational areas. Obviously guidance [from Public Health Wales] is the bug is 72 hours. So, if we could sit food for 72 hours and have seven stations in that community centre, a big, huge hall, then you know that, on a Thursday, I can take the Monday pile and it's free and sanitised, self-sanitised, and there has been no-one touching it." (Third sector respondent)

In addition to setting up these food distribution hubs, the Council was involved in the Swansea Together campaign through providing council staff and vans, re-deployed from other jobs, to deliver meals. They did this for about five months from March 23rd. They also provided some funding from their Food Poverty Fund.

³⁰⁴ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/57273/4000-hot-meals-provided-for-vulnerable-in-Swansea>

³⁰⁵ <http://www.goggiscuisine.co.uk/> , <https://www.thesharedplate.co.uk/about>

Other funding sources for Matthew’s House for this project were other charities that were not continuing to operate their usual programmes. SVSC also provided funding for them to have a FareShare membership to enable them to receive food weekly from April through to March 2021 (described later below).

The programme ran from the 23rd of March through to August and expanded over this time to also provide meals to people that were vulnerable for other reasons, not just those who were homeless or precariously housed. These were people identified through referrals, the helpline or local authority. They also provided meals to three women’s refuges.

Over 12 April 2020 to the end of August, the Swansea Together campaign supplied a total of 23,185 meals.³⁰⁶ The delivery of meals was slowly phased out over the last month, replaced by takeaway pick-up instead. In part, this was because groups that had been a part of the project delivery, such as the Swansea City Football Club and council staff, were returning to their usual roles. Similarly, the bingo hall that had been used as a site for food preparation was re-opening. Takeaway also became possible because many of the sites that had been shut were re-opening. At the time of our interview (November 2020), the Swansea Together project was operating a seven-day-a-week takeaway service from 11.30-1pm in four locations across the city (Matthew’s House, St. Mary’s Church, Zac’s Place, and i58 (City Church)), serving about 80-100 people a day. As shown in Figure 2, this provision was targeted towards people who are vulnerably housed and in need of food.

Figure 2: Takeaway food provision locations across Swansea over autumn 2020.



³⁰⁶ Internal document shared by participant.

Swansea Council

It was felt that the early meeting on the 18th of March with Matthew's House attended by council staff was critical for putting food access at the fore of council activities during the pandemic, as expressed below:

"I attended that meeting. When I came back to colleagues, it really helped raise food as a priority for the Council. That was relayed to the cabinet member and Swansea Council then made access to food a priority for the pandemic." (Council staff respondent)

Support for food banks

One of the first actions of the Council in support of food banks was to allow food banks to use the funding they had previously granted them through Food Poverty grants to instead respond to any new needs they had arising from the pandemic. They could deviate from what they had originally outlined they were going to do in their applications and given flexibility in how they could spend the funds to meet new demands.

In response to concerns raised by food banks about not having a sufficient supply of food, the Council set up food distribution hubs early in the lockdown, making use of four community centres that had been closed on account of the lockdown. As above, these hubs also provided food to the Swansea Together project. The Council purchased food for these distribution centres, using local suppliers such as Castell-Howell. They also received donations from local and national businesses. It was reported that as of June, more than 60 companies had provided donations.³⁰⁷ These were not centres for the public to access, but instead for the purpose of storing food so that it could be available to food banks as needed. The Council team liaised with food banks regularly, and if they were running out of food, the Council's food distribution centre would provide a supply.

This food went out to existing food banks, and in some cases, enabled them to re-open if they had to close early in the pandemic, but it also supported new food parcel distribution efforts, as described:

"We did have a couple of food banks that closed. I think solutions were found, partly probably because of the help that we put in place, those food banks did reopen. Or a different version of it, and then other new food banks were established as well...I'm talking about neighbours, little community groups, things that were set up really quickly...some of those groups decided, "Actually our neighbourhood could use something like a food store." There were some projects that were set up that were new throughout." (Council staff respondent)

Emergency food parcels

The primary aim of the food distribution centres was to support food banks, but as time progressed through the pandemic, they also became places from which the Council would assemble and deliver their own food parcels. These were intended for people in acute emergencies, where referral to a food bank would not be appropriate given the urgency of their situation, as described by one council staff member:

³⁰⁷ <https://www.wales247.co.uk/thousands-benefit-from-foodbank-support-in-swansea>

“Instead of calls saying, “I’m going to run out of food in three days’ time, could you help me?”, there were calls saying, “I’ve got no food, I’ve got no money now. I don’t know how I can eat or how I’m going to feed the children tonight.” You need quick responses. Some of the food banks expanded their hours and did what they could, but there were moments in time where it’s like “I need an emergency parcel out and there’s no available solution”. So the food distribution centres actually did that as well. They provided a back-up for when another solution couldn’t be found.” (Council staff respondent)

COVID-19 Helpline and connecting people with food

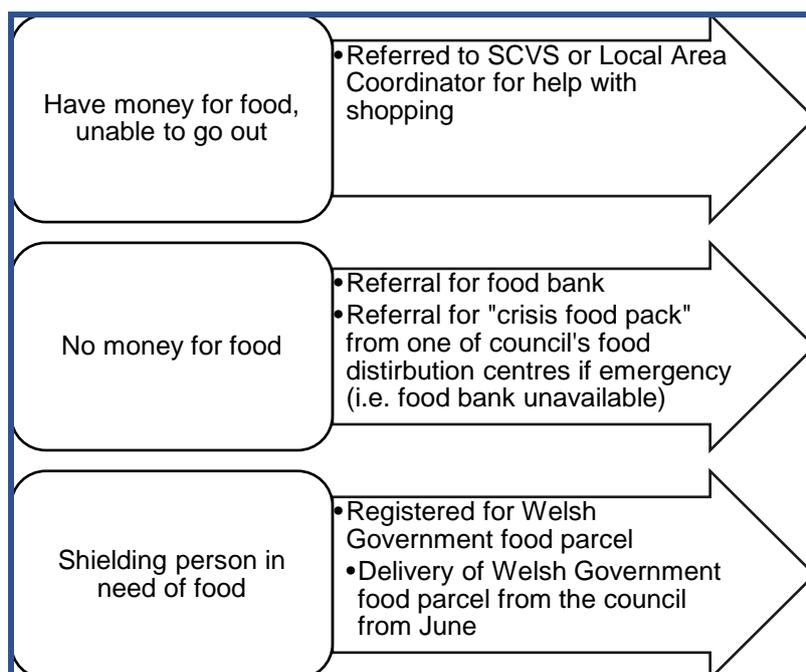
The Council established a COVID-19 helpline in early April that was staffed by people re-deployed from across the Council, such as library staff. The helpline received any kind of enquiry, but food access was a key concern.

The Council's Tackling Poverty section set up a Food Administration Team, made up of approximately 14 redeployed council staff from a variety of departments. This team established a referral form for the Helpline Team so that information could be collected on the nature of food needs. These referrals were passed on from the Helpline Team to the Food Administration Team who would then be the team to action a response. Staff on this team were assigned to different wards across the city and within each of these wards, asked to connect with the food banks operating there:

“One of the early things the staff did in that team was to make contact with the local food banks, so they could introduce themselves, say what they were doing and work out how the food banks would like to receive the referrals. They’d set up that system effectively. That was based on a ward basis.” (Council staff respondent)

Depending on the nature of help needed and indicated in the referral form, the following responses outlined in Figure 3 below would be actioned:

Figure 3: Actions taken by Swansea Council Food Administration Team in response to calls regarding food access to the COVID-19 Helpline.



As indicated in above figure, in the middle of the lockdown, the Council took over the “last mile” delivery of the Welsh Government’s shielding food parcel scheme in June. This decision was in response to the following concerns:

“We found that there were issues, there were parcels going missing or stolen. We knew that we could do, for want of a better way of describing it, a better job of delivery. So we had all the parcels delivered to one location in Swansea and then a council team got involved and they took over the delivery. The beauty of that was that A) they know Swansea, but B) they could add more care to the delivery of the parcels; they could take more time on making sure that that parcel got to the individual... We really, really improved the success rate of getting a parcel to the individual” (Council staff respondent)

The Council’s Helpline, Food Administration Team, and food distribution centres all ran through to the end of the shielding scheme in Wales (mid-August). This was felt to be because need had lessened but also because of changes in staff capacity:

“The food distribution centres, the COVID helpline and food help administration team ran through to the end of the shielding scheme. We did keep the helpline open longer. We were finding that the amount of calls were tailing off in terms of help that people needed. One of the main drivers for the decision being taken to close the work of the help admin team, the helpline and the food distribution centres was that all the staff were working on those activities needed to go back to their normal day jobs at that point.” (Council staff respondent)

It was also felt that food banks were no longer struggling with food supplies by the end of August, which was affirmed by our participants who worked in food banks.

A council press release in August 2020 highlighted what help would remain available to people in Swansea after the shielding food parcel scheme ended.³⁰⁸ Of about 9,000 people on the shielding list in Swansea, about 500 of them were reported to have received a food box per week from the Welsh Government scheme over the spring and summer. It was highlighted that after the 11th of August, people on the shielding list could continue to access priority supermarket delivery slots, delivery of food from local food businesses (listed on the council's webpage), or that they could contact the SCVS to receive help with shopping from a volunteer. Help from food banks was also pointed to.³⁰⁹

Hospital Discharge Initiative

In partnership with the Health Board, SCVS and Wiltshire Farm Foods (among other providers), the Council provided a new hospital discharge service over the first lockdown. Their role was to fund and provide the delivery of meals for people being discharged from hospital. The SCVS provided other elements of the service, such as help with food shopping, prescription collection, and befriending services.

Local Area Coordinator Expansion

Before the pandemic, Local Area Coordinators were not active in all parts of Swansea. Since the lockdown resulted in staff in other roles having capacity, the Council was able to expand the team to cover all geographic areas of Swansea. The team grew from 16 Local Area Coordinators to 38.³¹⁰

“About a month into the crisis, we got assigned 22 temporary staff from other parts of the Council. People joined us from museum, from libraries, from sports and employment teams. They started to get involved in areas we haven't covered traditionally.” (Council staff respondent)

During the lockdown, Local Area Coordinators provided help with shopping and were involved in local volunteer coordination. They also continued to provide support to local food banks, sometimes taking on delivery of their food parcels (as described below, see Gorsein food bank) and helping establish a new food bank in Penlan.³¹¹ They also engaged in outreach so that community members would know what help was available:

“There was an early recognition there are a lot of people not on Facebook or online at all. One of our first objectives was to get leaflets dropped to all the houses in the community so they'd know what was available and where they could call for it. Actually, quite a lot of people got in touch from those phone numbers whenever they were sent...we did find we were delivering [food bank] food parcels to people who weren't necessarily facing hardship, but they didn't have access to their money. They didn't have cash sitting in the house. They couldn't go to a cash machine and they didn't have anybody to do that for them. We were on occasion arranging food parcels for people in those circumstances.

³⁰⁸ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/58844/Alternative-food-support-in-place-for-people-shielding>

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

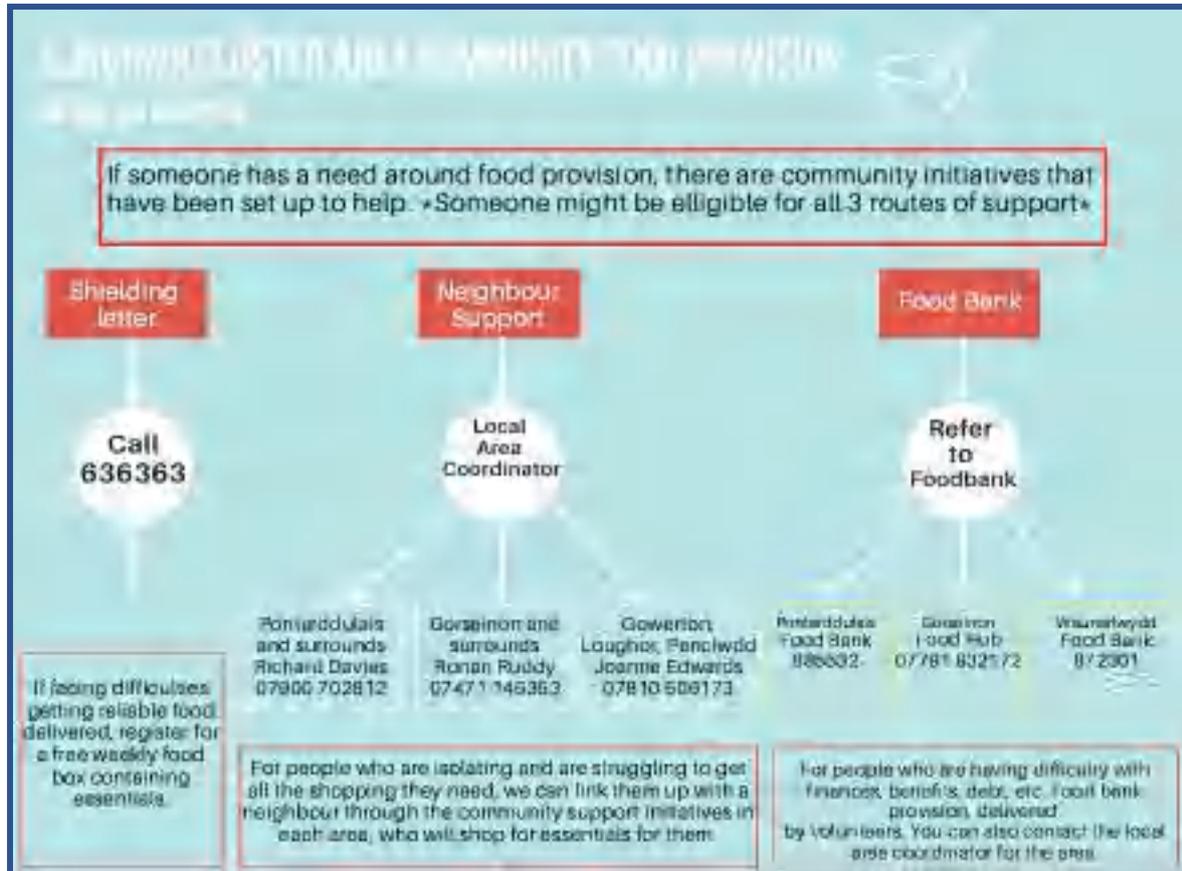
³¹⁰ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/57164/Every-community-now-has-local-area-coordinators-on-the-front-line>

³¹¹ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/57120/Neighbourhood-foodbank-is-a-big-hit>

Sometimes it was with them agreeing they'd make a donation as soon as they were able to." (Council staff respondent)

An example of a signposting leaflet provided by the local area coordinators in one area of Swansea is provided in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Signposting to COVID-19 help available in Llŵchwr area in Swansea



Local Area Coordinators also played a coordination role, especially where neighbourhood and community groups were already active in responding:

"I think one of the benefits I found is whenever we were involved early, we were able to join the dots together quicker and help organise it a bit. The drive definitely came from people on the ground whenever they realised their neighbours were going to be in difficulty." (Council staff respondent)

Money advice or cash-based assistance

Whilst we did not hear specifically about any work to expand the Council's work on money maximisation or to newly provide cash-based assistance in Swansea over the pandemic, it was felt that awareness and use of the Welsh Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) was increased, as reflected in the following quotes:

“I think the Discretionary Assistance Fund certainly came into its own during the lockdown, doing the pandemic, this would have been widely distributed...it was referred to much more; we could support people with applying for it, that kind of thing...” (Third sector respondent)

“I would expect that the awareness of the DAF for frontline workers across Swansea has [grown]; more people will be familiar with it and there’ll be people who will have made applications on behalf of people, whereas they might not have before. And the flexibilities and the additional funding that was put into it... [DAF data for Swansea] does show the demand and it shows the trends over this year.” (Council staff respondent)

As reflected in the quote above, the number of applications for Emergency Assistance Payments from the Discretionary Assistance Fund significantly increased in Swansea following the introduction of greater flexibilities to the fund in May 2020. We received the following figures from one of the Council participants:

Figure 5: Emergency Assistance Payments applications and awards for Swansea from Discretionary Assistance Fund (January-September 2020).

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of applications received | 1297 | 1161 | 1791 | 1655 | 1669 | 1791 | 2735 | 2248 | 2501 |
| Number of applications awarded | 498 | 452 | 964 | 748 | 875 | 1595 | 1678 | 1385 | 1566 |
| Percent awarded | 38% | 39% | 54% | 45% | 52% | 89% | 61% | 62% | 63% |

Notes: EAP: Emergency Assistance Payments. From 1st May 2020, the Welsh Government allowed greater flexibility and discretion to number and frequency of EAP payments that people may require. In March 2020, applications/awards increased due to flood impacts from storms at the end of February 2020.

Free school meals

In response to the closure of schools, the Council quickly implemented a free school meal replacement programme, providing cold lunches for pick-up. However, it was found that the take up of this provision was very low, possibly because of the difficulty of having to go to the school to pick up the lunch and because of safety concerns, as described below:

“We found that the take up was really low on it. And knowing Swansea quite well and some of the schools, the logistics of getting to those schools, especially if you’ve got a large young family. It’s quite a hassle to have to go maybe from Gors up to Townhill, which is quite a steep hill, with a little one in a pram and two toddlers walking alongside to go and get lunch every day...when we were speaking to these families, a lot of them were saying the reason they weren’t going to the school to get their lunch was because they were worried about congregating in large crowds as well, in large numbers. Congregating outside the schools to get their lunches.” (Third sector respondent)

The SCVS raised these concerns with the Council and suggested that instead, schools provide a weekly shopping bag for families to pick up on Mondays, enabling them to prepare food themselves at home for the week, reducing how often they had to go and also enable pick up times to be staggered. It was reported that some schools delivered these bags as well. Uptake was reported to have increased from 30% to 60% with the change in delivery. A problem with these food parcels was described as “we could only give what we could get” (Council staff respondent), referring to their reliance on their current catering suppliers:

“Our catering suppliers for schools were given a massive tin of beans, that’s what [our suppliers] sell us. Trying to get more family sized, individual food sized portions of things was an issue initially. I know a lot of families initially were, “I don’t want another tin of beans and tuna.” (Council staff respondent)

This food bag system was only in place for a short period of time, as the Council then started providing a cash replacement instead, depositing money directly into parents’/guardians’ bank account.

It was shared that, because Swansea is a City of Sanctuary, there are many families of asylum seekers and refugees.³¹² Ensuring a system of free school meal replacements for these families required a different response than money being deposited into bank accounts because these families may not have debit cards or because they may have limitations on funds they are allowed to have in bank accounts. Sandwich-type food parcels were also recognised to not provide culturally appropriate foods for many of these families. The SCVS and local authority and other organisations lobbied the Home Office for the following:

“We did manage to lobby and put pressure on the Home Office to actually allow the free school meal allowance go onto their Aspen Cards, which meant that they could then also have food, shopping, that way as well.³¹³ So that I think was a big, well, we were all really rejoicing, we were thrilled with that.” (Third sector respondent)

As above, the Council was intending to run and expand SHEP through the summer in 2020, but this was unable to go ahead due to the pandemic:

“Last year we did start our first SHEP, our School Holiday Enrichment Programme in one of our schools during the summer holidays. We were intending obviously to run more through these holidays as well, but obviously with COVID we haven’t had them... We were going to expand it as well, but obviously we couldn’t.” (Council staff respondent)

The loss of the SHEP programme was felt to be a negative adaptation to school food provision, as described below:

“There are a lot of things I think aren’t working quite as well with some things to support families. Like I said, there’s no SHEP provision this year. People are getting paid [referring to cash payments for free school meals through the summer], but they’re losing that [experience]. It’s the experience side of things that was part of that [SHEP] they’re not having.” (Council staff respondent)

³¹² <https://swansea.cityofsanctuary.org/>

³¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

Supporting the establishment of Swansea Food Poverty Network

Before the pandemic, the work of the Council in administering the Food Poverty grant to food banks and other community food providers revealed that many groups who engaged in food poverty work in Swansea did not have the opportunity to get together to speak to one another, collaborate, and share. This realisation led to the idea that Swansea would benefit from a Food Poverty Network. The potential benefit of this became clearer over the course of the pandemic. At the time of our interview, a group had been established and started having monthly meetings. The role of the Council is described below:

“It was an aspiration to set up a Swansea Food Poverty Network. Our role in that is to facilitate it happening rather than imposing it on the members. The way I see it, it belongs to the members, I’m just facilitating them coming together, looking at how to improve collaboration, talking about gaps, talking about problem-solving issues, etc.” (Council staff respondent)

Swansea Council for Voluntary Service

One of the first initiatives of the SCVS early in the pandemic was to put out a call for volunteers. They were able to recruit a significant number very quickly, and they were involved in various roles, as outlined below:

“Basically, we have a volunteer centre within Swansea CVS, so we put out a call for volunteers as soon as we knew of the lockdown. I think we got 500 people registered in the first weekend...those volunteers had a variety of different roles. [They were involved in] the Swansea Together campaign to support the preparation of the food that was going to be distributed.... we had volunteers who were supporting people with doing their shopping for them... we also had volunteers that were providing telephone befriending services.” (Third sector respondent)

The SCVS call played a key role in recruiting volunteers to the Swansea Together campaign in particular, but also supported businesses who were newly involved in food deliveries:

“We had 1,200 people come forward in a month. We were able to put about 100 of those through to the Swansea Together project. About 150 maybe through to our colleagues in the local area coordination team. About 100 through to the Co-op. [Talking about] cross sector, the Co-op said to us, “There’s a problem with delivery, we can’t get food to people. We don’t use volunteers ordinarily, can we start?” (Third sector respondent)

As a result of this request, the SCVS provided volunteers to collect and then deliver shopping for people who purchased food over the phone from the Co-op.³¹⁴

While the SCVS was able to recruit volunteers quickly, this was not without challenges. They had to quickly audit people’s skills, establish who had food hygiene training, who could drive vans to deliver food, who could take on door-to-door meal delivery etc. This time was described as “quite chaotic”, though also as “very exciting times [as] we did mobilise quite a

³¹⁴ <https://www.scvs.org.uk/news/scvscovidresponse-ufeval-sept20>

lot of stuff together” (Third sector respondent). As they moved through the spring, they also supported organisations with these tasks:

“Then as we moved into adapting, we almost took a breath, a half a breath and we started developing guides for volunteers or for community action projects that had newly set up to try and give them some ideas about safety, whether it was safeguarding or being aware of all aspects of safety.” (Third sector respondent)

The SCVS also worked with the Council to put together an “Essential Foods List”, which directed people to the range of offers from local food shops, supermarkets, and takeaways.³¹⁵

SCVS was also an important source of funding for organisations engaged in responding to food insecurity over the pandemic. Using funds provided to them by the Welsh Government for a COVID-19 response, they were able to cover the costs of monthly FareShare Cymru membership fees (£65 per month) for independent food banks and other food aid providers to enable them to receive food every week over April 2020 to March 2021. At first, seven food banks and food aid projects were supported, including Pontarddulais, HOP, Birchgrove, Eastside, Swansea Mosque, Morriston Salvation Army food banks, and Matthew’s House. This rose to 12 organisations being supported as new food projects started or existing projects came on board over the pandemic.

This funding from the Welsh Government also enabled them to fund the provision of their own food parcels. These were provided to support people who cannot physically go out to shop, have no means of doing an online shop and/or have no financial resources to purchase food temporarily. This new initiative was described by one respondent:

“We also used some of that money to purchase a lot of dry goods to SCVS directly. We do have staff who also have food parcels, staff who live in Swansea also have food parcels [stored] at home. Due to the nature of the referrals, we still have at times late on a Friday afternoon, there’s a need to get a food parcel out to someone, so the staff have got it there to be able to do that...I think it was June or July where we thought we do need to be able to have this. Seeing as we had the funding available, we put it into doing a large purchase from a food wholesaler so there were parcels available and they still are, they’re still available with staff now. It wasn’t there before.” (Third sector respondent)

Swansea Bay University Health Board Nutrition and Dietetic Service

During the pandemic, the Nutrition and Dietetic team provided nutrition information to SCVS which could be posted on their website and social media. They also were a partner in the Hospital Discharge Initiative set up by the Council and SVCS. They liaised with the Council on what contents should go into the food parcels and what types of meals should be provided to hospital patients being discharged who were receiving this service. They

³¹⁵ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/essentialsuppliers>

provided guidance on checking labels and suggestions for people following special dietary requirements. They also provided a “Food Fact” sheet about malnutrition.

Food parcel providers

Swansea Foodbank

As described above, two challenges early in the pandemic for Swansea Foodbank were an increase in need and decline in food donations. They also experienced a drop in numbers of volunteers and disruptions in their referral system, as described below:

“About half our [distribution] centres closed because the volunteers were cautious about their own health. The link with referral agencies was majorly disrupted because agencies weren’t meeting with their clients. I think we still need to figure that out a little bit because obviously everyone is still working from home quite a lot.” (Third sector respondent)

With distribution centres that remained open, cafe facilities had to close and food parcels were distributed from doorsteps of the centre. This impacted on the “more than food” support offered at their food banks:

“Our cafe facilities are still closed. Those conversations you have with people as they’re waiting for their food parcels to be packed, on the whole we’re still not having really because [collection] is on the doorstep.” (Third sector respondent)

The trend in usage of the Swansea Foodbank seemed to be high need through April and May, but then to stabilise after a few months. One respondent described this:

“I think numbers of people did drop a little bit. This is just my theory. I think we see it in school holidays as well, there’s an awful lot of apprehension at the beginning of a school holiday. In the summer when you get to the end of August the demand has settled a little bit because they were really concerned they wouldn’t get through the holidays. Then you get to the end and people are like, “I did make it.” I think we saw that a little bit about people really, really worried about how they would manage. Then after a few weeks, a few months I suppose actually, things did settle a little bit to be a bit more steady.” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about donations of food were abated in part because supermarkets started to have an abundance of food because other charities were not doing their usual collections, such as Matthew’s House, mentioned above. At one point, Swansea Foodbank was offered supermarket surplus five days of the week:

“There was a bit of a knock-on. We got some supermarket surplus before the lockdown. Then other charities that had picked up from supermarkets decided it was too risky, so then got more of their surplus. We offered five days a week of supermarket surplus at one point, which was logistically quite a lot to handle. There was a bit of that of some charities who were overly cautious about the fact a lot of customers would have handled the food during the day. We benefited from that.” (Third sector respondent)

One distribution centre, Gorseinon Foodbank, initially closed, but then the Council's Local Area Coordinator, local councillors, and local community members stepped in to take over running it instead:

"In Gorseinon, the food bank closed there and the [Local Area Coordinator], some of the local councillors and community members formed a little group that partly took over the running of a food bank, and it changed into a delivery service. There was no way given the crisis and the COVID restrictions that people would be able to come to the venue. It was delivery only to keep people away and to keep safe that way. The food parcels were all being delivered." (Council staff respondent)

It was shared that the food bank's usual referral system was relaxed under the circumstances:

"All of the referral process did go out the window because we were being contacted by people we weren't aware of who hadn't had support workers, who our organisation hadn't helped, or tenancy support hadn't helped. We had to take people at their word, which we did because the food was there. If people were highlighting there was a need for food, we just got it out to them. If it was going on week after week after week, we eventually had conversations around the long-term sustainability of it or if there were other options available to address their need." (Council staff respondent)

One source of funding for Gorseinon food bank at this time was from local councillors, who put forward their own budgets to support the purchase of food from wholesalers. Later, they applied for grant funding that came available from Admiral.³¹⁶

The Swansea Foodbank had a new food bank join them over the pandemic. A community food bank that was established in Penlan by a Local Area Coordinator during the pandemic decided to remain open and joined as a Swansea Foodbank distribution centre.³¹⁷ Other changes in Swansea Foodbanks' operations included one distribution centre moving from being open just two hours a week to being open five days a week. All but one of the centres that had closed were all open at the time of the workshop in early December 2020. The Gorseinon Foodbank, described above, was taken back over by the Trussell Trust team in the middle of the autumn and returned to having food parcels collected by patrons rather than providing deliveries.

Independent food parcel providers

Over the course of the pandemic, it was shared that an additional four independent food banks started operating and were still operating at the time of our interviews (November 2020).

Based on the published list of food bank activity in Swansea compiled by the Council, independent food banks variously adapted their services, with some continuing to operate collection with social distancing measures in place, and possibly requiring pre-booking, and others offering delivery (Table 2).

³¹⁶ <https://www.admiral.com/community-and-sponsorship>

³¹⁷ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/57120/Neighbourhood-foodbank-is-a-big-hit>

Table 2: Independent food bank activities during COVID-19.

| Independent food banks | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Birchgrove Foodbank | Started operating 29 March 2020. ³¹⁸ Open as usual for food parcel pick-up but also offered pre-booked delivery over the pandemic. Requires referral voucher. |
| Eastside Foodbank (Bonymaen) | Continued to accept “walk-ups”, though advanced booking for a collection time preferred. Did not provide delivery of food parcels. |
| Clase Foodbank | Open as usual. Referral required. |
| Morrison (Salvation Army) | Stopped drop-in food bank. To receive support, needed to phone on a Tuesday to be given a time slot to collect a food parcel on Wednesday. ID required for collection. Referrals accepted. |
| North Gower Foodbank | Food parcels collected by appointment only. No referral voucher required. |
| Pontarddulais Foodbank | Provided food parcel delivery during pandemic and also provided help with food shopping. ³¹⁹ Referral usually required but accepted benefit letter or proof of address to receive food parcel during the pandemic. Limit on food parcel receipt from 18 March 2020: 3 in 3 months, regardless of previous visits. (Unclear whether this more or less generous than pre-pandemic.) |
| HOP Foodbank (Sketty Park) | Open as usual for collection. Required referral. |
| Swansea Mosque Foodbank | Provided delivery service until January 2021. Referrals required but e-referrals allowed from referral partners. |

Source: <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/foodbanks> (accessed 9 February 2020) supplemented by additional webpage searches (see footnotes).

Eastside Foodbank

We spoke to one representative from Eastside Foodbank who shared some of the adaptations and challenges they faced in their food bank. They faced the same challenges as other food banks: operating in a small space without room for social distancing, the loss

³¹⁸ https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/new-food-bank-opens-swanseas-18015137?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=sharebar&fbclid=IwAR0kEWtVQL3hcHKhdz3QqFTetyWpoTbyZwCoT7OjTogq2yKBzQGN4BMdsUM

³¹⁹ <https://swansea.gov.uk/article/58141/Pontarddulais-foodbank-providing-vital-supplies>

of volunteers due to health concerns or because they were keyworkers, and also difficulty accessing referral agencies.

They went from operating on just one day a week to operating on two days a week and had people pick up food parcels at the door, rather than coming inside their chapel space.

To help with their concerns about food supplies, they were able to set up a new account with a local wholesaler, but they also made use of the Council's food distribution centres, particularly in the early days of the pandemic when it was even a challenge to receive supplies from their wholesaler.

One challenge that was raised with replacing volunteers with new ones over the pandemic was the need to have volunteers checked first, as shared below:

“It’s a professional requirement for me that I’m qualified and topped up on safeguarding regularly. There’s no way we can allow a volunteer to come in unless they’ve got an enhanced DBS to deliver to people’s private addresses. That was an issue. It’s one of those things I thought the head had to rule the heart in that particular instance. As the minister of the chapel, I’d have been the person responsible and could have been held legally responsible if anything had gone wrong.” (Third sector respondent)

To overcome these safeguarding concerns, they had the Council's Local Area Coordinators, local councillors, and Police Community Support Officers deliver their food parcels when required.

Swansea Mosque Foodbank

From our desk-based research, we learned that the Swansea Mosque Foodbank was able to continue running as usual over the pandemic, with support from the Council's food distribution centres and support for a FareShare membership from the SCVS.³²⁰ They continued to require referrals to access their food, though allowed organisations to provide an emailed referral rather than a paper voucher.

Community pantry or community fridge projects

Blaen-Y-Maes Drop-in Centre's Foodshare

The Blaen-Y-Maes drop-in centre announced changes in their operations on their Facebook page on 24th March, indicated that due to the unpredictable nature of donations from supermarkets at this time, they would post on their Facebook page when “foodshare” food would be available for collection. They continued to do this over the pandemic.³²¹ Food bags were provided for people to collect outside of their building. In October, they announced that they received funding from the SCVS for a FareShare Cymru membership for 6 months.

Swansea Community Fridge

The Swansea Community Fridge adapted their operations to provide pre-packed food parcels over the pandemic and rather than operating on a daily basis, were only open for

³²⁰ <https://www.swanseamosque.org/foodbank>

³²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/BlaenymaesDropinCentre>

collection one day a week.³²² They did not run a delivery service, but allowed others, including community volunteers, to pick up the food parcels on behalf of someone else.

Over the course of the pandemic, they also established a Community Pantry,³²³ which involved them receiving and distributing dried and canned food and hygiene products. These items were both donated from supermarket surplus schemes as well as purchased with funding from grants. Rather than providing pre-packed bags of these items, they used an ordering system, whereby people could browse a list of items available online, complete a request form for required items, and then pick up the items the following week.

Meal providers

Both Matthew's House and Zac's Place suspended their usual drop-in meal programmes over the pandemic to focus efforts on the Swansea Together campaign, described above. We learned that the Swansea University Discovery Student Project stopped their community meal programme and instead focused efforts on a sewing scrubs projects and a pen pal project targeted towards isolated adults over the pandemic. We were unable to learn from our research participants or desk-based research what other community meal providers, such as TOPIC or Christ Well Café, did over the spring and summer 2020.

Other third sector organisations

We also learned that new organisations that had formerly not been involved in food provision started food provision activities over the pandemic. For example, there was concern about food access among asylum seekers and refugees in Swansea, so the African Community Centre was mentioned by participants as one group who provided food boxes and meals to people in these target groups. The SCVS supported this project with volunteers.

The local response

We also heard about the strength of local or community responses in Swansea. Though these were often informal and neighbour-to-neighbour, it was felt that this was some of the first help available to people to support them getting food.

“Sometimes it was on a street level. That was the way things could be adapted the quickest... you saw local community members getting together to make sure their neighbours were able to get whatever they needed, whether that was food or prescriptions. Those things were in place... neighbours were looking out for neighbours a week in advance, that was the first thing to happen. People were delivering little notes to their neighbours saying, ‘I’m here, give me a call if you need anything.’” (Council staff respondent)

Though the above quote was in reference to one specific area in Swansea, it was felt this was being replicated across the city:

“What we found was a lot of community groups had started up their own WhatsApp groups, their own Facebook groups, in order to address the needs of the people who were isolating and shielding and couldn't get access to food or

³²² <https://goleudy.org/our-services/community-fridge/food-parcels/>

³²³ <https://goleudy.org/our-services/community-fridge/swansea-community-pantry/>

prescriptions or they arranged welfare calls. That was being established in communities all over the city and the county.” (Council staff respondent)

Local area coordinators collected stories of the ways that individuals helped in their communities. One story shared with us was a couple who started cooking meals in their kitchen and delivering them to people. As demand increased over the pandemic, they received support from friends.

Food retailers and local businesses

It was shared by a couple of respondents that local food businesses in Swansea adapted quickly to lockdown conditions, offering takeaway and delivery services within two weeks of the start of lockdown. It was also shared that when businesses were unable to open, they donated their food stocks to the Swansea Together campaign. Some of this work is reflected in the quote below, and in Table 3 presents a snapshot of local business activity at the end of March 2020 available in one area of Swansea, Pontarddulais, available on 30th March 2020. This help was advertised through the Pontarddulais Community Response to Coronavirus-COVID-19 group Facebook page.³²⁴

“You saw local business were getting food deliveries in place long before Tesco or Morrison ever managed to do that.” (Council staff respondent)

Table 3: Local businesses providing food support to be people in Pontarddulais on 30th March 2020.

| Name | Location | Tel No | Facebook | Type | Description |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|---|
| CHB Express | 41 St Trefa St, BONT | 01792 885090 | Yes | Takeaway | open 7 days 10-5 10pm-11 10pm-10.30pm takeaway, delivery |
| Pontarddulais Golf Club | Airly-Grazer Rd, BONT | Tel 07874815877 | Yes | Restaurant | Delivery |
| Penllengarn Shop & Shop | Penllengarn | 01792 894334 | No | Shop, P.D | Free delivery, £10 minimum spend |
| Piney's Food Office | FForrest | 01792 882378 | No | Groceries, P.D | Home deliveries |
| Hendy Pharmacy | Hendy | 01792 881234 | No | Chemist | Deliveries of prescriptions and goods to local area |
| Swallow Travel | 29 High St, Gorseinon | 01792 898988 | Yes | Taxi | Aids click collect, prescription collection and delivery |
| Ulvas Pharmacy | 5 St Trefa St, BONT | 01792 881388 | Yes (general) | Chemist | Home delivery service |
| Family Shopper | 27-28 St Trefa St, BONT | 01792 882810 | Yes | Broceries, P.D | Home deliveries, shops open Mon-Sun 10am-8pm |
| Wessex Cabs | Gorseinon | 01792 896669 | Yes | Taxi | Pick up of goods etc. |
| McDoner | 106 St Trefa St, BONT | 01792 881173 | Not list | Takeaway | Takeaway from 4pm, delivery from 5pm. Also as Just Eat |
| Waggon Farm Farm | Station Rd, BONT | 01792 885200 | No | Chemist | Order prescription online, ring chemist, will deliver to isolated |
| A Taste of Home | 28 St Trefa St, BONT | 01792 884813 | No | Takeaway | Delivery from 5pm |

³²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Pontarddulais-Community-Response-to-Coronavirus-Covid-19-103423331296995/about>

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Swansea

Below, we summarise some key themes we identified in our interviews, workshop, and desk-based research in Swansea.

The panic of the first weeks

The unprecedented nature of the situation that the pandemic brought required organisations to quickly develop a response for which, in the early weeks, there was not a system in place.

“I think if we’re talking about that March period, which was mid-March going into early April, that was a time of developing a response to a crisis during a crisis...we had a contact centre, but we didn’t have our systems set up in terms of our response at that point in time.” (Council staff respondent)

This need for a quick response to this new situation led to a sense of panic for some. Respondents also noted panic amongst their existing clients as to where they would be able to access food.

“It was just mass worry. People were like, “Where am I going to eat tomorrow? What am I going to eat now?” And we didn’t plan for this. Nobody planned for it, did they?” (Third sector respondent)

Food projects also bore the brunt of the panic of the public. Panic buying resulted in shortages of items, leading to food banks being unable to acquire donations of basic staples that they usually rely on.

“Even if people did want to donate, they couldn’t get the type of food we wanted or we needed from supermarkets, like tins of tomatoes. There were definitely a few weeks where our stocks depleted incredibly rapidly.” (Third sector respondent)

The role of Local Area Coordinators

Local Area Coordinators are a unique feature of the Swansea landscape. During the pandemic, they played an important role in connecting people with local services, providing services and help themselves, and helping coordinate volunteers. Interestingly, this coordination activity was ward-specific and not harmonised across different areas. This approach appears to reflect the aims of the Local Area Coordinators, which is to help build community resilience and enable people to help themselves.

Council press releases praised the work of Local Area Coordinators over the pandemic. For example, this quote was provided by a Councillor in April 2020:

“Cllr Mark Child, Swansea Council's Cabinet Member for Care, Health and Ageing Well, said: "The Local Area Coordinators do a really valuable job under normal circumstances but they have been an absolute godsend in the current coronavirus crisis. They have been using their skills and knowledge of their communities to help individual volunteers and organisations come together to

make sure that where people need help they are receiving it.” (Council Press Release, April 2020)³²⁵

New ways of working

Across various stakeholders and projects, our respondents described the different ways they had to adapt and transform their ways of working. In the Council, this meant quickly training staff from across a variety of different departments to work on the food poverty response and to reach out to food banks to understand their needs. The following quote reflects the changes made across the Council:

“We did things as an organisation that we don’t do. And we worked in ways that we don’t normally work and we adapted. That’s just the Council.” (Council staff respondent)

For the Swansea Together project, this meant building new relationships with housing agencies in order to enable delivery to people who were in temporary housing there. Of course, it also meant a huge transformation of organisations’ meal services from serving in-house to delivering meals across the city.

For SCVS, they had to adapt their volunteer recruitment processes, as shared:

“Swansea CVS and the Council worked really, really well together in terms of building a really from the ground new system that would allow us to recruit volunteers immediately for actions we weren’t even sure what they were. We were kind of recruiting blind at one point.” (Third sector respondent)

New actors engaged in food provision

Across the range of responses observed in Swansea, there were people involved in food provisioning activities that likely would have not done this before. At the neighbourhood level, this was neighbours checking on neighbours to ensure people who were isolating or shielding had a supply of food and providing meals for people. At the community level, this was newly formed community groups organising to open a food bank. At the city-wide level, this was the many volunteers who were enrolled by SCVS to support Swansea Together or to provide help with shopping. The role of people who were furloughed in volunteering was highlighted in particular:

“The demographic of volunteers changed overnight. There was a large proportion of older people volunteering. It suddenly became a large proportion of people who were much younger. With the furlough scheme, we had some incredibly skilled people who were not needed in their work for a little spell and were rolling up their sleeves and getting stuck in and had enormous skills. They were actually very exciting times.” (Third sector respondent)

Within the Council, new actors included staff being re-deployed from other roles to deliver food or respond to requests for food from the COVID Hotline.

Elected officials were also highlighted as key stakeholders engaged in provision:

³²⁵ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/57164/Every-community-now-has-local-area-coordinators-on-the-front-line>

“The elected representatives played a really key role as well. Whether that was community councils, city councillors or the assembly members and the members of parliament. From my experience, it was the local city councillors. They were all involved in my area with the food response, whether that was through the funding of it with their personal budget or through the volunteering, organising or distributing. They were a contact point, they were always well-known in their communities. People that were in need, they were becoming aware of them and they were referring them on for the help. I think they were a really key element of the response as well.” (Council staff respondent)

New organisations also became engaged in cooking for people who are vulnerably housed, such as the Mecca Bingo Hall and Swansea Football Club.

However, though many new people and organisations became engaged in food provisioning activity, much of this engagement came to an end when people and businesses returned to their regular roles. As highlighted, the Council’s Helpline, Food Administration Team, and distribution centres closed when staff returned to their regular roles in August 2020. The delivery of meals through the Swansea Together project came to an end when the football club and bingo hall returned to their usual operations, also in August.

This said, some projects that were initiated over the pandemic were established for the longer term, as was the case with the Penlan food bank, which is now operating as a Swansea Foodbank distribution centre.

Funding and food donations

Though organisations experienced concern about whether they would have sufficient supplies of food and/or funding through the pandemic, respondents shared that in the end, an abundance of donations were received, including from the public. One respondent involved in a food bank shared:

“Our food donations picked up. As soon as the supermarkets were allowing people to buy items. People were incredibly generous financially, but also were fantastic about donating food as well. We were I suppose a bit concerned that wouldn’t continue...we were generally fine supported by our donors. It was really good.” (Third sector respondent)

When we discussed funding with Council staff representatives, they described the approach within the Council was to fund upfront and count on funds being provided by the Welsh Government later:

“The Council fronted up the funding to do things quickly, with the hope that the Welsh Government would be able to see us right at the end. And the priority was “we’ve got to support people, we need to do this.” Do it, and we’ll worry about how to log that later... Subsequently, we have had funding from Welsh Government, COVID response funding.” (Council staff respondent)

As mentioned throughout, other sources of funding and food in Swansea were:

- Re-purposed Swansea Council Food Poverty grants available to food banks and other food poverty projects (initially for Brexit preparation but allowed to be re-purposed for COVID-19 responses). A new round of funding opened for

projects in December 2020, again funded by the Welsh Government (though not from a Brexit preparedness fund).³²⁶

- SVSC funding from Welsh Government for COVID-19; in turn, this was used to provide FareShare memberships to nine food poverty projects/food banks.
- Private donations from individuals and businesses.
- Council food distribution centres (sourced with purchased food and donated food from businesses) supporting food banks and Swansea Together.
- City councillors' budgets.

One respondent reflected on the benefit of not receiving core funding from the Council or the Council taking on the Swansea Together project as their own:

“But if the Council fund you, you do what the Council say...if we were council-funded, we might not have been able straightaway to change the service as quickly as we did... there is a beauty in doing it alongside the Council but not for the Council, but there are ways that the Council can still support, with little grant pockets of funding. Because [council funding] is a lot about restricted funds and stuff like that.” (Third sector respondent)

Limitations of the Welsh shielding box programme

A small number of comments regarding limitations of the national shielding box programme were raised. Some of these related to a lag between people being told to shield and receiving their first food parcel. This was exacerbated due to a delay between people on the shielding list gaining access to priority delivery slots. In this period, the SCVS mobilised their volunteers to help people do their shopping:

“We had volunteers who were supporting people with doing their shopping for them, because we did have quite a lag between the food parcels being available and the shielding list having come out.” (Third sector respondent)

“For example, during the initial lockdown, even though the shielding list had gone from the Welsh Government to the supermarkets 12 days before the UK Government listing, we all had to wait before slots were available to allocate to the vulnerable.” (Third sector respondent)

As described above, the Council had concerns about the Welsh Government's food parcels not reaching people due to parcels going missing or being stolen, which was why the Council took over “last mile” delivery in June. We also heard that the Council would respond on an ad hoc basis if issues with the Welsh Government's food parcels were raised by individuals. They also gave feedback to the Welsh Government, which raised concerns about the monotony of contents of the food parcels.

Target groups of concern

There were some groups that were specifically targeted for food responses in Swansea. Since Swansea is a City of Sanctuary, there were concerns raised for asylum seekers and refugees. Programmes like free school meals replacements were specifically adapted for these groups. We also observed a programme specifically targeting people leaving hospital,

³²⁶ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/foodpovertygrant2021>

which is again a specific target group and response in Swansea. Lastly, people who are vulnerably housed was a key target group of concern, as reflected by the outpouring of support for the Swansea Together project.

A lack of understanding of impacts of food provisioning activity

While it was clear that stakeholders felt proud of how many people and organisations engaged in the food response in Swansea over the spring and summer, one downside could be that it made it hard to gain a complete picture of what was happening across the city and how it could be influencing need. Though it was felt that some of this new activity could be leading to less demand from pre-existing food banks, this could not be clearly documented so it made it hard to understand trends in food bank use, as reflected in the comments below:

“I think there are fewer people coming forward for food than I would expect at the moment. Which you could see as a good thing, perhaps people are alright. I’m worried. It could be that people are getting food in centres that I’m not aware of. That’s quite possible, obviously. That’s just a nagging thought of we’re not as busy as I would expect given the situation we’re in.” (Third sector respondent)

“We went through quite a quiet spell from August through September. We found [our food bank use] picking up steadily through the autumn. Because there are more food banks about, things are probably a bit easier for us...” (Third sector respondent)

“There’s so much help out there. I’m aware of pubs that are helping people by cooking and delivering meals...To have the full picture is nearly an impossible task. There is a lot of help out there. A lot of food banks did spring up and some are still going. That might have helped relieve some pressure on some of the food banks that were existing already... It’s difficult to map and understand that -- the wider landscape has changed and that has an influence on [food bank numbers] as well. It’s a really tricky one...there are probably people who are helping each other at a community level that are helping take some of that pressure off food banks as well. It’s really difficult to understand the full picture.” (Council staff respondent)

Another example of how more food provisioning in one area could lessen the need for food banks was the provision of free school meal cash replacements through the summer, as shared below:

“Interestingly, in contacting the food banks for the school holidays, I wanted to see if there was a change in the demographic of the people accessing them because of the free school meal provision. And all apart from one said that there were definitely less families of school age children accessing the food banks during that time during the school holidays, which is quite interesting.” (Third sector respondent)

Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020

Over the course of our interviews and workshop, various reflections were offered on responses to concerns about rising food insecurity over this time. In addition to freely offered responses, we also used Padlets to gather responses to targeted questions asking respondents to reflect on the responses put in place over the spring and summer (as outlined in the Methods section).

Participants' answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

The ability to respond quickly

In reference to the Swansea Campaign, many stakeholders shared how proud they were of the ability of Matthew's House and other partners to put in place the city-wide distribution of meals for people who were precariously housed within one week:

"All credit to [staff from Matthew's House], it was set up really quickly. He put together that plan, and they called us together, he was like, "This is what I need from you. This is what I need from you. This is what I need from you." And we were all able to see our role and play our part." (Council staff respondent)

Some features specific to Matthew's House were thought to have enabled their ability to set up the Swansea Together project quickly. These included having a small leadership team and small Trustee team who were supportive of the idea and of internal funds being moved from a reserve fund into a COVID crisis fund; having connections from before the pandemic that enabled them to bring stakeholders together for a meeting; and having a large team of volunteers, which meant that even with about 70% unable to volunteer, about 30 people were still available to respond immediately.

"And the beauty of what we do at Matthew's House is we turn something around within days and hours because we work together and we've got this missional focus, and we've got people who give to us monthly, who believe in what we do. We've got trustees who believe in what we do. And we haven't got 40 hoops and 20 sign-offs..." (Third sector respondent)

In reference to the response undertaken by the Council, the support of the cabinet member was felt to be essential for their ability to respond quickly:

"I'd engaged with our cabinet member about the project, and we made sure the Council was getting behind it. That helped a lot with how quick we were able to respond to that and be part of it." (Council staff respondent)

The SCVS was felt to be able to respond quickly because already in early March, they had started preparing for a shift to at-home working:

"We were also very fortunate in Swansea CVS that just two weeks before the lockdown, we'd already started testing a working from home rota, and we were all set up anyway with equipment. Even though the lockdown then happened, I think

it was on the 23rd, we were already set up and able to run immediately.” (Third sector respondent)

They were also well-placed to handle volunteer recruitment and screening, since this was work they were already engaged in before the pandemic.

The ability to adapt

The ability of organisations to adapt and quickly develop new ways of working was highlighted by our stakeholders as a key strength of the response in Swansea, as reflected in the following quotes:

“The responses from the community upwards to the services who were having to change the way they worked and people working in totally new ways. It’s full credit to everybody who was involved in it. I’m absolutely blown away by what everybody managed to achieve.” (Council staff respondent)

Enablers of the food response over spring and summer 2020

Reflecting over the range of responses enacted over the spring and summer, our respondents highlighted some key factors that they thought enabled the actions taken:

- Trusting local communities to find their own solutions.
- Strong local connections.
- Partnership among different sectors.

Elaboration on these points was provided by respondents.

Local knowledge and local concern

It was felt that local neighbourhood groups were able to respond most quickly to needs in their communities:

“The hyper local response was the best because it was so adaptable, people looking out for each other is just the first thing that happened.” (Council staff respondent)

It was also expressed that local communities can be trusted to find their own solutions because they know the needs of their communities best:

“Trusting communities to find their own solutions to know what their own response should look like. [Local Area Coordinators’] job is to facilitate that, grease the wheels as they get things in order. I think it shows trust in the communities of Swansea. The hope is that it will encourage even more people to become resilient, part of their communities and to be contributing citizens.” (Council staff respondent)

Social media platforms were thought to be an important enabler of the local response, as described below:

“In terms of how a lot of it got organised, it would have been via Facebook, which was a great platform to get people together, to get people talking to each other

and to get word out there as soon as possible of what was available and where people could go to for help.” (Council staff respondent)

The pre-existence of Local Area Coordinators was also felt to help enable local support to be available. This was expressed in a council press release in August 2020:

“Cllr Clive Lloyd, Swansea Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Care & Community Health Services, said: "Swansea was the first council in Wales to start to use Local Area Coordination to make our communities stronger. The service proved its worth long before the current crisis but it gave us a huge head-start in making sure there was support available for those that needed it when the pandemic began.” (Council press release, August 2020)³²⁷

Cross-sector working and working together

Respondents were particularly keen to highlight how well different sectors worked together over the pandemic, as reflected in the following quotes:

“What I would like to say is there has been really good partnership work in our coordination between the third sector, SCVS and the local authority within Swansea... It definitely has been very productive and we adapted quite to meet the needs of the residents of Swansea to have all that in place.” (Third sector respondent)

“I think what has been really outstanding in Swansea is the way that from the early days, certainly through to the middle of the first lockdown, how there was incredible will between sectors to work together, which was quite new. Obviously, we've done it before, but we were really successful.” (Third sector respondent)

“The other thing...is the links between us all. I think we've got a lot better links and communications and knowing how each other work through this.” (Council staff respondent)

“Yes, just to say one thing really. As everyone has said, the response to the crisis in Swansea and without knowing what happened anywhere else, it was amazing. It was partnership working that allowed that to happen.” (Council staff respondent)

“In terms of the response, it was possible because of everyone's contribution. [The] Council, statutory sector, SCVS and the third sector, communities, businesses, it was everyone working together that made it work. That willingness very early on to just get on with it.” (Council staff respondent)

One respondent who worked in a food bank highlighted the benefit of the council's food distribution centres in particular:

“I'd agree with everything that's been said about the way people responded, it was absolutely marvellous. The Council distribution centres worked pretty well for

³²⁷ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/59137/Local-Area-Coordinators-respond-to-20000-inquiries-during-pandemic>

us, particularly in the early days when it was hard to get hold of stuff.” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 2020

Stakeholders also identified the need to look back and reflect on what was put in place:

“You’ve got to look at this big picture. Yes, a load of really good stuff happened and it’s good to identify that, but it’s also good to identify maybe what we could have done better or thought about earlier or... You know, at the beginning of this we were making and adapting our plan as we implemented it.” (Council staff respondent)

The following were reflections on aspects of responses that were felt to be limitations or things to be concerned about.

The absence of other forms of support for people receiving food

Stakeholders reflecting on different food responses in Swansea over the pandemic shared how adaptations made to various programmes meant that people were no longer being offered support or activities beyond food. This was true for food banks that could no longer operate their cafes and switched to doorstep collection; meal programmes providing delivery or takeaway, where patrons could no longer come and spend a couple of hours; and the replacement of the SHEP with cash provision of free school meals instead.

Reflecting on the provision from Matthew’s House, this was shared with us:

“Because it’s a takeaway, the community is not there. I saw a guy on the street that used to come for three years, a little old guy, and he hasn’t been. Because it’s not always about the food, it was being able to speak to someone... And that is one of the things that we are struggling with and we are looking at actively, [we might provide] a little outside seating areas where people can get supported in other needs. It’s the community aspect of it then, do you know what I mean?” (Third sector respondent)

Their hopes to return to their previous ways of working were also shared with us:

“The dream is to open up and have 40 people in again, and 8 volunteers in the kitchen, rather than 3. And serving and just making people feel welcome. A safe, warm space to sit in for an hour...” (Third sector respondent)

Similar feelings were also expressed by a respondent who runs a food bank:

“I was just going to say that as far as we’re concerned, trying to do some face-to-face stuff is something we would dearly like to pick up again. I think overall we’ve lost a lot of the effectiveness because we’ve had to hand stuff out through the door. It’s very hard to replicate that kind of contact and networking, particularly in our kind of community.” (Third sector respondent)

Unmet need

When we asked respondents about whether or not they thought people were able to access sufficient food as a result of the responses put into place over the spring and summer, it was

generally felt that people were more willing to seek and access help over this period and that it was available:

“I think during the conversations that happened in COVID and lockdown, more people were willing to accept that help, which was a good thing. I think a key aspect was getting leaflets delivered to every household in the community so they knew the help was there and it wasn’t something they should feel ashamed about accessing. It was just having those reassuring conversations over the phone as well. I don’t think we hit everybody. I’m sure there were people out there who still didn’t get the help they needed and probably were hungry. I’d hope we hit the vast majority of people.” (Council staff respondent)

One group that was of concern to some of our participants were people who were older, as shared below:

“One of the groups of people or demographics I think haven’t always accessed the help when it’s been there is the older population, whether that’s an element of pride. We’d often go and visit people and realise there’s no edible food in the cupboards. Whenever you’d talk to the person about maybe getting a food parcel they’d say, “No, no, no. That’s not for me, that’s for other people.”” (Council staff respondent)

Though this was the only group highlighted that might not have accessed support, it was acknowledged that some food need may be hidden, but that it was felt that all could be done was ensuring help was available and doing one’s best to promote it:

“All we can do is ensure there is support and help available to everyone whatever their need is out there, that it’s accessible and people know about it. We’re working with partners, the work the local area coordination team does in linking communities.” (Council staff respondent)

As above, there were concerns about unmet needs among people who received food support, as projects and programmes were lacking the “more than food” support they usually offer.

Barriers to the food response over spring and summer 2020

Though challenges have already been highlighted, some of the key barriers identified by our stakeholders to enacting responses were:

- The time taken to process Universal Credit claims was a barrier to registering children for free school meal provision, as described in the following quote:

“We had issues with families looking at the free school meals side of things. With Universal Credit, it was taking so long for them to get their eligibility confirmed. In the meantime, they were, “I can’t feed my children.” (Council staff respondent)

- The lack of availability of food supplies in the early days of the pandemic.

The present and looking ahead

At the time of our interviews and workshop, Swansea had recently come through the firebreak, but was not currently in a lockdown. One respondent described their current work:

“We’re concerned about the [financial] impact of the crisis now. People in low-income households are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This is something we’re now in, a different position, and is a different challenge I think going forward. Yes, the virus is still out there and that does cause problems. In the beginning, it was a response to the pandemic.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council had recently announced a new Food Poverty Grant fund of £100,000.³²⁸ The priorities for funding were “capital/revenue funding that address issues relating to food poverty including enhancing crisis food provision and community growing projects and spaces.” Examples provided here:

- Extending existing food crisis provision.
- Food preparation and cooking equipment; storage/storage solutions; fridges/freezers.
- Mobile services.
- Growing spaces/growing resources.
- Enhanced access to and supply of food grown within communities.
- Website/App development eg. directory, network, communications etc.
- Food.
- Staff eg. Food bank staff/coordination of food activity/collection and distribution.
- Training eg. health and safety/cooking and nutrition skills.
- Volunteer expenses.

The Council also committed more funding to enable the Local Area Coordinator team to remain expanded:

“The Council have committed more in the local area coordination team, to secure our future going forward and expand the team, which is really good news. The eventual objective is to have the whole county covered with the local area coordinators.” (Council staff respondent)

Other details were shared regarding funding from the Welsh Government for the provision of free school meals through school holidays, suggesting commitment until the end of the financial year but uncertainty beyond that point:³²⁹

“For next steps the Welsh Government are committing up until 31st March to support us with the additional payments we’re making for free school meals. I must add, they don’t fully fund us for the payments they announced they’re going to make to families. It is at a cost to the Council. I suppose it’s what’s going to happen after 1st April, a new financial year and will there’ll be funding available from then on. Families are used to having support.” (Council staff respondent)

Into the future, respondents highlighted the need to provide free school meals for asylum seeker families. They also highlighted the need to continue to provide support for people unwilling or unable to go out to shop for food:

³²⁸ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/foodpovertygrant2021>

³²⁹ While uncertainty about funding for 2021 was expressed by our workshop participant, the Welsh Government had announced in October an extension of funding to cover free school meals over the Easter holidays as well: <https://gov.wales/marcus-rashford-mbe-backs-welsh-government-decision-ensure-free-school-meal-provisions-every-school>

“It’s going to take a while, I think, for people to actually have the confidence to go out and do their shopping things as normal.” (Third sector respondent)

Respondents were also keen to carry forward positive aspects of Swansea’s food response and to learn from what was enacted. They hoped to continue to see links between the Council departments as well as with third sector organisations and continue to establish the Swansea Food Poverty Network:

“[The pandemic] has changed things. Like we’ve set up the Swansea Food Poverty Network...we want to take all the good stuff that’s happened and make it into normal, you know, make it part of what we do going forward.” (Council staff respondent)



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

West Berkshire Case Study

Goldberg, B., Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., Lambie-Mumford, H.

West Berkshire Case Study

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 to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

West Berkshire, a unitary authority, is situated in the county of Berkshire, in the south east of England, and residents live in a combination of rural villages and larger towns.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council did not have a food security strategy, but facilitated some income maximisation opportunities, such as local tax reductions and referral to advice agencies, for example, Citizens Advice. Some council departments also provided referrals to a local food aid provider.

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network operated five distribution sites. Meal projects were also in place that aimed to support people who were homeless. Newbury Community Furniture Project supplied household items in the case of sudden financial shocks and would provide an emergency food parcel for an interim period whilst households waited for other assistance with food provision.

At the beginning of the pandemic, through the local knowledge, relationship and combined efforts of the lead local funder, Greenham Trust, Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and the Council, a community support hub, encompassing statutory partners and third sector organisations was set up. From this wider hub, a Food Providers Group was created, involving the established organisations providing food parcels, community meals and meals for the homeless.

Most of these organisations continued to serve the populations they had served prior to the pandemic, for example the homeless population, older residents and people facing financial crisis. All providers made adaptations to the way in which their service was delivered, for example, changing from on-site meal provision to ready meal deliveries, from food parcel collection to home-delivery, and relaxing eligibility criteria. Across the area, hundreds of volunteers offered their services, not least to support the 90 community groups, many of which self-started, spontaneously as a result of the pandemic, to serve the needs of the local towns, villages and hamlets.

The shielding population were provided with the national food boxes arranged by Central Government. A central point for the distribution of community food parcels was established to support the collection and delivery of food parcels to residents newly encountering food insecurity. This operation was facilitated by the volunteers from a number of community groups which were established in response to the needs of their individual towns, villages and hamlets. New providers, previously not active in the area, as well as new locally-based groups, began to distribute food parcels in addition to those being provided by established organisations.

Children of key workers or vulnerable children, who were still attending school during the lockdown, continued to receive hot meals there, families of other children in need of support received either daily, or weekly food parcels, and schools maintained contact with students they considered vulnerable, but not attending school

One third sector organisation offered food aid groups logistical support, by using their large capacity transport vehicles, and purchasing a further vehicle with a chiller body, allowing for the distribution of chilled and short-life foods, in addition to ambient food products. Whilst the Council contributed no funding for the direct food aid response, the providers received significant support from an active third sector organisation which not only provided direct financial support, but also facilitated matched funding and an online platform for individual donations.

| | |
|--|----|
| Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in West Berkshire | 1 |
| Data overview | 4 |
| About West Berkshire | 4 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic .. | 6 |
| West Berkshire Council | 6 |
| West Berks Foodbank | 7 |
| Spotlight | 8 |
| Newbury Community Furniture Project | 8 |
| Meal providers | 8 |
| Other actors | 10 |
| Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic | 12 |
| Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic | 12 |
| West Berkshire Council | 13 |
| Greenham Trust | 16 |
| Volunteer Centre West Berkshire | 17 |
| Established food aid providers | 17 |
| New actors in food aid provision | 22 |
| School support | 24 |
| Other Actors | 25 |
| Key themes emerging on supporting food access in West Berkshire | 25 |
| Limitations of the national food box scheme | 25 |
| Funding | 26 |
| Volunteers | 27 |
| Food donations | 27 |
| Triaging & needs assessment | 28 |
| Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020 | 29 |
| Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer | 29 |
| Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer | 32 |
| Present and looking ahead | 32 |
| New projects | 34 |

Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in West Berkshire

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in West Berkshire 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 COVID-19 pandemic West Berkshire had a number of actors supporting people with food access.

West Berkshire Council Revenues and Benefits Department provided support to people on low income or experiencing income crises, for example council tax reduction or financial help. Where appropriate they would also signpost people to advice agencies, such as Citizens Advice, or other organizations providing emergency food parcels.

There were a number of organizations providing emergency food parcels prior to the pandemic.

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network, was established in 2013 as the first food bank in the area. The food bank operated out of five distribution centres which were open twice a week, each on different days and in different towns. The food bank estimated to have served 100 clients over the course of a week prior to February/March 2020. Additionally, the food bank provided food to five schools at the start of the six-week summer holiday school break which they could distribute to families. The schools chose how they would provide this food to the families.

Newbury Community Furniture Project is part of a wider organisation, Newbury Community Resource Centre, comprising 5 projects although not all in West Berkshire. They support vulnerable residents through a range of endeavours including horticultural therapy for adults and young people with a range of disabilities and health challenges, environmental projects and education. Although food provision was not their primary function, they provided hot meals for volunteers and service users, and emergency food parcels for financially insecure households, in particular in the event of them being re-housed.

There was also a number of meal providers operating in the area. Newbury Soup Kitchen supported members of the homeless and rough sleepers' community with food, as well as social and mental health support. Loose Ends provided a drop-in service for members of the homeless community, providing hot meals for breakfast or lunch, as well as offering food parcels, toiletries, and clothes to people in need. The Fair Close Day Centre offered its services to the older population, aged 65 plus. They provided social activities, physical health and grooming services, as well as cooked meals, for which they have a scale of charges for members and non-members. They described food as being central to their services, providing meals to their service users, in the community centre and also offering a Meals on Wheels service.

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire supported the voluntary and community sector and Greenham Trust is a social enterprise which provided assistance to charity, volunteer and community organisations including the provision of funding for the established food aid providers in West Berkshire.

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

The strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic was spearheaded the Community Support Hub, a partnership comprising the Council, and the Volunteer Centre together with the Greenham Trust as the funding source.

The Council implemented two hubs: a Community Support Hub, where Council staff and leaders together with members of statutory bodies met to resolve all emerging issues relating to COVID-19 and a central distribution point/hub, through which food distribution was coordinated. The community food distribution hub was set up by the Council at a local rugby club. Spotlight UK provided food parcels for the distribution hub. Spotlight operated in the neighbouring local authority area prior to the pandemic, providing support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. A member of the Council workforce was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from Spotlight and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups. Correspondence received suggests that 125 food parcels were provided weekly by Spotlight, distributed through the food hub. The Council also worked with Greenham Trust, who had established relationships with all of the food aid providers in the area, to facilitate regular meetings with those groups provide an opportunity to communicate on matters relating to food supply and use of food aid services.

Greenham Trust was central to the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in leadership, but in funding the organisations which were mounting the frontline activity. In addition to providing direct financial support for the food aid activity, they launched a local fundraising appeal, and they established the Food Aid Providers group, co-chairing the fortnightly meetings of this group. Volunteer Centre West Berkshire undertook a strategic co-ordination role, and provided practical input including the recruitment of 700 volunteers, linking them their local food aid provider. Furthermore, they delivered food parcels from the Community Food Distribution Hub, and from Spotlight for residents in Newbury Town, for whom they also provided a shopping service.

The established food aid providers continued to support their service users, although all made adaptations to their operations.

West Berks Foodbank lost the majority of the volunteers working there prior to the pandemic due to shielding requirements, posing immediate staffing challenges. These were overcome through a social media recruitment drive. They changed their model from clients collecting food parcels in person to a home-delivery method and increased the size of the food parcel from three days to seven days' supply. In acknowledgement of the wider support food bank clients would previously have received during visits to the distribution sites, outreach was conducted by the volunteer workforce, who had now been instructed to shield, who made phone calls to clients on a weekly basis to provide support and comfort.

Newbury Soup Kitchen moved their food preparation operation from a domestic kitchen to a commercial unit and increased their service delivery from two to seven days a week, delivering ready-meals to members of the homeless community who had been provided with hotel accommodation by the Council. To ensure that there was no duplication, nor omission, in terms of sites where food was provided, they coordinated with another charity Loose Ends, also serving homeless people. Loose Ends also adapted their service delivery mechanism from on-site meal provision to providing food parcels and ready meals for the homeless community.

Newbury Community Furniture Project used their own financial reserves to purchase a van with a chiller body and hired vans to add to their existing fleet of five vehicles, usually used for transporting furniture and household goods. This allowed them to collect food from FareShare for distribution to the food aid providers, and schools. In addition to the support provided to the various providers of food aid, they also continued to provide food parcels for individuals who had either been previous service users or referred to them through the Community Food Hub and other established partners.

The Fair Close Centre operated seven days a week, increasing their meal provision from 30 to 100 per week. Instead of on-site meal provision, they moved totally to a Meals on Wheels service. As the majority of their drivers were in the age group instructed to shield, they needed to replace them with new volunteers, for whom they had to undertake background checks, and inductions.

As well as these established food aid providers continuing to provide food aid many new local community groups were established spontaneously in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The grass roots approach facilitated communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, the Council and organisations who were able to meet the identified need. In addition to playing a role in making up and distributing food parcels, the volunteers in these community groups were also reported to have undertaken shopping services for people unable to leave their homes. Other actors such as Sovereign and Home-Start made welfare calls to their existing clients. If food insecurity was identified they would signpost and support people to access food aid. We also learned of new independent food banks which were established in some of the villages.

Data overview

The full methodology for the local area case study research has been published alongside this report in the *Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*. This is available on the project website. Details of the data collected for this particular case study is reported below.

The following case study draws from the following sources:

- Six interviews, three with local authority respondents and three with respondents representing three different third sector organisations.
- An on-line workshop was held with nine participants, one local authority respondent who had previously been interviewed, seven third sector respondents, one of whom who had previously been interviewed, and one from a school.

In addition to these participants a further six people were invited to participate in the research but did not do so. Including four third sector representatives, one council representative and one health professional.

In addition to the primary data collection through interviews and the workshop correspondence, desk-based research was undertaken to understand the characteristics of the area and to learn more about the nature of food aid activity. Some data on the extent of food aid provision was supplied in email correspondence. Written responses to specific questions were collected using Padlet and Mentimeter was utilised to establish levels of agreement to additional questions.

About West Berkshire

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. West Berkshire was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly rural. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 186%.

West Berkshire is a unitary authority comprising 30 wards, situated in the County of Berkshire in south east England. In the 2011 census, 153,822 people were recorded as resident in the district, the majority, 98,933 living in the five main towns of Newbury, Thatcham, Calcot, Purley & Tilehurst, with Newbury being the largest of them, and home to 26% of the population (see Figure 1).³³⁰ Approximately 39% of people in West Berkshire live

³³⁰ <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/population>, <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/media/34859/Census-2011-Key-Data-and-Trends/pdf/130605 - Census 2011 - key data and trends - published to web.pdf?m=636733985636570000>

in rural areas, which is more than twice the English average of 17.6%.³³¹ The working age population (16-64 years) represents 60.8%, and the proportion of households described as “workless” is low at 5.6%, compared to the English proportion of 13.3%.³³² At 19.3%, the proportion of people aged over 65, is similar to that of the wider South East England (19.5%).³³³ The population is predominantly white, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups accounting for 5.2% of residents. A local authority respondent shared their description of the population:

“We do have predominantly a white community, we do have pockets of deprivation, and because we span a broad range, from very economically sound to very economically disadvantaged, those disadvantaged communities tend to be quite hidden.” (Council staff respondent)

The risk of hidden insecurity is compounded by the geography of the area.

“You have already appreciated we are a vast area to cover for a small unitary authority, so people will be isolated because of the rurality of our district. So that in itself also presents some challenges.” (Council staff respondent)

Within West Berkshire there are 78 primary schools and 23 secondary schools and of these, 14% are private schools. Free school meal uptake is lower, at 6.3%, than the English average of 13.5%.³³⁴ Despite this, there are apparent pockets of income deprivation, as one respondent shared:

“We have one school that has 127 children on their register and 53 of those are entitled to free school meals.” (Third sector respondent)

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 93% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.³³⁵

³³¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/88029/west-berkshire.pdf, file:///Users/barbaragoldman/Downloads/rucoaleafletmay2015tcm77406351.pdf

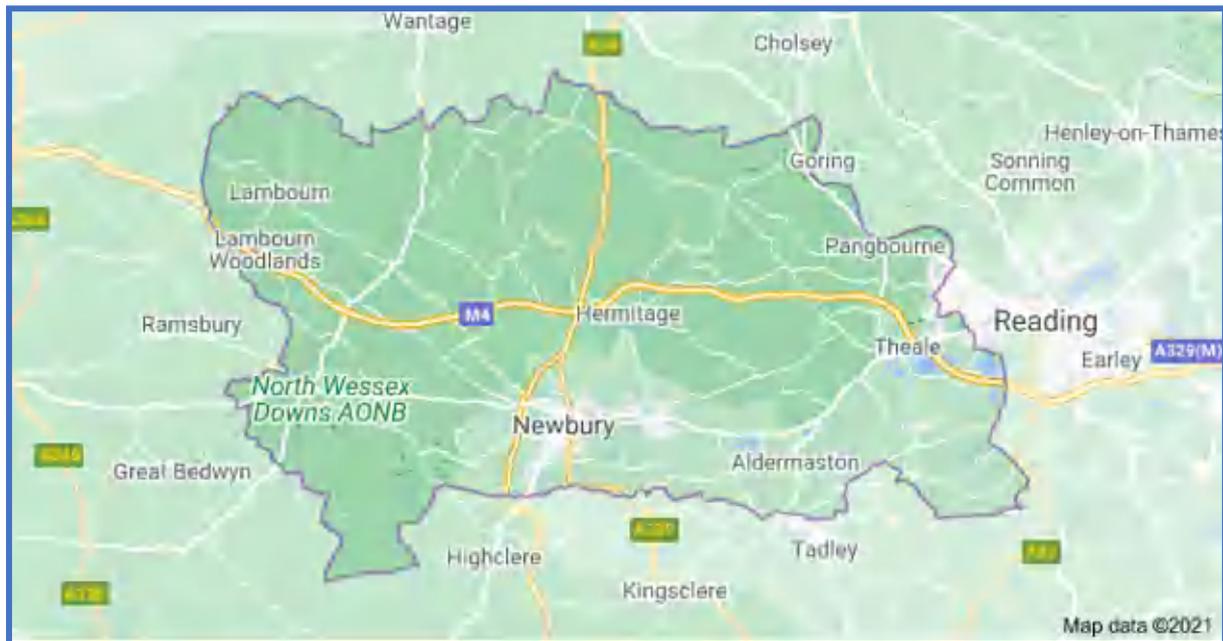
³³² Source: Office for National Statistics, Source: Nomisweb.

³³³ <https://westberkshire.berkshireobservatory.co.uk/population/>

³³⁴ <https://admissionsday.co.uk/area/westberkshire#:~:text=West%20Berkshire%20schools%20and%20catchments,while%2029%20set%20their%20own,https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/search/free%20school%20meals#page/0/gid/1/pat/6/ati/102/are/E06000037/iid/90632/age/34/sex/4/cid/4/tbm/1>

³³⁵ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

Figure 1: Map of West Berkshire



Source: Westberks.Gov.Uk

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic West Berkshire had a number of actors supporting people with food access. There was one food bank, with five distribution centres. Another organisation that provided furniture and white goods to households who had been re-homed, or suffered financial shocks, also provided emergency food parcels. Three other organisations were also providing meals in the area prior to the pandemic, two of these provided for the homeless community and one for older residents. Two charities offered hostel accommodation to homeless people, providing food in at least two of their venues. Other groups supporting vulnerable residents in the area, would refer people to the above organisations when they were working with people who needed help accessing food. These, and other actors that subsequently played a role in the response to the pandemic are described below.

West Berkshire Council

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council's Revenues and Benefits Department provided support to people on low income or experiencing income crises, for example council tax reduction or financial help and where appropriate, directed people to advice agencies such as Citizens Advice, as described to us:

“So the council’s responsibility would be to make sure that anybody who was in financial hardship, for whatever reason, was able to access everything that they were entitled to, both through our easements, but also access to through agencies such as Citizens Advice, any other easements or support that they were, they were entitled to.” (Council staff respondent)

Where appropriate the Revenues and Benefits Department would also provide referrals to West Berks Foodbank or another organisation, Newbury Community Furniture Project, who would be able to support with items such as white goods, and emergency food parcels. Although the respondent had no previous direct involvement with issues relating to financial insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they shared:

“...my instincts are that we [the Council] would respond with...would find a way we would never say we can't help you. We might not be able to help directly, but we would signpost them to somebody like the furniture project or to Citizens Advice so that they in turn could support them.” (Council staff respondent)

West Berks Foodbank

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network, was established in 2013 as the first food bank in the area, and until 2020 was staffed by a volunteer workforce, recruiting their first paid employee in March 2020. The food bank operated out of five distribution centres which were open twice a week, each on different days, located in church halls in the towns of Lambourn, Hungerford, Newbury, Thatcham and the combined Burghfield & Mortimer.

Referral partners included schools, churches, community organisations and health professionals, although the food bank manager estimated that only 20% of clients came through referral agencies, of which the greatest number came through the registered social landlord, Sovereign and Home-Start, the charity supporting families with young children. A crisis line staffed by food bank volunteers enabled self-referrals. The food bank did not report any particular relationship with the Council, other than several departments were referral partners.

Food bank clients represented a mixture of short-term service users experiencing particular financial shocks, such as a large bill or an unexpected household cost, and those for whom food parcel access was longer-term, and described as “more complex”.

The food bank also offered a free table of items which would not ordinarily be included in a food parcel, items which may have had a short shelf life or those of which there was excess stock. These items were also made available to people unable to obtain a voucher with which to access a food parcel:

“For instance, when you walk into a distribution centre, there's a free table of all the things that you know don't fit into the Trussell Trust list of what goes into your food parcel, or the things that were going, were short, dated, or we have an excess of. People would come in. Maybe if they didn't have a voucher and help themselves to that and, and we would encourage that, if necessary.” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank estimated to have served 100 clients over the course of a week prior to February/March 2020. Additionally, the food bank provided food to five schools at the start of

the six-week summer holiday school break which they could distribute to families. The schools chose how they would provide this food to the families.

Spotlight

Desk-based research reveals that Spotlight UK is a national charity, founded in 2009, providing support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. Children from low-income households are offered the activities at low, or no cost, and their households might receive food or equipment to relieve financial pressures. Examples of the tangible support offered for low-income families includes food bank provision, Christmas toy appeals and birthday gifts for children living in financially insecure households.³³⁶ Although the organization was active in the neighbouring district of Basingstoke, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic they were not known to be active in West Berkshire, but as will be seen below, played a significant role in food parcel distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Newbury Community Furniture Project

Newbury Community Furniture Project is part of a wider organisation, Newbury Community Resource Centre, comprising 5 projects although not all in West Berkshire. They support vulnerable residents through a range of endeavours including horticultural therapy for adults and young people with a range of disabilities and health challenges, environmental projects and education. In Newbury, and its neighbour Basingstoke, they garner donations of furniture, white goods and household items which they provide to low-income households who have been re-housed or have an identified need for such items. Although food provision was not their primary function, they provided hot meals for volunteers and service users, and emergency food parcels for financially insecure households, in particular in the event of them being re-housed. They were also members of FareShare.³³⁷ Their activities were described to us:

“We run a whole host of activities and food was a very minor point of what we do. We prepare hot meals every day for our volunteers and adults with learning disabilities that we support. We’ve had supplies from FareShare over the years, and worked closely with FareShare. On an ad hoc basis, we’ve been supplying people for years. That would usually be where the social worker or a family support worker would come in, they’ve been on a family visit, they’ve needed food, and we’ve basically raided the cupboards and the fridges, put packages together and off it went. And that really was the extent of what we did on food, prior to COVID coming along.” (Third sector respondent)

Meal providers

Newbury Soup Kitchen

Newbury Soup Kitchen was established in 2016 by its founder and general manager, who maintains a hands-on role. The organisation supports members of the homeless and rough sleepers’ community with food, as well as social and mental health support. The organisation relied on public donations from supermarkets for their food supplies, using them to provide hot meals for up to 60 service users per week, and a hot take away meal for approximately 20 people on weekends, served out of the back of their van. In addition to meals, some long

³³⁶ <https://spotlightuk.org/who-we-are/>

³³⁷ <https://www.n-c-r-c.org/community-furniture-project/>

shelf life foods would be provided if necessary, as well as signposting to other organisations able to offer wider support, such as addiction recovery.

In order not to overlap with the other meal provider for the same population, Loose Ends (see below) they operate on different days of the week.³³⁸ A third sector respondent described the service offered:

“They gained lots of local support, business and community support. Lots of volunteers, no problems at all there. They interact with the statutory services very well, in as much as local GPs might go in there and talk to some of the visitors and talk to them about their health and encourage them to interact with the services where possible. So there’s quite a good relationship there with the local authority that they have.” (Third sector respondent)

Loose Ends

Loose Ends is described as Newbury’s oldest established homeless support charity. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it provided a drop-in service for members of the homeless community, aged 18 plus. Approximately 20-40 people accessed the provision per day, which opened 5 days a week, providing hot meals for breakfast or lunch, as well as offering food parcels, toiletries, and clothes to people in need.³³⁹ Where appropriate, clients would be signposted to relevant support and advice services such as Citizens Advice, etc.

Their activities were described by a third sector respondent:

“...going back 24 years, a group called Loose Ends was established and that’s a Newbury based charity. And what it does is actually provide hot meals on certain days and times of the week in a place where homeless, rough sleepers, people living in a hostel go there for, again, hot meals. They get a change of clothes there. They’re given toiletries and those sorts of things.

It’s a very well-established organisation, well respected, reasonably well funded. They do okay. It’s wholly run by a volunteer team and an impressive track record really.” (Third sector respondent)

The Fair Close Day Centre

The Fair Close Day Centre offers its services to the older population, aged 65 plus, in West Berkshire. Opening in 1967, they provide social activities, physical health and grooming services, as well as cooked meals, for which they have a scale of charges for members and non-members.³⁴⁰ The organisation describes food as being central to their services, providing meals to their service users, in the community centre and also offering a “Meals on Wheels” service.

Their service was described by a third sector respondent:

³³⁸ <https://newburysoupkitchen.org.uk/>

³³⁹ <https://www.looseendsnewbury.org/>

³⁴⁰ <http://www.fairclosecentre.org/about-us/>, <http://www.fairclosecentre.org/whats-on/>

“We’re known really locally for running the Fair Close Day Centre, which, in normal times, is a thriving social hub for the elderly, providing an extensive range of services.” (Third sector respondent)

“The Fair Close centre is food, fun and friendship is at the heart of what we’ve always done. So, running a community hub and a restaurant, people would be coming in here physically, elderly people, and enjoying the company of others. There is an extensive range of other services, but food is really at its core, in terms of the effort put in, the staffing around it and the contributions to earned income. Before COVID, we were probably doing around 50-odd meals a day, half of them delivered out into the community.” (Third sector respondent)

Other actors supporting older people

During our workshop, we learned that there was one other, commercial organisation, Wiltshire Farm Foods providing a ready-meal delivery service to the older population. In addition, Age UK West Berkshire provided a shopping service, called Easy Shop, using volunteers to assist people who were housebound with online supermarket shopping.³⁴¹

Other actors

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire

This organisation’s role was described as supporting the voluntary and community sector. They work with statutory partners, including the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), town and parish councils, health and wellbeing boards, and advise voluntary organisations in matters such as sourcing funding streams, recruitment, safeguarding and background checking. Additionally, they operate as a volunteer recruitment organisation, providing the public with information as to how, when and where they can volunteer across West Berkshire. They also offer advice as to how a prospective group can establish whether there is a local need for a particular service and consulted with the founder of the West Berks Foodbank before that charity was established. In addition to the work undertaken to support other charities, they offer direct provision to the population, for example running a suicide prevention group, operating community transport services and run a Shopmobility service, using electric scooters.

The organisation is funded from different sources including Big Lottery, the local CCG, a local funder (Greenham Trust – see below) and receive occasional donations from legacies. Further funding is provided by the local authority contributing to the rental costs, as well as the Shopmobility scheme and transport services provided an income stream. The Council provided capital funds for the community transport vehicles.

Greenham Trust

Greenham Trust is a social enterprise, established in 1997 to provide assistance to charity, volunteer and community organisations within West Berkshire and North Hampshire. Income generated from commercial rentals provides funding of £3-5million for community projects. They collaborate closely with the Council, including jointly funding Citizens Advice and

³⁴¹<https://directory.westberks.gov.uk/kb5/westberkshire/directory/service.page?id=43RrDHgMask&adultchannel=2-23>

provide funding for the established food aid providers in West Berkshire. The extent of the financial support provided is described in the following quotes:

“For the 20 odd years we’ve been in existence, we’ve been supporting just about every charitable cause you can think of. Food providers have formed a big part of that, whether it’s the food bank, whether it’s a soup kitchen, whether it’s Loose Ends, we help fund...” (Third sector respondent)

“The food bank, they have a unit on the business park which we fund. We support them in annual grants for various initiatives as well as their steady state of supporting those in food poverty. Then you’ve got the homeless entity which is Loose Ends and the Soup Kitchen and you’ve got- Those are the people in need which Newbury Community Resource Centre, [...] we help support. We provide funding support for them as well. We have a hardship fund so it goes beyond food. It might be white goods or a bed or a carpet, and that sort of stuff as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Sovereign

Sovereign is the lead social housing landlord in the district. In addition to providing affordable housing, it supports charities by funding initiatives which aim to reduce the symptoms of food insecurity, such as West Berks Foodbank, and funds a national campaign led by Accent Housing, called More Than Homes which also raises funds for the Trussell Trust.³⁴² Sovereign was also described as one of the agencies providing West Berks Foodbank with the greatest number of referrals, which they estimated to be “five or so a month”.

West Berkshire Council does not own its own housing stock, however, in 2018 it entered into a joint venture with Sovereign to provide 1,000 new affordable homes by 2020.³⁴³

Other organisations supporting the homeless

We also learned of other organisations providing support to the homeless community, including West Berkshire Homeless and Two Saints.³⁴⁴

Home-Start West Berkshire

Home-Start is a charitable organisation supporting families with counselling, signposting and advocacy, focusing particularly on households experiencing social, health, or financial challenges. Prior to March 2020, they estimated themselves to be the fifth/sixth largest referral partner of the food bank moving to second place during the pandemic.³⁴⁵

School Support

A representative of one primary school responding to our request to participate, estimated that 22% of their student roll were eligible for free school meals. Their work to reduce food insecurity among their students included: referrals to the food bank in the Trussell Trust

³⁴² <https://www.sovereign.org.uk/press-release/sovereign-supports-a-hunger-free-future>, <https://morethanhomes.org/>

³⁴³ <https://www.sovereign.org.uk/press-release/west-berkshire-council-and-sovereign-lay-foundations-for-new-partnership>

³⁴⁴ <https://westberkshirehomeless.co.uk/>, <https://www.twosaints.org.uk/>

³⁴⁵ <https://www.home-start.org.uk/pages/category/things-we-can-help-with>

network, running a breakfast club, and where necessary, providing an emergency food parcel from stocks held on site. When needed, wider support might include a school uniform “bank” and providing the family with nappies and other hygiene items. During the school holidays before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that 25 families would be provided with food parcels provided by the food bank, as well as donations garnered from parents, staff members, and the church to which they are affiliated.

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

One of the earliest signs of food access issues was seen in changes to the volume, and type, of food donations provided to food aid charities. Shortages seen on the supermarket shelves were reflected in the donations:

“It was interesting because the [collection] bins, a bit like Christmas, the initial response was people started filling the bins up with shopping, with tinned food, ambient food, so that was flooding in. But [then] the supermarket donations almost disappeared and/or became very erratic. Because of public shopping change – as you said, the toilet rolls, pasta, beans, flour, rice – you couldn’t get stuff on the shelves.” (Third sector respondent)

Another sign of the challenge which lay ahead was seen in the volume of calls being received by the Fair Close Day Centre. Having anticipated an increase in demand, based on what was being seen in other countries, they received calls not only from the service users themselves, but also the families who had previously been supporting their elderly relatives:

“So, we anticipated that there would be a real hike in demand for our Meals on Wheels service, which is exactly what happened within hours and the days after we went into lockdown. So, there were a few enquiries just before, and then the phone went off the hook for a week or two, after lockdown started in the middle of March” (Third sector respondent)

“It never stopped ringing. So, we could see it coming, people could see it coming, but it suddenly - “My God, my mum is at home, how are we going to feed her, because I can’t go and see her?” (Third sector respondent)

The Volunteer Centre also reported having received calls for help, whether as a result of physical, or financial barriers to food access:

“We were getting calls from people that were just desperate for food and irrespective of their means, they were just still in lockdown, we can’t go out, elderly people, vulnerable people, people who had been told to shield and so forth.” (Third sector respondent)

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

The strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic was spearheaded the Community Support Hub, a partnership comprising the Council, and the Volunteer Centre together with the Greenham Trust as the funding source.

Food access interventions across the area during March to September 2020 included the delivery of food parcels, meals, and volunteers supporting households with essential shopping. Food parcels were provided by the food bank, by Spotlight UK, by schools, and by Community Furniture Project, which also provided logistical support, such as some distribution of surplus food, warehousing, and transport. Hot meals were delivered by the Fair Close Day Centre to their elderly service users, and by Loose Ends and Newbury Soup Kitchen to the re-housed homeless community.

New actors providing food aid in the community included Spotlight UK who provided food parcels. In addition, community groups formed within “parishes, villages and hamlets”, providing a conduit between beneficiaries in the local communities and third sector food parcel providers.

West Berkshire Council

The Council implemented two hubs: a Community Support Hub, where Council staff and leaders together with members of statutory bodies met to resolve all emerging issues relating to COVID-19 and a central distribution point/hub, through which food distribution was coordinated.

The Community Support Hub was established, once it became apparent that local groups were being set up spontaneously, in an effort to establish some structure to harness the community spirit which was evolving.

“Everything was entirely spontaneous. That weekend when it all just stood and you could see it all happening on Facebook and community noticeboards etc. Everybody was saying that we just want to help. We just need to know what to do.” (Council staff respondent)

Accordingly, they collaborated with West Berkshire Volunteer Centre and Greenham Trust, attempting to coordinate the anticipated supply and demand of support, identifying the categories of need as likely to be food, medicine, and welfare.³⁴⁶

“So I talked to the leader of West Berkshire Council. I also talked to many other charity heads, and said, “Look, I think we need to come together to create an organisation that can support whatever is needed, whether it’s food, mental health... You know, whatever it is, we need to do this, we need to do it in a coordinated manner. In effect, what came out of that was the Community Support Hub for West Berkshire.” (Third sector respondent)

The homeless community were provided temporary accommodation in hostels and hotels, and their nutritional needs were met by the third sector, and in some cases were provided microwaves by the Council to facilitate food preparation. The Council also provided funding to Newbury Community Furniture Project to allow them to purchase white goods or furniture for residents experiencing sudden need for these items which may have compromised their ability to purchase food:

³⁴⁶ <https://www.newburytoday.co.uk/news/coronavirus-community-support-hub-launched-in-west-berkshire-9187430/>

“We have used the Emergency Food Grant to support the Furniture Project, to provide white goods so that people don't have to have that difficult decision between buying a fridge, putting down carpets and a bed or putting food on the table.”
(Council staff respondent)

Promotion of support

The Council contact centre took calls for the Community Support Hub which was staffed by council staff. Together the Contact Centre and Community Support Hub signposted callers to the community groups providing food aid now operating in their local communities. The support available to the public was promoted through the local newspaper, which published a new and dedicated telephone number for calls linked to the Community Support Hub.

Calls that could not be addressed at the first point of contact with signposting to the relevant community group were assigned to a Hub Response Officer whose role was to provide additional support and advice. If further needs were identified, for instance from an existing service user, the Response Officer was able to refer the caller for additional support, as a local authority respondent described:

“... a member of the public would phone the Council and say, "I need help", or phone the hub, sorry, and say that they needed help. Their need would be expressed on the platform as a 'job', the response officer's job today, still today, is to go and pick that up off of the platform and try and solve that problem. So by the information that had been articulated by the person that was in need, work out what they needed, then make the call to them to help them. But if they thought that this was somebody, from what was described, who might already be in contact with adult social care, before they did that they would then look on the care package to see what was there or make a contact call to somebody in adult social care to say, "Mr Jones has come through. He said he needs help in respect of his government food parcel, but what else can we do to help him?" (Council staff respondent)

Community Food Distribution Hub

The community food distribution hub was set up by the Council at Newbury Rugby Club working with the charity Spotlight to distribute food parcels. A member of the Council workforce was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from Spotlight and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups.

“We set up Newbury Rugby Club as a kind of food hub, so that we would go and collect...Spotlight had a building in Thatcham at the time and they would using their volunteers make the food parcels up there – our transport team would go to Thatcham, load a minibus up bring it back to Newbury Rugby Club put it all in to different areas and then the volunteers would turn up during a set hour and we would hand the food parcels over and they would go off” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to the volunteers from the community groups, other volunteers supported the distribution effort within the food hub.

“I’d say we probably had at Newbury Rugby Club probably a team of ten/twelve volunteers, on the 2 days that the food parcels would come in and help out then”
(Council staff respondent)

The role of the seconded council staff member overseeing the logistics and liaising with the range of organisations providing the response was described:

“So the logistics role was very much about keeping in touch with all of those community groups that set up, knowing what their capability was, knowing what their offer was, really, and who the key point of contact was. Over time, liaising with the food banks who were also needing to work collaboratively with the community groups in getting food parcels out there.” (Council staff respondent)

“Their role was also liaising with our transport team, who were offering transport services. So if a community group didn't have somebody who could drive for them, for whatever reason, then our wonderful team on the transport team were doing some of that driving for us.” (Council staff respondent)

The provision through this hub was designed for people who were not being supported by any of the other local food aid providers (see below). Once the referrals had been collated, and the provision organised according to local geographical area, the logistics officer would liaise with the person leading each local group to arrange for food parcels to be collected from the community food distribution hub and delivered to the residents in each town or village. The process was described as follows:

“So they would – the community [group] would ring up our community hub and say “I need a food parcel” ...so we would then do a referral across to Spotlight for that for the food parcel, then they would send me a list every Thursday for the following week on who was on their list for food and in what area. So I would break that down into areas and I would then send an email out to the lead of the community group and say I’ve these people in this area who need a food parcel, are you able to find someone who can pick it up and take it and drop it off and they would say yes and then...”
(Council staff respondent)

The need for these food parcels began to diminish once residents were able to access supermarket slots.

“I think it was when people were allowed to start going back out then you had the DEFRA scheme where we could get people who were shielding but could afford food and they were getting priority supermarket slots so the need for the food parcels weren't as big so we were able to pass them on to different ways, because that was the thing with Spotlight, they were getting lots of You could afford to buy food but you couldn't go out and get the food and you couldn't get a supermarket slot so that's where Spotlight came in.” (Council staff respondent)

Systems were established to try to ensure no-one was financially exposed when expenditures were incurred on behalf of someone else, for example when volunteers shopped for people unable to leave their homes or shop online:

“We set up systems where cash wasn't really needed so that we gave one or two community groups what I called a community purse. So there was a pot of money that they were given so that they could reimburse the volunteer whilst the person who

had received the service could write a cheque and it could be banked. Now, most of our community groups didn't even need that. They just worked it out for themselves, how they were going to- They set up a volunteers' pot and things like that.” (Council staff respondent)

DEFRA scheme for priority supermarket slots

The shielding population were provided with the national food boxes arranged by Central Government and delivered by their central contractor up until the end of July 2020. The Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) worked with supermarkets to make priority shopping slots available for people unable to go out, but able to pay. Prior to the end of the National Food Box Scheme, the Council contacted residents who had been receiving them, and were eligible for the priority supermarket slots, to take up that offer. People who did not have the ability to pay for food were referred to the food bank.

“So, we did that very proactively, because it ended in July, didn't it? So from the end of June, all the way through July, we were phoning up everybody who was receiving a government food parcel and enabling them, in whatever way they needed help, to get a supermarket slot. If they couldn't afford food, then we were enabling them to get food through other provision.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council also worked with Greenham Trust, who had established relationships with all of the food aid providers in the area, to facilitate regular meetings with those groups provide an opportunity to communicate on matters relating to food supply and use of food aid services.

“We wanted to make sure that there was food going to be in plentiful supply because there was lots of stuff going around about food shortages. We wanted to make sure that there was the right criteria being adopted in terms of making sure people did really need some food assistance.” (Third sector respondent)

Greenham Trust

This organisation was central to the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in leadership, but in funding the organisations which were mounting the frontline activity.

Once the consequences of COVID-19 became apparent, not least through reports in the print media, Greenham Trust, the Council, and the Volunteer Centre discussed the need for a local coordinated response, resulting in the Community Support Hub being established with a view to identifying the sectors in which the greatest need was likely to be seen, and the organisations best placed to meet those needs.

“Really, the idea of that was to just draw together the key voluntary and charity organisations that would be needed to support those who were having serious issues because of the pandemic. Obviously food being, probably, one of the most significant parts to that but, you know, there's mental health, there's domestic abuse. There was schooling, all kinds of things.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to providing direct financial support for the food aid activity, the organisation launched a local fundraising appeal. Altogether, £400,000 was available to support the charities:

“In the same week we created the hub, Greenham Trust launched for the first time we'd ever done this, we launched the coronavirus appeal fund. We put in £200,000 of

our own trust money as matched funding to attract public donations, other charitable donations, and corporate donations. We raised, pretty much, another £200,000 through doing that. We got high net worths, we got charitable organisations locally, we got the general public donating. You know, anything from £10 to £10,000 from individuals to corporates to you name it. They put money into this. We used this, to deploy, to support the various food agencies and other people who needed support during- You know, whatever need throughout it. So that was running at the same time.” (Third sector respondent)

A Food Aid Providers group was established by Greenham Trust, comprising all the relevant established organisations. Meetings were held fortnightly, chaired by the Council and by Greenham Trust, as one respondent shared:

“We had a number of meetings specific to the food providers because we saw that as being one of the most important areas, just to make sure they were all talking to one another because they’re all dealing with the same sorts of clients or people who use them. We wanted to make sure that food was going to be in plentiful supply because there was lots of stuff going around about food shortages. We wanted to make sure that there was the right criteria being adopted in terms of making sure people did really need some food assistance because there were one or two charities who just sort of knee-jerked into providing food for people who probably didn’t really need it.” (Third sector respondent)

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire

The Director of this organisation provided part of the strategic leadership of West Berkshire’s third sector response.

“As a charity, there is myself and [name] at the Greenham Trust, it was our idea to actually establish a community [support] hub with the local authority. So we established a community [support] hub and then about a fortnight after that the government said to council, “You’ve got to have a community hub.” So the local authority, West Berks, then took on the central call centre, if you like, to the public as the hub.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as this strategic co-ordination role, the volunteer centre provided practical input to the response including the recruitment of 700 volunteers, linking them their local food aid provider. Furthermore, they delivered food parcels from the Community Food Distribution Hub, and from Spotlight (see below) for residents in Newbury Town, for whom they also provided a shopping service.

Established food aid providers

The established food aid providers continued to support their service users, although all made adaptations to their operations (see below). In some instances, there appears to have been some informal geographical division of responsibility, with the residents of the larger towns supported by the established organisations, and the smaller villages and hamlets relying instead on the community groups which were established in response to the pandemic (see below).

“We predominantly found that we were dealing with people in the towns of Newbury and Thatcham and that, in the surrounding villages, local people at a village level and

a smaller town level, initiatives were kicking off and helping people.” (Third sector respondent)

West Berks Foodbank

West Berks Foodbank made a number of adaptations to their service.

Adaptations

The food bank lost the majority of the volunteers working there prior to the pandemic due to shielding requirements, posing immediate staffing challenges. These were overcome through a social media recruitment drive:

“One of our first key challenges was we lost 74% of our volunteers because they were vulnerable. But we literally put it out on social media that we needed support and we were inundated. So, that was one of our key challenges right at the start. To be brutally honest, it has been amazing, it’s been absolutely amazing. From volunteers coming in and working to my volunteers talking about staying in bubbles, and we knew that, if we stayed in bubbles, it would mean that everybody would have to work set weeks, or set days in a week, we’d have to work harder than we expected to. Everybody committed to that.” (Third sector respondent)

One of the first adaptations made to the food bank operation was the change from clients collecting food parcels in person, to a home-delivery method. Notably, implementing a delivery service had been part of the organisation’s future planning prior to the pandemic, to overcome the challenge of the distance to reach the more rural communities, but implementation was hastened in response to the pandemic. In addition, they increased the size of the food parcel from three days to seven days’ supply when they started the delivery method of distribution, in order to reduce the required number of journeys.

They also relaxed the restriction to food parcel access, previously three vouchers in a six month period (which was a standard provision of the Trussell Trust before the pandemic).

In acknowledgement of the wider support food bank clients would previously have received during visits to the distribution sites, outreach was conducted by the volunteer workforce who had now been instructed to shield:

“So, we put in process a welfare call system. So, our volunteers- It tended to be our older volunteers that were shielding, who couldn’t come and help anymore and were desperate to help, making phone calls to our clients weekly. Not offering them food – offering them support, offering them comfort. And that is something I’m incredibly proud of. Because a lot of those clients were only talking to one of our volunteers once a week, and they hadn’t spoken to anybody since then. For safeguarding purposes, we very quickly gathered the information of lone males and females, and made sure that we did contact them weekly. And if we hadn’t got hold of them, we kept trying, until we did get hold of them.” (Third sector respondent)

Sources of food donations

The owner of Dream Doors, a local kitchen company, was prompted by the empty supermarket shelves to become a new local partner. A scheme was established called ‘Food Bank on Your Doorstep’, providing not only a delivery service, but a novel means of garnering food donations.

“She decided to contact the food bank and say, “What can I do to help? My shop is shut but we are going to sit in our shop every day, just in case, for any mad reason, somebody wants to come in and buy a kitchen because we don’t know what else to do. Can we help you?” So, they became a delivery hub. So, we would literally make up the boxes for Thatcham, take them over to [name], and her and her husband would deliver them out in the afternoons, in their Dream Doors van. And then she turned around and she said, “What else can I do?” And I said, “We need donations.” So, she set up Food Bank on Your Doorstep. So, she asked for volunteers to mailshot the road that they lived in, putting their telephone number on there, saying, “Contact me to tell you that you’ve left two cans of beans on your doorstep and a lovely volunteer will come and collect them for you.” And they were bringing in probably- I think their first month, they brought in over a ton. And then I think, in total, they’ve done probably 18- 20 tons of food to us.” (Third sector respondent)

To put this into context, the food bank respondent reported that, at its peak, they were distributing 15-18 tons of food per month, a five-fold increase on the volume distributed prior to the pandemic.

Another source of food donations came from people who were receiving the national food boxes despite not needing them:

“...we used to collect about 40 - We called them Boris boxes. We used to collect about 40 Boris boxes a week, from donors that were being sent them and they didn’t need them, so they donated them to us. So, we had Sky engineers, because Sky engineers, as we all know, were stood down the first time around. They used to go out in their vans and collect the Boris boxes and bring them to the food bank” (Third sector respondent)

Levels of need

The food bank has maintained its eligibility criteria of financial barriers to food access, however, at the start of the pandemic, they were providing one seven-day emergency food parcel, at the request of the Council, to overcome physical barriers to food access.

“At the start, obviously, we were covering households that had gone into isolation, for a one-off, an emergency parcel for a one-off, because we were asked to do that by the Council. And that was so the Council could get them in contact with their local community group. But we had said, right from the start, that we were only going to feed people that were in financial crisis.” (Third sector respondent)

They estimate that they have received four to five times the number of referrals compared to those received prior to the pandemic, thought to be a consequence of reduced household income, resulting from reduced working hours, people being furloughed, or marriage breakdowns. The increase also arose out of partnerships with new referral agents, such as schools and churches, many of which had previously been reliable sources of donations.

During the early months of the pandemic, the food bank witnessed increase levels of need from families eligible for free school meals and experiencing increased vulnerability, as shared with us:

“During COVID, obviously when free school meals during the first lockdown wasn’t organised, we had a huge uptake. And that was obviously something that the families were saying – “We are entitled to free school meals, can you help us?” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank now has a volunteer ‘Schools Manager’, whose primary focus is to work with schools. They contacted the schools, building relationships and offering support for vulnerable families. In addition to delivering food parcels to families, they also provided parcels to schools for them to distribute as they saw fit.

Newbury Soup Kitchen

Newbury Soup Kitchen moved their food preparation operation from a domestic kitchen to a commercial unit and increased their service delivery from two to seven days a week, delivering ready-meals to members of the homeless community who had been provided with hotel accommodation by the Council. They estimate that they provided 5,000 meals during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that there was no duplication, nor omission, in terms of sites where food was provided, they coordinated with another charity Loose Ends, also serving homeless people (see below).

“So, we, initially, were feeding two days a week, as I said, pre-COVID. We then went up to seven days a week because people were being housed in accommodation in and around Newbury. We delivered seven days a week, we’ve got a transit van that’s been donated to us, so we were preparing meals and delivering them to various places the two days a week that Loose Ends didn’t. Or Loose Ends did some hotels, we didn’t. So, between the two of us, all the hotels were covered. Six of us fed and prepared and delivered 5,000 meals in that initial lockdown. I can’t remember how many weeks it was now. And that was seven days a week. So, they would have hot vegetarian meals.” (Third sector respondent)

Loose Ends

This organisation also adapted their service delivery mechanism from on-site meal provision to providing food parcels and ready meals for the homeless community who had been provided with temporary accommodation by the Council. It is estimated that they provided 350 individuals per week with meals.¹⁹

“But of course, homeless people were put into hotels in the area, so we then were working with the hotels. They were providing the accommodation, but they were not providing any food. So, in our repurposed call, we began this takeaway service for the clients that come to us, plus we were making up food parcels that would be delivered to, I think it was four hotels, maybe five, in the end, who were putting up the homeless people. So, we went from just being a ‘come and join us for food’ building, to being a full takeaway service. People working not exactly around the clock, but certainly doing a lot of hours, to ensure that the people who had the greatest need were fed.” (Third sector respondent)

¹⁹ Email correspondence from West Berkshire Council.

The particular challenge for both of these organisations was providing food in a way that it could be utilised, as the accommodation they had been provided had no food preparation or storage facilities.

“And often some of the hotels, it had to be left outside their doors. And we were going through into the summer months, and it was quite difficult, you couldn’t guarantee meals were going to be consumed straightaway, so we did vegetarian meals so they were a bit safer. But in that package, they would have an extra meal, so they would have a sandwich made or something. They didn’t have cooking facilities, but a lot of the hotels did have kettles, so they could use Pot Noodles and make porridge. But then the Council did start providing microwaves to some of the people. But there was no other food provision, other than Loose Ends and ourselves, with regard to the hotels, the emergency accommodation.” (Third sector respondent)

Another challenge with this particular community was matching their needs with the type of products with which they were being provided. In addition to lacking food storage and preparation facilities, many people lacked food preparation skills:

“And that was quite interesting on the food side of it as well, because an awful lot of the people that we rehoused hadn’t really been catering for themselves for some considerable time, so there had to be some other things put in. Because a lot of the foods we were supplying, I think the classic line was, “No, when I said I wanted some food, mate, I meant ‘food’ food.”

So, essentially, we were trying to supply fresh fruit and everything else and, in a way, there was a bit of a mismatch between what people wanted out of the ‘food’ food and what we were actually supplying, from our point of view being a balanced diet as best we could make it, with a lot of fresh produce. Whereas an awful lot of the people we were supporting, who had been long-term, either in temporary accommodation or had been homeless, whether it be street-homeless or whatever, didn’t actually have the skill set to do that. So, at the time, we did have to do an awful lot of ready meals, which is not exactly what we set out to do. So, that of course meant that we had to go and try and source different items as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Newbury Community Furniture Project

In addition to supporting service users with whom they had engaged previously, the Newbury Community Furniture Project also received referrals for food parcels from established referral partners and the Community Food Hub. This was in addition to the logistical support for other food aid providers, which they had anticipated would be their primary function. Data received from the logistics manager of the Community Food Hub suggests that they were providing food parcels for 450 families per week, and for 6 schools.³⁴⁷

Adaptations

Drawing on their experience in logistics, the Newbury Community Furniture Project used their own financial reserves to purchase a van with a chiller body and hired vans to add to their existing fleet of five vehicles, usually used for transporting furniture and household

³⁴⁷ Email Correspondence from West Berkshire Council

goods. This allowed them to collect food from FareShare for distribution to the food aid providers, and schools, as they shared:

“We noticed pretty quickly, if we were going to be able to make use of this stuff that was coming through, we were going to have to put a cold chain in place, so we went out and bought a chiller van, pretty sharpish. We also started hiring in large refrigeration trailers.” (Third sector respondent)

“What we were doing was, when the chiller van went up to Didcot, to collect it from FareShare, we’d first of all go to a number of schools on different days. We were going up every day at one point. So, we’d go up, we’d go to a school, we’d have lots of yoghurts, we’d have an awful lot of dairy, cheese, yoghurts and everything. We’d just say to the school, “Depending on what you’re doing for your day, just take what you need out of the van.” So, we were trying to get rid of it before it ever got back to us, and we were visiting different places.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to the support provided to the various providers of food aid, they also continued to provide food parcels for individuals who had either been previous service users or referred to them through the Community Food Hub and other established partners.

Fair Close Centre

Adaptations

The Fair Close Centre operated seven days a week, increasing their meal provision from 30 to 100 per week. They initially moved their food preparation area to Newbury Racecourse, to allow for social distancing, returning to their own premises after three months, by which time they felt they had safe practices in place. Instead of on-site meal provision, they moved totally to a Meals on Wheels service. As the majority of their drivers were in the age group instructed to shield, they needed to replace them with new volunteers, for whom they had to undertake background checks, and inductions.

New actors in food aid provision

Spotlight UK

Spotlight UK was an organisation with limited experience in food aid provision rather, as noted above, they provided support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. As food access issues became more prevalent in the area they became a key actor in food parcel provision. Receiving initial funding from Greenham Trust for 10 weeks they worked closely with the Council and the Community Food Hub, distributing food parcels to the community groups operating in the villages and towns. Correspondence received suggests that 125 food parcels were provided weekly by Spotlight, distributed through the food hub.¹⁹ This arrangement was described,

“They were working in partnership with the Council, the Council Transport Team were doing their deliveries. So, they had set up a hub at Newbury Rugby Club and Spotlight would deliver food there. And volunteers and community volunteers from

¹⁹ Email Correspondence from West Berkshire Council

the community support hubs that sprung up in all the different places, they all came there. And also, there were drivers from the Council.” (Third sector respondent)

Prior to the pandemic Spotlight provided services in the neighbouring area of North Hampshire but were not active in West Berkshire. However, they offered their services to West Berkshire Council at time when the need for food support was high. For example, when people who were self-isolating, but not shielding, were unable to delivery slots with supermarkets and were not eligible for support from other food aid providers.

“What I didn’t know about was Spotlight, they were new to me, and they literally turned up when we needed them, which was just as everybody was getting to that critical point of trying to meet demand and finding it hard to meet demand. Plus, the demand was changing. It was increasing, but it was also people who were needing help who had never historically needed help, and the traditional avenues were not those that they had rehearsed. So we needed something that was a little bit more nimble, and that is when Spotlight came into the family, as it were, to help us do that.” (Council staff respondent)

Once the initial funding stream was exhausted and no further funding for their food provision in the area was obtained, Spotlight ceased their food aid operation in West Berkshire.

Community Groups

The Council estimates that as many as 90 groups were established spontaneously in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by 3,000 volunteers, many of whom had never previously undertaken any volunteering role.

“So a lot of the physical response, the actual going out and helping people, was geographically based, and those were stand-up [spontaneous] groups. Those were groups that didn’t exist at the beginning of March and they were there to do things. So they were very new and they were very COVID-focused.” (Council staff respondent)

The grass roots approach facilitated communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, the Council and organisations who were able to meet the identified need.

“Everybody just came together and said, “We have got this. We can help people. We know who the vulnerable people are in our community. We will deploy one community champion per street and one person to manage all of those, and that is the person the hub [The Council’s food distribution hub] can be in contact with regularly.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to playing a role in making up and distributing food parcels, volunteers were also reported to have undertaken shopping services for people unable to leave their homes:

“The burden of the actual supporting communities was taken by those voluntary groups who were going out and doing the shopping and picking up the prescriptions and delivering them.” (Council staff respondent)

This local approach enabled grass roots communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, and the groups who were able to meet this need. It

also offered the prospect of limiting the risk of hidden, unmet need through the very granular nature of the response:

“West Berkshire is quite thin and quite rural, one part is way out in the sticks and then you’ve got other parts that are quite near Newbury or Thatcham – big towns - but the ones that are out in Lambourne, which is out in the sticks have always been like “oh we don’t get anything, we get no support ...” but the community groups, I think now are really helping bring it all together so they’re not feeling out on their own, so there would always be able to get a food parcel, or support.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to the Community Support Hub number promoted by the Council in the local press, the community groups communicated through various medium, including social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and leaflet distribution. Some of the various processes were described as follows:

“There were two ladies in one of our villages, and it was literally two ladies on Facebook. Because it was a small little hamlet, they kind of knew everybody and they decided to go out and literally put leaflets through everybody’s door to say, ‘If you need help, this is a number. Let us know, and we will find what it is, whether it is walking your dog or getting your food or whatever help you need, we are there’.

Then there was a guy in Hungerford who got himself 12 volunteers, gave each of those volunteers a patrol patch, and they went and found out who was on their patch. Then he coordinated those volunteers, and he was the link then to us in the hub. He connected also with the food bank and made sure that food parcels were getting over there as well. So every locality did it in a slightly different way, but commensurate with what they had, the resources that they had.” (Council staff respondent)

School support

Following the closure of schools to most pupils, the respondent from this sector reported reaching out to families directly to find out if they needed help with food, and of receiving calls from families for help:

“So, what we started doing was phoning, from a safeguarding and welfare point of view. But what we did find also was that other families, that weren’t known to us, were coming to us, asking for help with food and things, because of redundancies and all manner of things. And equally, some of our staff members, we were supporting as well.” (School Respondent)

Children who were eligible for free school meals were provided a hot meal if they were eligible to attend school, for example children of key workers and those considered to be vulnerable, while families of those being home-schooled were provided with a daily “grab bag” or a weekly food parcel. The food parcels provided the schools with an opportunity to engage with families.

“So, we decided that we would go down the food parcel route, so they could collect a food parcel once a week. And all of our families receiving free school meals did engage with that, whether the child was in school or not, which made us able to have contact at least some face-to-face contact and see what was going on.” (School Respondent)

Other Actors

Sovereign

Sovereign staff made welfare calls to their residents at the start of the pandemic. When food insecurity was identified, they would refer to organisations who would be able to offer meals or food parcels. Additional support was offered in the form of food vouchers.

“One thing that we introduced at Sovereign, as a direct response to COVID, was a support fund, which looked to- It was with our frontline officers, that were already working with residents that had been negatively impacted by COVID. And it offered them access to a voucher for up to £50 for either Tesco, Amazon or Asda. It wasn't completely said that that had to go on food provision, but when we asked people at the end what it was spent on, I would say 90%, if not more than 90% of people spent that on food.” (Third sector respondent)

Home-Start

Home-Start adopted a similar approach to other organisations by proactively calling their service users to establish their needs, which included concerns about food insecurity,

“We contacted all of our families at the start of this and we were very aware of what was going on and what families said they needed now, and that's how we designed the support that we provided. And it was a range of things, other than just food. With the children at home, that had a big impact, having additional mouths to feed, and the fact that they were always home as well, and bored, and always eating.” (Third sector respondent)

Independent food banks

We learned of new independent food banks which were established in the villages of Hermitage, Chieveley and Lambourn Junction. Two of these were previously distribution sites for the food bank in the Trussell Trust network prior to it moving to a delivery, rather than client-collection service. The new food banks did not impose any eligibility criteria, nor offer signposting to wider support services. Existing food aid providers offered these independent operations their support.

“So, these are very, very community-focused, and tend to be without criteria and tend to be without any of the signposting or the long-term. So, we've had conversations with all of them regarding food dependency and creating food dependency. Some of them get it, some of them don't. Because they just want to help. So, we have very much stood back and have turned around and said, “If you need support, we are here. If you get a complex case that you are worried about, let us know.” We have, obviously, all the safeguarding, training and connections...” (Third sector respondent)

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in West Berkshire

Below, we summarise some key themes we identified in our interviews and the workshop.

Limitations of the national food box scheme

Distribution of the national food boxes provided by central Government, though welcomed, presented some challenges in their own right. Initially, the data flow as to who would be

receiving the boxes was perceived to be slow, and there were difficulties with the delivery mechanisms and in people being able to opt out of deliveries.

“What didn't work well initially was some of the information that we were receiving from the government in respect of who was clinically extremely vulnerable or, in the first phases of this, called shielding. Some of the data that was coming out that we needed to use to help our communities to know who would be getting a government food parcel, etc., some of that data flow was not good.” (Council staff respondent)

“They [food boxes] didn't arrive quick enough. There was a bit of a delay from it starting. There's a food crisis, these people need a food box. Then there was a bit of a delay from them deciding that to actually them coming out.” (Council staff respondent)

When the Government food box contents were inappropriate for the recipient, adaptations were made in collaboration with local community groups who would purchase culturally sensitive products. Additionally, opting out of receiving the food boxes presented challenges:

“...there was a person who had declined on numerous occasions and the darned thing kept being delivered. He kept declining it and it kept getting delivered.” (Council staff respondent)

“If we were contacted on the hub, that the boxes weren't culturally sensitive, for example, then we would work with our local food providers to see if we could change it in any way, but we didn't receive that many comments about them being culturally insensitive or, indeed, not meeting the needs of people who had medical conditions. We received a few and we got round it. We would contact the local community group and ask them to help buy some different products, which they were happy to do, but it did happen. We did get some calls saying, "I can't eat this. I am on a very restricted diet." (Council staff respondent)

In the absence of being able to opt out of the national scheme, the boxes were often donated to food aid providers, as one respondent shared:

“We did get quite a few where the food bank was getting donations of those food boxes, they [recipients of the boxes] didn't actually need those food boxes because they were still going out to the supermarket. But because they were on a list that was drawn up, it seemed to be they just got food parcels.” (Council staff respondent)

Funding

Funding for the West Berkshire food aid effort was extensive, and received from a range of sources, including Greenham Trust, some of the smaller town councils, as well as donations for individual groups made by local residents. This was helped by The Good Exchange, the on-line fundraising platform operated by Greenham Trust to allow organisations to crowd fund for specific projects. Whilst this platform was not established in response to COVID, it allowed the public to donate to all of the organisations listed above as having participated in the food aid response.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ <https://thegoodexchange.com/>

There was widespread recognition for the role Greenham Trust played in supporting the food providers group financially, as one respondent shared:

“We are all a lot closer to the Greenham Trust, because without Greenham Trust, there isn’t one charity in West Berkshire that would have been able to do what we did without their financial support. None. None of us” (Third sector respondent)

The existing food aid providers noted that the additional financial donations offered more financial security than they would previously have had.

Despite the widespread funding, although West Berkshire Volunteer Centre received some funding from Greenham Trust, and from a local donor, they estimate that they will have experienced a financial shortfall of approximately £35,000 due to reduced income previously earned through the paid-for services provided to the public, such as the Shopmobility scheme.

Volunteers

Volunteering was already a feature in West Berkshire, prior to COVID-19, and the volunteer response underpinned much of the response to food insecurity in the area, including the community groups mentioned above.

So they were very new and they were very COVID-focused, but there was already a strong history of volunteering in West Berkshire...” (Council staff respondent)

“Back in March, I think we recruited something like 700 volunteers in about 8 or 9 weeks, something like that, I think, which we then refer to the most appropriate organisations across the district. So, people are ready, willing and able to help out.” (Third sector respondent)

Food donations

Workshop participants shared their experiences of changes experienced in the volume and nature of food donations. These included a reduction in the amount of short life fresh food donations from supermarkets and an increase of catering surplus from FareShare.

“We found that the fresh stuff was not being donated because people were panic-buying, people were very quickly being put on furlough, etc., and were short of money, so they were buying reduced items, which is usually what we’re donated, that hasn’t been sold by the supermarkets.” (Third sector respondent)

“...we noticed that the types of food coming through were different. Because obviously the hospitality sector was closed, so we were getting huge catering packs of all kinds of stuff, which we then had to split out and repack. So, there was a rapid change in the type of food.” (Third sector respondent)

Surplus food donations were unpredictable, and in some cases finding the appropriate destination for the donated food was a challenge, requiring a flexible approach:

“But it was a very rapid change in the type of food that was coming out through FareShare. And it was a bit of feast or famine. Suddenly, we were offered eight pallettes of cucumbers on a Friday afternoon. Well, there’s not a lot you can do with that really.” (Third sector respondent)

Following the closure of the sector, the hospitality industry became a significant source of food donations. These donations were important when supermarket donations were reduced but they also provided some logistical challenges:

“It’s happened after every lockdown initially, that hotels and restaurants contacted us because they had fridges and freezers and cupboards full of food that they couldn’t use. So, that actually supported a lot of our food provision, when the supermarkets weren’t” (Third sector respondent)

“We were getting 2kg rolls of goat’s cheese, which doesn’t go down very well with food parcels, so we were trading them with top-end restaurants for tins of chopped tomatoes and the like. It was about trying to find the right mix of food that you needed, to supply a particular type [of food provision].” (Third sector respondent)

Established sources of donations, including food surplus distribution organisations provided much of the food stocks being used:

“We get our donated food from Neighbourly and FareShare, so we rely heavily on donated food from supermarkets and obviously the public purse. We have donation bins around various supermarkets around Newbury and Thatcham and Hungerford.” (Third sector respondent)

Food providers also reported sharing food donations between themselves, swapping items for which one organisation had a surfeit, and others a dearth (see Reflections section below).

Triaging & needs assessment

Different approaches to triaging and needs-assessment were adopted, and to different extents. Although the food bank initially relaxed its eligibility criteria, this changed during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the most part retained a focus on food parcel distribution to those in financial crisis. Conversely, Spotlight adopted no eligibility criteria, nor did some of the established organisations with specific service users, such as the homeless community or the elderly, as shared with us:

“We go on the basis that, if somebody tells us they need food, we give them food. If we get conned, so what? It’s food.” (Third sector respondent)

“...a lot of our clients could afford food, albeit a lot of them are on a very tight budget. There were isolated, scared, often not able to cook for themselves, but we did have occasions, we have quite a lot of people who live in Sovereign housing and we would get calls, saying, “People have slipped through the net, they need feeding, can you help?” And we’ve always said yes, we’ve just fed them.” (Third sector respondent)

There was acceptance that some residents may have been accessing support from more than one food aid provider and reflections around the outcomes of not having eligibility criteria were shared:

“I would more than likely say there was a risk of duplication, there were probably people getting double [food] boxes.” (Council staff respondent)

“I remember taking one particular parcel and we tried three times that day. And eventually I found my way into this flat and the young woman there said, “Oh, just leave it there.” I decided to tell a bit of white lie and said, “I think this is going to be

ending this week,” and she said, “Oh, we don’t really need it anyway.” So, I said, “Okay, I’ll just leave it.” So, I think there was a lot of that. There was no test as to their actual need, so people were just taking stuff.” (Third sector respondent)

In the early weeks, little distinction was made between financial and physical barriers to food access, but over time people were able to put alternative support systems in place.

“I think the issue was that some people were making a plan and there was a very short period where they couldn’t get access to food, they couldn’t get delivery slots, they couldn’t get other things in place, and they couldn’t put their support in. I would say, in the first four to six weeks, quite a lot of the people we supported initially then had already put their support mechanism in place. That particular group, who had an access issue, it wasn’t a financial issue.” (Third sector respondent)

By the time the priority supermarket slot scheme was established, however, closer attention was paid to the needs assessment before food parcels were delivered from the community food hub:

“It [lack of needs assessment] kind of came to an end, I think, when the Defra scheme, the supermarket priority slots, came in. And that way, from the Council point of view, you could work out a triaging system of who actually needed the food boxes and where they would go. And it did come- I think we had a few volunteers who would come back and say, “X wasn’t in. This person doesn’t need it,” etc., etc.” (Council staff respondent)

From responses to our Padlet data collection, lack of needs assessment was cited as one of the features of responses enacted over the pandemic which should not be continued into the future.

Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer *Collaboration*

When asked about what worked well during the months of March to September 2020, respondents expressed an appreciation for the way in which people worked together, and for a common purpose.

“And that’s one thing that I want to say at this point, is the collaboration between the charities in West Berkshire has been incredible. We have all stepped up. We have all built relations where they maybe weren’t as strong before. They are strong relationships, and I am very proud of the relationships that we have, sat here today. It has been amazing. And we’ve all done damned well at it. I’m so proud of us all, it’s been brilliant, how we’ve worked together.” (Third sector respondent)

As mentioned above, organisations collaborated by sharing food donations between themselves, as shared by a workshop participant:

“So, I had to work very carefully with [name of another food aid provider]. We swapped food quite regularly, if you had too much of something. But we had to really because we work so closely.” (Third sector respondent)

The Food Aid Providers Group meetings, and the relationships that were established as a result of the collaboration between them all was felt to have contributed to a coordinated response:

“It beautifully came together really that every... We, just, were able to corral the whole group together, whatever they were doing in the food provider space, get them talking, get them sharing food in terms of the various sources of food that were available. You know, whether it be restaurants that had closed or whether it be FareShare or whatever it was, we got this collective really working together in different parts of the community whether it was those in general food poverty families or whether it was those living on the street or, by then, in hostels because that's what the government... You know, wanted everybody to be under a roof.” (Third sector respondent)

Using a Mentimeter poll, there was strong agreement (score 4.3/5) with the statement that responses to threats to food insecurity in West Berkshire were well coordinated between different actors, however, based on the contributions made using Padlet, there appears to have been some hesitation about the extent to which all organisations worked together, as “siloes” working practices was cited as a feature of the food aid response which should not be continued in the future.

Relationships

Some of the existing food aid providers in the area reflected that they were not clear how or why Spotlight became involved in the response given they were not active in the area prior to the pandemic. One respondent said,

“We had no idea where they came from or why they came.” (Third sector respondent)

However, as noted above, the rationale for their involvement was increased capacity in a time of need.

A Food Providers group was initiated by Greenham Trust and included all the established community organisations. The initial meetings were described as adopting a “top down” approach, however, in time the organisations individually, and collectively, felt able to be more forthcoming, as one third sector respondent shared:

“The first Food Providers’ Group was obviously chaired by the Council and the Greenham Trust. And the first meeting was very much the Council telling us what we needed to do, which we all found quite surprising, as we’re all charities and that-thankfully, we could do it, and we were doing it. But we all came away from that meeting feeling slightly uncomfortable. Because they were asking us to do things that, actually, for duty of care for our volunteers...because a lot of that involved rough-sleepers, and to deliver to hostels and hotels, for middle-aged women potentially, was quite concerning. So, we actually got together – and I think this is

where we've all built this amazing community, as charities now – and turned around and said, “Actually, we are the guys doing this, so we have got to have a voice.”

So, at the meetings thereafter, we were very much- We felt empowered, I think, enough to say, as a group, “No, actually we can't do that, but this is the provision that we can provide.” (Third sector respondent)

Established relationships were strengthened as a result of the organisations' response to the crisis presented by COVID-19. The historical relationship between the funder, Greenham Trust, and the charities it supported was seen as central to the coordinated response:

“I think the level of intelligence we had on what was happening on the street was phenomenal. That's back to the relationships we had. I think, you know, that's where I did become pivotal because, you know- That's why I ran- I brought together the Food Providers Group because the Council didn't have the same relationships with them. We did because we were the funder, and had done a long time before I was at the trust as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Relationships between the different, established food aid providers were also cemented as a result of their combined efforts throughout the pandemic, as one respondent shared:

“The knowledge that we all have now, regarding the other agencies in our area, that we have all, as I say, come together, we talk more, we communicate more. (Third sector respondent)

The new relationship between the West Berks Foodbank and Dream Doors, described above, was said to enable many more people to support the organisation than might ordinarily have been possible. This benefitted not only the food bank in terms of food stocks, but seemingly the benefits felt by members of the community in being able to make a contribution:

“Everybody wanted to help and, actually, people got quite frustrated when you couldn't let them. And 'Food Bank on Your Doorstep' was this amazing initiative that allowed so many people to help. And because it was the area that you lived in, the streets that you lived in, we were able to get so many people involved. And it was their sense of happiness to be able to do something and to get out and support the community...” (Third sector respondent)

Factors which enabled responses to concerns about food insecurity access

Using the Padlets, a number of items were listed as having been positive in the food aid response in West Berkshire, these were: effective senior leadership team; knowledge sharing and signposting ability; pooled resources; budget management; building on established relationships; agile adaptation to service delivery; and collaborative working

One respondent reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic had reduced the emotional barriers to food bank access, acknowledging that some people are resistant to accessing the support because of the perceived stigma:

“There is a stigma about coming to food banks, we are trying to change it, and I think COVID has changed it, I think people are more willing to come to us. But there still is that stigma, and there still is that very- Especially the working parents or the parents that were working are just so embarrassed to come to us.” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Managing the voluntary response

The coordinated response of established third actors in food aid and in volunteer activity was seen as a strength in the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the spontaneous efforts of the public, were sometimes seen as a challenge:

“I’d say the biggest challenges...I think one of the biggest challenges became managing... You know, lots of people wanted to volunteer and then got very upset because they didn’t have a volunteering role. You ended up with challenges like that. You ended up with lots of groups forming on Facebook. We got this Coronavirus Support Group that just grew exponentially on Facebook with all these do-gooders that were just going off in all kinds of different directions with all kinds of information being shared that shouldn’t have been. People wanted to help but people...Obviously, the potential for scams and stuff like that, you know...” (Third sector respondent)

Safeguarding volunteers

There were discussions within the Community Food Hub assessing which protective measures were appropriate to implement in terms of volunteers and their role in distributing food parcels, or medicines:

“We had to spend a whole load of time talking about safeguarding and did we need to DBS check everybody. We didn’t because most of our volunteers were not crossing the threshold. They were never going to be alone with an individual. They were posting things through kitchen windows. So where people were going over the threshold, that was generally through community care and through adult social care, so those systems were already in place.

Any of our volunteers, we were saying, “You should not be putting yourself or anybody you are supporting in a situation of safeguarding concern.” (Council staff respondent)

Inability to anticipate levels of need

One council respondent suggested that the biggest challenge they faced was not being able to plan for whatever was ahead of them during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the delay in being able to draw on past experience to inform planning.

“...it was all new, so it’s the unexpected, so not taking a step back and going “what do we need to do” you were just always on the front foot, just trying to meet the need without thinking of the next thing that was going to come along , it’s the unexpected was probably the biggest challenge and it still is now, you still don’t know what’s going to happen.” (Council staff respondent)

Present and looking ahead

At the time of the data collection during, February/March 2020, the Community Food Hub remained in operation, maintaining contact with the community groups, identifying and meeting (virtually) with community champions. There was a recognition that the financial vulnerability arising as a result of COVID-19 was likely to be an enduring feature in the area and, that this would inform the Council’s future planning:

“we are very, very attuned to the fact that an enduring legacy of COVID-19 is going to be financial hardship. We need to be attuned to that, and it features very strongly within our recovery plan as to how we are going to seek to meet those needs because it will be an enduring legacy, I believe, with worklessness in families that have never experienced worklessness before.” (Council staff respondent)

The community groups remained active as of March 2020. Their efforts during the early months of the pandemic were particularly celebrated, and the extent to which they became increasingly self-sufficient.

“...lots of them were so resilient, I think again they did such a good job, the community groups of working themselves and it helps now so that we ‘ve not had a mass amount of calls in – I think within the Community Hub now we get phone calls every time there’s a Government release on something, or they just want clarification we get about 10 people ringing who want clarification of a rule, or something, we don’t tend to get any phone calls in needing food and I think that’s probably down to the community groups as well because they have a good handle on who within their community group needs that support and those who need that support know where to go to – so their first port of call is that person within the community group – or volunteer.” (Council staff respondent)

The Volunteer Centre estimated that approximately 20 of the 90 community groups remained active. The other organisations that participated in the research talked about their continuing provision. The organisations supporting the homeless population were continuing off-site food provision in the form of food parcels:

“I just wanted to say that we are still feeding people in hotels, so that is ongoing. So, it was food parcels. Hot food we've stopped doing, because we did want a different thing, so we were doing what you might call a ‘picnic parcel’ for them.” (Third sector respondent)

Sovereign residents continue to be supported with referrals to food aid providers, and to be provided with food vouchers for major retailers, however now this support was also linked with longer term processes, such as debt advice, budgeting courses, and skills building for roots to employment:

“Before, we were just sending through a voucher, whereas now, everyone that’s put forward for a voucher actually gets a phone call. A proactive phone call from one of our team, that talks through all the other areas of support that we can help with. So, it tries to link them into our longer-term support, such as our employment and training team, our debt advice schemes, our budgeting courses, our digital courses, everything. So, we’re actually trying to not just offer that emergency help, we’re actually trying to link residents into something that can provide a longer-term solution for them.” (Third sector respondent)

Newbury Soup Kitchen was intending to extend the use of their commercial kitchen unit to other service providers. They were also in the process of expanding their street food provision, and returning to serving meals on-site:

“...we have a beautiful commercial kitchen, that other charities can use at any time, that is sat here, that is not used every day. But it’s just given us way more flexibility of what we can do.” (Third sector respondent)

“we’re also in the process of looking for a food provision van, a catering van, because our safeguarding - because we’re out in the streets, feeding out of the back of a van some days. So, we’ll be expanding the food provision, once we’ve got that too. So, we’ll carry on with the takeaways more, as well as, hopefully this autumn, getting back to doing our sit-down meals.” (Third sector respondent)

The Fair Close Centre had found transportation an issue, presenting a barrier to providing on-site meals once it became permissible. They continued to provide welfare checks by phone calls, and had found that their service users were lacking confidence to return to external provision:

“...we have a welfare service, we’re speaking to people on the phone, to check in and check they’re okay. They just didn’t feel confident going out and about, in the round. And I think going forward, giving people the social confidence to come out and about, even if we are approaching the end of the tunnel, will present its own challenges” (Third sector respondent)

As a result of the work undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emphasis of the activities of Newbury Community Furniture Project has shifted from one where food was a small part of the operation, to increasing capacity in terms of food distribution to food aid providers. Newbury Community Furniture Project now has an established temperature controlled supply chain using the vehicle they purchased with a chiller body, and their relationship with FareShare has strengthened; the once-weekly food delivery they had previously received has now changed to a food collection from FareShare several times a week, as needed:

“So, things that have remained in place are, for example, now we have a cool chain. Previously, we were very much tinned and dry goods on a lower scale, but now we can deal with a lot more volume, if we need it. We’ve got about 12 vehicles up to 7.5 tons, so we can move a lot of kit quickly, if we need to.

Also, our relationship with FareShare has changed a lot, from FareShare doing one delivery to us on a Monday, to deal with our own demands, now to the fact that FareShare will contact us at various times during the week and say, “We’ve got a surplus,” of whatever, “Can you deal with it?” And we do a same-day collection from them, in order to clear their stocks. But it’s something we can switch on and off now, which we didn’t have before.” (Third sector respondent)

“...we’re looking more to support other groups, rather than be a direct distributor. So, in a way, becoming a kind of hub, to supply other organisations locally that need it, but trying our best to focus as much as we can on things that are not easily donated by the public, in particular fresh foods and chilled foods. That’s what we’re trying to work towards.” (Third sector respondent)

West Berks Foodbank was continuing its collaboration with schools, providing food parcels for school staff to distribute as needed:

“So, we’re talking a lot more to the schools about them setting up their own little food cupboards, that they can give to even just the children, they can take it home with them, if they comment or they look like they’re hungry. Or they can speak to the school and the school can just hand it out there and then. So, we’re talking to a lot of schools about offering that provision.” (Third sector respondent)

A community fridge had been established, which they intend to offer their referral partners enabling them to provide their service users with chilled products:

“We now have a fridge that we are going to open up to our referrers. So, people like Home-Start specifically, health visitors, family support workers, to provide full fat milk that’s fresh, for the children, and yoghurts and cheese. So, we won’t provide milk, so we will provide very much the dairy side of things.” (Third sector respondent)

We also learned that Sovereign had plans to develop a community fridge.



Local Area Case Studies - Methodological Appendix

Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., Goldberg, B., Shaw, S.
and Lambie-Mumford, H.

Methodological Appendix

About this Appendix

This methodological appendix sets out the research methods that were undertaken in the Autumn/Winter of 2020/21 for local area case studies which form part of the wider ESRC-funded research project on responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19. This appendix is published alongside the first round of findings of the research on the project webpage: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

The methods set out here underpin the following published research reports:

- Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)
- Argyll and Bute Case Study
- Belfast Case Study
- Cardiff Case Study
- Derry and Strabane Case Study
- Herefordshire Case Study
- Moray Case Study
- Swansea Case Study
- West Berkshire Case Study

It also underpins case studies in Greenwich, Merton, Bradford, Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

How to cite this appendix

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Research approach, aims and objectives

We carried out two sets of case studies aimed at mapping responses to risks of rising food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK over spring and summer 2020. The first set of case studies was conducted as part of a commissioned piece of research for the Trussell Trust, which had a specific focus on understanding differing trends in their member food banks in different areas over this period. The second set of case studies was a pillar of a wider ESRC-funded project mapping responses to food insecurity over the pandemic and learning from lived experiences of support with access to food over this time.

Whilst the two sets of case studies had some unique objectives, the overall aim of each case study was to map and understand how local governments, third-sector organisations, communities, and businesses responded to concerns about inadequate food access arising from the COVID-19 pandemic over the spring and summer of 2020. Common objectives were:

- To understand what types of food aid provision and other forms of help (e.g. financial support, food delivery for groups unable to physically access food, food bank provision) were available to people facing insecure financial or physical access to food before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To understand how the provision of support for people facing insecure food access (for either financial or physical access issues) changed over the spring and summer of 2020, including changes in operations of projects/programmes that had already been operating and the initiation of new projects or forms of support.
- To assess the long-term outlook of these landscapes into the future. This included examining how provision was reduced with changes in lockdown restrictions and guidance for people shielding and also plans of particular projects/forms of support to continue to operate or cease to operate in the future.

A case study approach was adopted to allow for in-depth discussion with various stakeholders involved in local responses. Each case study involved conducting 2-6 interviews with key stakeholders to obtain a picture of the food insecurity landscape before and during the pandemic in spring/summer 2020. Data collected in these interviews were then used to create an initial food systems map, which was further filled out and discussed with a range of stakeholders in a case study area research workshop.

Each case study area had a lead researcher from the research team who conducted the interviews, led the workshop and undertook the data analysis and write up. 1 researcher led on 3 areas (Cardiff, Swansea and Herefordshire), another on 4 areas (Belfast, Derry and Strabane, Moray and Argyll and Bute) and another on 7 (all the Trussell Trust areas and West Berkshire). A second member of the research team attended each of the workshops. Analysis and write up went through various iterations, with members of the research team reviewing other drafts. A fourth member of the research team, who did not lead on any of the case study areas, provided review and comment on report drafts of each area and contributed to cross case analysis.

Below, we outline additional specific objectives of each set of case studies (from here, referred to as Food Access during COVID-19 case studies and the Trussell Trust case

studies) and the methods for each set of case studies. Table 1 provides a summary that highlights similarities and differences in the methods used for each set of case studies.

Table 1: Differences and similarities in approaches to two sets of case studies.

| Methodological Element | Food Access during COVID-19 case studies | Trussell Trust Case Studies |
|---|--|---|
| Case selection | Total of 8 areas | Total of 6 areas |
| | All 4 nations of the UK | Only in England and Scotland |
| | Mix of rural and urban areas | Only urban areas. |
| | All unitary local authorities in England; local authorities in each devolved nation. | Two London boroughs; two unitary local authorities in England; two local authorities in Scotland. |
| | All with % rise in UC claimant rate of 100% or more over January to July 2020. | All with % rise in UC claimant rate of 100% or more over January to July 2020. |
| | Half with a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network; half without. | No selection based on presence of registered member Food Power network. |
| | No selection based on presence of food bank in the Trussell Trust network. | All areas with a food bank in the Trussell Trust network, half of which experienced an increase in usage over spring/summer 2020, half of which experienced no change or decline in usage. |
| Identification of potential research participants | Informed by Food Power Alliance member in Food Power Alliance areas; informed by other key respondents in non-Food Power Alliance areas. | Informed by the managers of food banks in the Trussell Trust network and desk-based research. |
| | Mix of council staff, third sector volunteers and staff, mutual aid/community groups, food bank managers. | Mix of council staff, third sector volunteers and staff, mutual aid/community groups, food bank managers; all included food bank respondent from the Trussell Trust network (either at regional or local level) |

| | | |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Data collection | Interviews, workshop, desk-based data collection, follow-up phone calls and emails. | Interviews, workshop, desk-based data collection, follow-up phone calls and emails. |
|-----------------|---|---|

Food Access during COVID-19 case studies

Additional objectives

Conducted in partnership with the Food Power network, an additional objective of this set of case studies was:

- To understand the potential influence food poverty alliances registered with the Food Power network had on responses to food insecurity within their local areas over the course of the pandemic and thus explore the impact of VCS-driven partnership working and co-ordination of food access-related activity in local areas during the outbreak.

A participatory research approach that engaged leaders of the alliances registered with the Food Power network in the research process was adopted for this set of case studies. Within these case study, leaders of alliances were invited to take part in the research as “Local Research Facilitators”, which involved providing feedback on the research approach and supporting the recruitment and write-up of the case studies, as outlined below.

Case study selection

Two case study local authority areas were selected in each constituent country of the UK. Within these, the local areas selected were areas with either a significant proportion of rural area or that were predominantly urban areas. This was to allow for within-country comparisons to be made between areas with the same level of urbanicity. In England and Scotland, areas were predominantly rural and in Northern Ireland and Wales, areas were predominantly urban but may also have had some rural areas.

All case study areas were areas where there was evidence of the pandemic having an economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. Nationally, the claimant rate rose from 2.9% to 6.3% over January 2020 to July 2020, a rise of 117%.³⁴⁹ Across all areas, the rise in the claimant rate from January 2020 to July 2020 was examined and areas that experienced a rise of 100% or more were prioritised for selection.³⁵⁰ Within each constituent country, where possible, areas chosen were also of approximately the

³⁴⁹ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

³⁵⁰ There were two exceptions to this. In selecting a match for Cardiff city, Swansea was selected as the second largest city in Wales. The rise in the claimant rate was lower than 100%, from 3.3% to 5.9% over January to July 2020, compared to the rise in Wales of 3.3% to 6.6%. Similarly, we selected Derry and Strabane as the comparator area for Belfast, since Derry is the second largest city in Northern Ireland. Here, the claimant rate was higher than Belfast before the pandemic (4.4%) and rose to 7.4% (a 68% increase) compared to a rise of 3.1% to 6.6% in Belfast (113% increase).

same population size or as close as possible to one another. Points of contrast within constituent countries were the existence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network before the COVID-19 pandemic within one area and the absence of a food poverty alliance (Food Power or other alliance (e.g., Feeding Britain) before the pandemic.

In all cases, areas with alliances registered with the Food Power network were selected first, based on the rise in the claimant rate, meeting the rural/urban criteria, being a unitary authority, and willingness of a member of the alliance to participate as a Local Research Facilitator (explained below). Table 2 below details the areas selected for the eight case studies.

Table 2: Selected case study areas in constituent countries of the UK.

| Nation/area | Food Power Alliance | Population size | Rural/urban | % change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| England | | | | |
| Herefordshire | Yes | 192,800 | Mainly rural | 144% |
| West Berkshire | No | 158,500 | Significant rural areas | 186% |
| Wales | | | | |
| Cardiff | Yes | 366,900 | Urban | 100% |
| Swansea | No | 247,000 | Urban | 79% ² |
| Scotland | | | | |
| Moray | Yes | 95,800 | Mainly rural | 104% |
| Argyll and Bute | No | 95,500 | Mainly rural | 153% |
| Northern Ireland | | | | |
| Belfast | Yes | 343,500 | Urban | 113% |
| Derry City and Strabane | No | 151,300 | Mainly Urban (with some rural areas) | 68% ² |

Participant recruitment

Across all areas, a snowball participant recruitment strategy was used, where through the knowledge of key stakeholders, subsequent stakeholders were identified to be invited to participate in the research. The identification of key stakeholders varied depending on whether or not the area was a Food Power Alliance area, as below. The research aimed to include a range of stakeholders engaged in responding to food insecurity, including:

- Local authority staff engaged in delivery of food and/or financial crisis support in response to insufficient food access before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Local authority staff engaged in delivery of free school meal replacements (where relevant); or, where there may have been a local partnership in place around FSM replacement, representative/s such as a head teachers/school staff involved in the delivery of replacement of free school meals.
- Managers/board members of local food projects offering food parcels, meal deliveries, or meal programmes before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Staff/ volunteers from local organisations/ groups newly providing support with food access as a result of the pandemic.
- Local support agencies who provide referrals to food banks and/or other cash or food assistance.
- Organisations/businesses involved in running Meals on Wheels.
- Where relevant, other local private sector stakeholders who have been active in the area (i.e. from retail).

Role of Local Research Facilitators (LRF) in case study areas with a food poverty alliance registered with Food Power

In the areas with a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, selected as potential case study areas, leaders of the alliances were first approached to ask if they would be willing to participate in the research and have the role of Local Research Facilitator (LRF). This role reflected the participatory approach of this research, utilising participants' local area knowledge and expertise to create an initial systems map and build a local stakeholder group. Four Food Power Alliances were purposively selected based on area characteristics (i.e. only rural areas in England; unitary authorities; rise in claimant rate etc.) and engagement with the Food Power team at Sustain. Leaders from these four areas were initially approached about participating in the research and having the role of LRF; of these, three accepted. A fifth alliance was then approached and agreed to participate.

The LRFs helped with participant recruitment, as they were key stakeholders who could then recommend further stakeholders to approach. LRFs identified other key stakeholders to approach for scoping interviews ahead of the research workshops. These were individuals or organisations who had a level of expertise and perspective to help build an initial systems map (or critical part of it) of food provision activities in the area before and after the pandemic. LRFs also put together a list of invitees of other area stakeholders to invite to the research workshop. In all cases, these lists made up the total of people invited to participate in the research workshop. LRFs sent out the invitations and tracked responses.

Areas without alliances registered with the Food Power network

In areas without an alliance registered with the Food Power network, our contacts from national organisations (Sustain, Independent Food Aid Network, devolved Governments) provided introductions to individuals they knew in these areas. Initial conversations with these individuals then led to identification of other organisations and individuals to invite to either interviews or the research workshop. In one area (West Berkshire), no contacts were identified so web-based searches were carried out to identify managers of food banks and other food provision organisations to have these initial conversations with. Following these initial conversations, the process of further recruitment differed depending on the capacity of

the initial interviewees. In Swansea, the initial interviewees took the lead on further recruitment, sending out workshop invites to other potential participants. In Argyll and Bute, the initial contact introduced the researcher, by email, to other potential participants and the researcher contacted them directly with an invite to participate. This was complemented by desk-based research which identified a list of community food organisations in the area, who the researcher contacted directly. Similarly, in Derry and Strabane the initial interviewee introduced the researcher, by email, to other potential participants. Two people interviewed also shared the invite to the workshop to other potential participants and desk-based research identified other relevant organisations.

In each case study area, we aimed to have 2-3 interviews with key stakeholders ahead of the research workshop to obtain a broad overview of responses to food insecurity before the pandemic and during the spring/summer of the pandemic. There were no limits placed on how many organisations/individuals were invited to the research workshop. Any that were identified as stakeholders in responding to food insecurity in the local area were invited to participate. If someone invited to attend the workshop could not attend due to timing, they were invited to participate in an interview. All participants were sent a participant information sheet and consent form prior to their participation in the research.

Interview schedule

Interviews were semi-structured. The general flow through the interview was to obtain a picture of the nature of responses to food insecurity in the local area before the pandemic, what evidence participants saw of rising food insecurity early in the pandemic that prompted them or other organisations to take action, and then to obtain a picture of how existing responses changed over the spring and summer of the pandemic and of new responses that developed. Here, by responses to food insecurity, respondents were asked to describe financial interventions and direct food provisioning activities, whether arising from financial or physical access needs.

Individuals attached to specific organisations were asked to focus on their work but were also asked to describe other key organisations or activities they knew of. Individuals in roles where they were working with a variety of organisations and/or in positions that enabled them to have a view of a wider picture were asked to describe not only their own work but also to highlight the work of key players before and during the pandemic. All interviews were carried out by online or phone meetings and recorded. Recordings were sent to a professional transcribing company and transcripts produced.

Workshop preparation and execution

Prior to workshops, initial food systems charts were created based on interview data already collected. These outlined key stakeholders and their activities that were in place before the pandemic, how these changed over the spring and summer of 2020 in light of the pandemic, and new activities and organisations involved in responding to food insecurity over this period. Workshop participants were asked to add further details in how they were involved in responding to food insecurity before the crisis and over the crisis and to fill in gaps where activities or organisations were overlooked in the initial food systems charts. They were also asked to share what raised concern about rising food insecurity early in the pandemic.

Once it was felt that a comprehensive picture of responses to food insecurity in the local authority area both before and during the pandemic was obtained, workshop participants were asked to provide their comments on Padlet or share verbally about what factors enabled responses to food insecurity to be developed over the spring and summer and what factors may have acted as barriers to responding to food insecurity at this time. Here, we were interested in gathering information on sources of funding, food supplies, people power, pre-existing relationships/alliances, leadership, space/vehicles and any other factors respondents felt were important. Next, workshop participants were asked to provide their answers to the following questions using Padlet or verbally:

- What responses/features of the response to food insecurity have you seen over the crisis that you think should be continued into the future
- What responses/features of the response to food insecurity have you seen over the crisis that you think should NOT be continued into the future?
- What did you/your organisation stop doing during spring of 2020 because of the crisis, that you have now realised is obsolete? (i.e. What has lost its relevance in a (post) COVID world?)
- What did you/your organisation stop doing during spring of 2020 because of the crisis that you think should be picked back up again?

Lastly, Mentimeter polling was used to gauge workshop participants' feelings about the effectiveness and reach of responses enacted over the spring and summer of 2020. In-session polling results were used as a launch point of discussion. Participants were asked to indicate, in relation to their local authority, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- The shame and stigma sometimes felt by people about receiving free food aid reduced over COVID-19.
- Hidden hunger, that is, people going without food but not receiving help, is a significant problem in [local area].
- Some groups have not received adequate support with food access over the COVID-19 crisis.
- The responses to threats to food insecurity in [local area] were well-coordinated between different actors.
- Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, funding and food donations have been abundant to support the work you/your organisation do.
- Except for possibly in first weeks of lockdown, no one should have gone without food over April to August because so much food was available.

Quantitative results are not shared given the small number of workshop participants in each session.

Desk-based research

The websites and social media pages of organisations that participated in the research and of organisations mentioned but not participating in the research were browsed for further information on their organisational aims and activities before the COVID-19 pandemic and over the spring and summer of 2020. Council webpages and press releases were also searched for information relating to food and financial aid relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research participants were also asked to email reports, leaflets, or any other documents that may have been relevant to understanding activities in the case study area.

In particular, we requested quantitative data on the number of calls made to Council and other organisations' helplines, the number of food parcels and/or meals distributed, and any information available on the reasons for people seeking help with food access over this period.

Post interview/workshop follow-up

During the analysis and write-up stage, we identified gaps in our understanding of some activities and of some organisations that were active over the COVID-19 period. These queries were sent to relevant individual participants and on some occasions, further phone meetings were set up to acquire the details we required. Workshop and interview participants were also invited to review draft individual case studies to check that details were correct and provide further details where needed.

Recruitment and desk-based research outcomes The number of people invited, the number of participants and the means of participation (interview/ workshop) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of people invited by sector, number of people who participated by sector, and means of participation (interview/ workshop)

| | England | | Northern Ireland | | Scotland | | Wales | |
|---|---------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| | Herefordshire | West Berkshire | Belfast | Derry & Strabane | Moray | Argyll & Bute | Cardiff | Swansea |
| <u>Invited</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Council | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 10 |
| Third Sector | 8 | 16 | 12 | 12 | 16 | 13 | 15 | 34 |
| Other ¹ | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 22 | 24 | 17 | 14 | 20 | 15 | 24 | 44 |
| <u>Participated</u> | | | | | | | | |
| Council Staff | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 |
| Third Sector | 4 | 9 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| Other | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Total | 8 | 13 | 10 | 9 | 13 | 8 | 13 | 8 |
| <u>Form of participation (interview/ workshop)²</u> | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|----|---|----|---|
| No. of interview participants | 3 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| No. of workshop participants | 8 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 10 | 5 | 12 | 7 |

1. For example education sector staff, housing sector staff, local businesses involved in a response
2. Some research participants took part in both an interview and the workshop.

Whilst this recruitment strategy was designed to provide comprehensive insight into support with food access in each area, there were inherent limitations in this design. Relying on the snowball technique meant there may have been pockets of activity that were unknown to the participants that would have, therefore, remained unknown to the researcher. Although desk-based research was sometimes taken to complement the snowballing technique some of the activity to support food access, particularly that by small local groups may not have had an online presence. Furthermore, in some areas we heard concerns that different population groups, including those known to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic, were not engaging with the mainstream support available. The recruitment strategy was not targeted to ensure the support available for different population groups was comprehensively identified. Furthermore, pragmatically, we were approaching organisations who had been working at full capacity for an extended period of time during a global pandemic, potentially impacting availability and motivation to participate in the research. Finally, the scale of the responses that were being put in place, ranging from authority-wide statutory response to micro level neighbourhood support meant creating an entirely comprehensive map of food access support was extremely difficult.

A range of secondary data sources were found for each area. Firstly, in many cases participants sent us internally generated reports which detailed their responses during the pandemic. Secondly, publicly available reports were found through Google and organisational websites, particularly in the case of local councils and larger third sector organisations. Thirdly, Facebook posts and websites allowed some insight into the activities of organisations that were not able to participate in the research (although it is important to note that we did not apply a systematic social media method for the identification of all available social media data). Finally, general Google searches for 'food aid', 'Covid-19' and the area returned news reports on local activity. Whilst these searches were not systematic, they provided a range of additional data sources that enhanced the insight provided by the primary data. One limitation of these strategies to locate secondary data is a likely skew towards organisations that have an online presence and have the capacity to produce such reports, potentially missing therefore the more informal community/neighbourhood level support. In some cases we found it difficult to locate quantitative data on the number of households supported, number of food parcels distributed. This may have been indicative of a de-prioritisation of recording such data over this time. For example, one food bank reported stopping the completion of the usual information gathering forms from clients as they wanted to focus purely on quickly providing food.

Analysis

A separate NVivo project was created for each of the case study areas. All interview and workshop transcripts were uploaded to the NVivo projects and any substantial additional data collected (e.g. reports written by organisations). An initial coding framework was developed by one researcher, based on their three case study areas and this was reviewed and added to by a second researcher based on their four case study areas. The coding framework was based on four key categories - actors, response, target, and themes, with sub nodes created under each. This framework was uploaded to two of the NVivo projects (Cardiff and Moray) and data was coded. Having ensured the framework captured the majority of the data for these two areas this then became the framework that was used in each of the remaining NVivo projects. However, there was flexibility for researchers to add codes as necessary for each individual area, given the natural differences that arose in each.

The coded data then formed the basis for the write up of each area which followed the same format of the interview schedule - key actors supporting food access prior to the pandemic, early signs of food access issues and key actors supporting food access during the pandemic. The coded data was also used to write two later sections, key themes and stakeholders' reflections. During write up any additional data sources that had not been uploaded to the NVivo project were layered in, such as websites, social media accounts and data from the interactive tools used during the workshop. First drafts of each area write up were reviewed by one member of the research team for comment, which often triggered a return to the coded data to clarify and fill gaps.

A second stage of analysis was then undertaken to create the cross-case themes report. Each individual write up of the 14 case study areas became the data for this analysis. Two researchers, having read their own and some of the other case study areas created a coding framework which identified key themes that had emerged looking across the case studies. This coding framework was reviewed by a third member of the team. Using these headings in a word document (the cross case write up) each individual area write up was re-read with content written into the relevant section of the write up document. This analysis was completed by two researchers 1 of who had been a lead for 4 case study areas and one who had not been involved directly in the data collection. The first draft of the write up was reviewed by two other members of the research team, one of the other lead researchers and an external contact who is an NGO partner of the project.

The Trussell Trust Case Studies

Additional objectives

Conducted in part as a piece of commissioned research for the Trussell Trust, an additional objective of this case study was:

- To investigate potential reasons for outlier trends in Trussell Trust food bank usage in local areas, contrasting those that experienced large increases in usage over this period to those that experienced moderate or significant declines.

Case study selection

The geographical focus of this work was at the level of unitary local authorities in England, which provide all services in the local area, and local authorities in Scotland. We focused on urban areas in both countries, including two London boroughs, two cities in the north of England, and two cities in Scotland. Within each region, pairings were made between cities. In London, one borough was identified for having a very large increase in Trussell Trust use (Merton), and it was paired to an area that saw a negligible increase in Trussell Trust food bank use (Greenwich). In both the north of England and Scotland, areas were chosen that had relatively large decreases in food bank use (Leeds and Glasgow), which were paired to cities that had an increase around the network average for the time period (Bradford and Edinburgh, respectively) (see Table 4).

In making these pairings, we also considered the absolute and percent increase in the claimant count to rule out areas that had been less economically impacted by the pandemic. Population sizes were also considered, with the aim to pick areas that had similarly sized populations.

Table 4: Case studies included in the research.

| | Population size³⁵¹ | Absolute change in parcels distributed over April to September 2020 compared to same period in 2019 | Percent change in parcels distributed over April to September 2020 compared to same period in 2019 | Absolute change in claimant count³⁵² from Feb to Sept 2020 | Percent change in claimant count³⁵³ from Feb to Sept 2020 |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Greenwich | 286,186 | 178 | 4% | 9,720 | 154% |
| Merton | 206,186 | 10,945 | 470% | 6,255 | 170% |
| Bradford | 534,300 | 4,940 | 94% | 14,030 | 83% |
| Leeds | 793,139 | -3,519 | -25% | 18,160 | 103% |
| Edinburgh | 524,930 | 6,964 | 60% | 11,175 | 157% |
| Glasgow | 633,120 | -7,762 | -37% | 17,400 | 87% |

³⁵¹ <https://directory.londoncouncils.gov.uk/demographics/population/> ;

<https://www.bradford.gov.uk/open-data/our-datasets/population/>;

<https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/population/>; <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/>

³⁵² Universal Credit claimants required to look for work. Data from www.nomisweb.co.uk

³⁵³ Ibid.

Participant recruitment

In identifying stakeholders, our criteria included any individual or organisation involved in responding to concerns about economic access to food over the pandemic, as well as concerns about physical access to food over the pandemic, given the overlap between economic and physical inaccessibility to food. These included people working for local authorities, food bank staff and volunteers, leaders of grassroots community groups, leaders of food poverty alliances, school headteachers, people working with groups at risk of food insecurity (e.g. people who are homeless, migrants and asylum seekers, low income families with children). To identify potential stakeholders, we consulted our research partners involved in national work on mapping responses to COVID-19 over the pandemic (e.g. the Trussell Trust, the Independent Food Aid Network, Sustain). Desk-based research was also used to identify key organisations working in each area. After identifying 3-5 stakeholders, a snowball sampling strategy was used, whereby participants who took part in the research were asked for their recommendations/introductions to others we should speak to in the area.

Interview and workshop schedule

The questions posed to interviewees and workshop participants centred around understanding the landscape of responses to insecure access to food before the COVID-19 pandemic and how the landscape changed over the crisis. Participants were asked how their organisations operated before the crisis and then how operations changed over the crisis, including documenting new programmes initiated, new forms of communicating help and assistance, new sources of funding and food donations, new hours of operation and new locations, and changes to referrals and any eligibility criteria. At the same time, challenges to their regular ways of operating and adaptations made were also documented. Participants were also asked to share their observations on who was seeking help with food over this time and how characteristics of clients or helpline callers may have been different from who would have presented before the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, participants were also asked to reflect on how their own activities over this time operated alongside or as part of a wider landscape of responses in the area, and where relevant, on the challenges and benefits of being part of a diverse landscape of responses with many different (and in many cases new) stakeholders involved.

Post interview/workshop follow-up

Following conducting initial interviews and workshop, some participants were asked to complete another interview to collect further details on activities that we may have missed. Targeted requests for data and information were also sent to key stakeholders to address specific answers to questions not fully answered or addressed in initial interviews and workshops. In addition, requests for reports and documentation of activities over the pandemic were made to stakeholders, and where provided, were analysed alongside workshop and interview data. For the most part, however, data comes from oral information shared with us by research participants in interviews and workshops.

Recruitment and desk-based research outcomes

The number of people invited, the number of participants, and the means of participation (interview/ workshop) are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Number of people invited by sector, number of people who participated by sector, and means of participation (interview/ workshop)

| | Greenwich | Merton | Bradford | Leeds | Edinburgh | Glasgow |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <u>Invited</u> | | | | | | |
| Council | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| Third Sector | 5 | 11 | 7 | 9 | 11 | 13 |
| Other | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 10 | 14 | 11 | 12 | 18 | 14 |
| <u>Participated</u> | | | | | | |
| Council Staff | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Third Sector | 3 | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 9 |
| Other | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 7 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 10 |
| <u>Form of participation (interview/ workshop)*</u> | | | | | | |
| No. of interview participants | 6 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| No. of workshop participants | 3 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 6 |

**Some research participants took part in both an interview and the workshop.*

Analysis

All interviews and workshops were recorded and transcribed. An a priori coding framework was applied where we gathered and documented information to enable a description of the landscape of responses to food insecurity before COVID-19, a description of activities and responses during the pandemic, and specific details on how the food banks in the Trussell Trust network in the area changed their operations specifically in relation to referrals, food parcel distribution methods, and engagement with other stakeholders over the time; sources of funding accessed across all stakeholders; how help was communicated to the community; and how the problem of food insecurity changed over the pandemic in terms of rising demand for help and in the characteristics of people needing help.

Interview transcripts were also inductively coded for themes related to reflections on how responses and adaptations to responses operated over this time.

As with the Food Access during COVID-19 case studies, a second stage of analysis was then undertaken to create the cross case themes report. Each individual write up of the 6 case study areas became the data for this analysis. As above, two researchers, having read

their own and some of the other case study areas created a coding framework which identified key themes that had emerged looking across the case studies. This coding framework was reviewed by a third member of the team. Using these headings in a word document (the cross case write up) each individual area write up was re-read with content written into the relevant section of the write up document. This analysis was completed by two researchers, one of who had been a lead for four case study areas and one who had not been involved directly in the data collection. The first draft of the write up was reviewed by two other members of the research team, one of the other lead researchers and an external contact who is an NGO partner of the project.



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