



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

# Local responses to household food insecurity across the UK during COVID-19 (September 2020 – September 2021)

---

An analysis of experiences from 14 local areas from around the UK  
and recommendations for future policy and practice appendix

---

Katy Gordon, Hannah Lambie-Mumford,  
Simon Shaw and Rachel Loopstra

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on food access in multiple ways, but also on the ways that governments, third sector organisations, and communities responded to the problem of food insecurity. Responses have been varied and at scales unprecedented before the pandemic. Our ESRC-funded project has mapped and monitored local and national responses to risks of rising food insecurity in the UK over the course of the pandemic.

As part of this project, in summer 2021, we published 8 individual case studies and a cross-case comparison of 14 local authority areas that reported on the nature of local level responses to food insecurity enacted over the first wave of the pandemic (March-August 2020). This report builds on those findings, examining local level responses in the 14 case study areas, as the pandemic continued over September 2020 to September 2021, with a particular focus on the work of local councils, food aid providers, other third sector organisations, as well as local collaboration and partnership working.

**We find that during September 2020 – September 2021, a wide range of initiatives in the case study areas continued to support households experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This support included initiatives that pre-dated the pandemic, many of which had been adapted for the new context, and initiatives that had emerged during the pandemic. There was an ongoing combination of financial, food and other support; the split between types of support varied between and within local areas. There were also attempts to restore support and activities which had been disrupted by the pandemic, but in some cases, there were a number of challenges to doing so.**

Local councils, local collaborations and partnerships, and food aid providers continued to provide a range of activities to support food access from September 2020 to September 2021 in the case study areas. Many **local councils continued to provide direct food provision** to certain population groups, such as people who were self-isolating. Some of the significant adaptations food aid providers made to their service during March to August 2020 were still in place during September 2020 to September 2021, such as home deliveries of food parcels. In other cases, organisations were reverting back to pre-pandemic ways of operating.

The **level of demand** that individual food aid providers experienced since September 2020 varied. Individual food aid providers reported increased demand, reduced demand and unchanged demand for their services. Where additional support in place earlier in the pandemic had ended (e.g. local authority food box provision), some existing food aid providers were starting to get busier. Alternatively, where the new support available in response to the pandemic was continuing, there was an ongoing reduction in need for the existing food aid providers.

There was a mixed picture in the trajectory of **new actors** providing food aid during March to August 2020. Some of the more informal, community provision had now ceased; other organisations returned to their pre-pandemic activities which did not involve food provision; and others continued to operate. There was also evidence of an increasing interest in, and use of, low-cost community food retail models.

Activities were taking place to **strengthen the provision of ‘wraparound support’** such as the development of resources for signposting purposes. The use of **‘cash first’** schemes continued by councils and third sector organisations, and there were examples of cash first approaches newly being introduced as well.

Some types of food aid activities, such as community meals and cooking groups, had been paused in March 2020 because of lockdown restrictions. The extent to which these activities had subsequently resumed varied. Where they had not resumed, this was a cause for concern, particularly given that **social** isolation was seen as likely to have increased during the pandemic due to the lockdown and social distancing measures.

**Data from the case study areas highlighted four key trends that have the potential to reshape the landscape of local responses to food insecurity:**

### **1. Cash first approaches increasingly integrated in local responses to food insecurity**

Cash first approaches were playing an increasingly prominent role in local responses to food insecurity in the case study areas – in both council and community sector provision. A spectrum of ‘cash based’ responses was evident, including income maximisation efforts, cash grants and vouchers. A common concern with these approaches, however, was that their success is determined by the adequacy of the social security safety net and/or earned incomes, over which local level governments and organisations have little control.

### **2. A range of actors driving for comprehensive approaches and system-wide strategies**

Participants’ priorities for the future include that work be done to foreground sustainable collaboration in future responses. This should involve key actors including local government departments and public services that can help people access appropriate support and advice, as well as other third sector organisations. Food partnerships, food poverty alliances and other local networks continue to be powerful vehicles for collaboration, sharing of good practice, and developing a joint system-wide vision and accompanying set of actions.

### **3. Recognising the role of third sector organisations and the limitations of food aid capacity and food supply**

This research has once again highlighted that third sector food aid provision was a linchpin of local responses throughout the COVID-19 response. However, the data also highlighted levels of fatigue and potential burn out amongst food aid providers. As we expect the economic fall-out of the pandemic to endure for a number of years, there needs to be full, frank and inclusive discussions – at both the national and local levels - of the role that community organisations should and can play in response to food insecurity.

### **4. Increasing the reach of community food projects and other services**

As specific groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its aftermath, we consider that targeting and tailoring of support warrants particular attention from practitioners and policymakers. Furthermore, as some projects aim to have more inclusive

models of support and reach a wider group of people, projects are considering how they communicate and facilitate access to support.

**There are some powerful lessons to be taken from the experiences of those leading local responses to food insecurity during COVID-19 in the case study areas. These relate to the overall approach to food insecurity, support for both individual and partnership initiatives, the roles of the third sector and new initiatives, perceptions of food support, and food boxes for those who were shielding.**

- **Take a whole systems approach to tackling household food insecurity:** This includes increasing emphasis on 'cash first' support, alternative framings of responses such as a rights-based approach, publicising the desire to end the need for food banks and the plan for how this can be achieved, and campaigning locally and nationally.
- **Retain and sustain networks and partnership working:** Partnership working continued to be a key feature of effectively implementing a joined-up response. Participants hoped that strong partnership working, and support to enable it, will continue.
- **Harness and guide new interest in food support systems:** Many new actors began providing food aid across March to August 2020. This capacity and the intent were welcomed however there were also some concerns and tensions regarding these new actors. Reflecting back on that period, there were concerns that the new actors did not have the appropriate knowledge to, for example, ensure compliance with data protection. There were also concerns about the longer-term impact of their actions.
- **Retain wide engagement, from a range of audiences, for food access interventions:** Participants reflected on how the food aid provided during the pandemic may have increased engagement with issues of household food insecurity and income crises through bringing more people to the 'table' or by raising the awareness of the work being done by the third sector. However, there was still more to be done to increase engagement from a range of stakeholders, and there were concerns that engagement was waning.
- **Empower third sector responses in a sustainable way:** Third sector organisations continued to play a pivotal role in supporting food access during September 2020 to September 2021. They are valuable sources of insight as well as key for reaching communities. Though they faced varying levels of need for their services, they were all concerned about increasing need in the future. The toll of providing high levels of support during the pandemic, fear for the future and burnout were all present.
- **Understand, and respond to, the range of factors impacting food access:** These factors include particular challenges in rural areas, a spectrum of physical food access issues, the stigma of seeking support, and (in)effective food recovery.
- **Avoid negative local perceptions of food support:** Third sector food aid providers reflected on the judgements that were sometimes made, by people in their local communities, of their activities and the people their projects were supporting. Such judgements can feed the shame and stigma of accessing food aid.

- **Learn from the limitations of the national food box schemes for people who were shielding:** Shortcomings of the national food box scheme for people who were shielding continued to be raised including suitability, variety, nutritional quality and duplication.

**In addition, the data from case study areas also raises some more immediate and practical questions that local stakeholders, policymakers, researchers and funders may wish to consider when looking ahead:**

- There have been significant challenges for organisations restarting social and face-to-face activities. How can these challenges be addressed, and this be prioritised?
- There is clearly a need to garner the support of communities in times of crisis but how can this be done in a way that complements and supports, rather than frustrates and disrupts, existing infrastructure and systems?
- Where new food aid providers have been established over the pandemic and remain, what support can be provided to them to develop from or critique the direct food aid model?
- How can data be gathered which evidences the use, reach and impact of funding provided by local and national governments to third sector organisations, but in a way that is not overly resource intensive for these organisations?
- Among social service providers (whether third sector or local authority), some of the new ways of working over the pandemic have been useful in particular circumstances such as home delivery, telephone support and online classes, meetings and events. How can organisations be supported to maximise the positive aspects of new ways of working while also addressing the shortcomings of these?
- Direct food aid provision can be contentious locally. How can assumptions in local communities be addressed?
- How do projects and local communities think through the role of open access provision that may help to reach those in need or who may not come forward and support a preventative approach?

In **conclusion**, our findings suggest some promising developments have emerged from the pandemic, most notably the trend towards cash-first responses, the strengthened partnership and collaborative working and, more broadly, the momentum for integrating food insecurity responses into wider systems. However, the crucial role of the food aid sector, the toll of this reliance and the fear of growing need on a sector already at capacity are areas of significant concern. This, again, reiterates that charitable food aid cannot be the vanguard response to household food insecurity in the UK; governments and councils must play a proactive role in shaping policy and practice in line with the needs of people and those organisations who have provided support.

*Accessing the full report*

The full report 'Local responses to household food insecurity across the UK during COVID-19 (September 2020 – September 2021)' is available on the project website. It can be accessed here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-duringcovid-19/>



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