FOOD VULNERABILITY DURING COVID-19

Food vulnerability during COVID-19
End of project summary of key findings

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About this document

This document, published in August 2022, provides a high level of summary of key findings from the Food vulnerability during COVID-19 research project. Full details of the project and all the reports from the research are available on the project website: http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/

About the project

The research began in July 2020 and ran for two years. It mapped and monitored responses in the UK to risks of household food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project covered both national and local responses and included a participatory policy panel formed of people with direct experience of support to access food over the pandemic. The research team was led by the University of Sheffield and King's College London alongside NGO co-investigators, Church Action on Poverty and Sustain.

Project Team

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- Dr Rachel Loopstra (Kings College London) – Co-lead
- Dr Katy Gordon (University of Sheffield) – Researcher
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Contents

Project overview and published outputs

Table 1 provides a high-level summary of each of the work packages of the project.

Table 1: Aims, methods and outputs of the three work packages in the Food vulnerability during COVID-19 research project

Work package	Aims	Research methods	Outputs
National	Mapping and monitoring food access support at a national level, across the UK.	• Systematic desk-based mapping of national interventions • Systematic desk-based search and review of existing evidence on key interventions • Primary data (online interviews and workshops) with representatives of government departments, national charities, food and poverty charities and business representatives	• Mapping responses to the risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK (published August 2020). • Monitoring responses to the risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK (published December 2020). • Mapping and monitoring responses to the risk of rising food insecurity during theCOVID-19 crisis across the UK (Autumn 2020 - Summer 2021) (published August 2022)
Local	Mapping and monitoring food access support at a local level.	• In-depth case studies of 14 local authority areas in the UK that involved: • Desk based mapping of local interventions • Primary data (online interviews and workshops) with local representatives of councils, public health, local charities, local food aid organisations, other groups supporting food access (e.g., community councils)	• Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020) (published July 2021). • Eight local case studies are presented in the 'Mapping local responses: March to August 2020 reports' (published July 2021) • Local responses to household food insecurity across the UK during COVID-19 (September 2020 – September 2021) (published February 2022).
Participatory policy panel	Hear directly from those with lived experience of food insecurity during the pandemic.	• Monthly panel meetings (Oct 2020-Dec 2021) using a range of participatory and creative methods through which panel members could share and reflect on their experiences and contribute to policy recommendations. Reflective conversations were also held with panel members individually. • Deliberative policy engagement workshops (autumn 2021) that brought the panel together with 'policy specialists' with direct experience of shaping policy regarding food security.	• Navigating Storms (published October 2021). • Participatory Methods in Practice: Key Learning (published August 2022) • Deliberative Policy Engagement Autumn 2021 (published August 2022)

Mapping and monitoring national level responses – key findings

Mapping national responses - March – August 2020

The mapping of national responses during March – August 2020 found that:

> "Responses to food insecurity have been on a scale and of a complexity not seen in recent times in the UK."

The types of responses for different population groups are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: types of national responses to address threats to household food security for at-risk groups during COVID-19 (March - August 2020).

Shielding population	Moderately clinically vulnerable	Low Income
- Government food grocery box schemes - Priority supermarket delivery slots - Government financial support - Third sector provision (Salvation Army and Red Cross home delivery parcels, food bank support)	- Priority delivery slots - Government financial support - Retailers shopping hours for moderately vulnerable, increased supermarket delivery capacity - Third- sector provision (Salvation Army parcels and Red Cross hardship grants, food bank support, initiatives supported by FareShare)	- Government financial support - Free School Meal replacement schemes - Charitable emergency assistance (food banks, meal projects)

Monitoring national responses - March – August 2020

The monitoring of national responses during March – August 2020 noted that,

> "Based on the evidence we have collected so far for this research, we would point to the need for both process evaluations and outcome evaluations to understand the impacts of the various strategies on addressing food insecurity over this time."

For four of the key interventions implemented during this time the following observations were made:

School Food Replacements:

- A range of alternative approaches were provided, (direct payments via BACS or other cash transfers, food parcels and food vouchers).
- There was a varied picture in terms of implementation. Because of the localised nature it is not easy to obtain a comprehensive overview of provision.
- There were significant problems with the food voucher system in England.

- Concerns over the suitability of eligibility criteria and reach of replacement schemes were raised.
- There were important debates around the benefits of cash versus food replacements for families.
- School food suppliers and supporting school food supply chains were also a concern for policy makers over this time.

Emergency finance provision

- In Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales, nationally funded and managed emergency payment schemes were in operation.
- In England, there was no equivalent national scheme, though the central government provided local authorities additional funding to support people meet essential needs.
- To date, there is limited evidence on the impact of these schemes.
- Additional funding, changes to eligibility criteria and easier access mechanisms were widely welcomed.
- Significant concern regarding the reach of the schemes was evident.

Emergency food systems

- There appears to have been a heavy reliance on charitable emergency food providers by government.
- There were significant increases in the provision of food parcels over the course of the lockdown.
- Significant government and corporate funding was made available for organisations over this period.
- Adaptations made by emergency food providers were extensive and highly responsive.
- The scale of funding and bulk food donations moving through the networks was unprecedented.
- The pandemic threatened several of the well-established vulnerabilities in food charity systems.

Shielding grocery boxes

- Strengths identified in the design and implementation of the scheme, in the context of local and other kinds of support in Scotland, included the pace and scale of roll out and co-production across levels of government.
- However, findings also revealed the limitations of the schemes: concerns were raised regarding variety, food quality, flexibility, suitability, and adequacy.

Mapping and monitoring national responses – Sept 2020 – Summer 2021

As the pandemic developed over September 2020 to summer/spring 2021, we continued to see interventions put in place to respond to concerns about food access.

On the whole, these shifted to delivery at the local level and away from direct food provision. There were decisive shifts in guidance towards cash-based interventions in Scotland, as evidenced in their Financial Insecurity Fund guidance, and sustainable interventions in

Wales and Northern Ireland, in relation to their support for the charitable sector. Very little was provided to continue to support people at clinical extreme risk to stay at home shielding other than the provision of priority supermarket delivery slots, reflecting the shielding advice over this period, with the exception of England in January 2021 when this guidance was reissued. With the exception of free school meal replacements in Northern Ireland, it continued to be at the discretion of local authorities to provide cash, voucher-based, or in-kind provision as a replacement. Importantly, the range of initiatives and funding that continued over September 2020 to summer 2021 raises questions about which approaches to food insecurity results in prevention and amelioration of the problem. Better data are needed to address this critical question.

Key points of comparison across countries were,

- The extent to which local authorities were given discretion over how to use new funds made available and the guidance issued when this discretion was applied.
- Very different schemes were in place for low-income households with respect to emergency finance schemes and free school meal replacements.
- This variation hasn't been mapped or evaluated, but this is an urgent research need, as currently schemes are being implemented in the absence of data on food insecurity prevention or amelioration.

Approaches and critiques of interventions over autumn to spring/summer 2021

- Lack of forward planning.
- The extent to which interventions were put in place to respond to crisis or prevent crisis.
- Difficulty evaluating effectiveness.
- Competing priorities for food supply sector and recipients of assistance.
- Should national or local government direct food insecurity interventions?

Mapping and monitoring local level responses – key findings

Comparing local responses (March to August 2020)

Drawing from the 14 case study areas the research highlighted key dynamics of local level responses implemented to support food access across March to August 2020, shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Key dynamics of local level responses implemented (March to August 2020).

Early signs of food access issues	• Rising numbers of Universal Credit claimants and evidence of disruption to incomes • Increasing need for local food aid. • Physical food access issues (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.
Three phases of the response (March to August)	1. Early weeks: a degree of panic and mobilisation of responses from a range of actors. 2. Significant landscape of response in all areas from across sectors which ran and evolved from March through to June 2020. 3. June to August 2020, easing of restrictions (shielding ended) and wind down of some of the direct food provision from statutory organisations.
Range of actors	Councils, food partnerships/ alliances, existing food aid providers, third sector projects newly providing food, informal groups, local businesses
Resources	New or repurposed funding was available from a range of government and philanthropic sources; volunteer demographics changed as some groups had to shield or avoid going out and other groups were on furlough; food projects worked hard to secure alternative sources of food (when there were food shortages in shops); some organisations required additional space for food storage and/or processing.

Table 4 highlights the key local level actors and their roles in supporting food access during March to August 2020.

Table 4: Key local level actors and their roles in the pandemic response (March to August 2020)

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 *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.*	Co-ordinated food responses, facilitated collaborative working, channelled resources, collated and shared information on available support.
Third sector projects previously providing food *Such as existing food aid providers, food banks and other community food projects.*	Established local helplines, promoted support and identified households who would benefit from support. Adapted previous food responses in response to need and guidelines. Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery. Also provided smaller food packs to minimise shopping trips for people who were staying at home.
Third sector projects newly providing food *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*	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).
Informal groups *Local community, neighbourhood or ad hoc support through social media or local communication*	Support with shopping, informal, 'neighbourhood food banks', 'pop up food banks'
Local businesses *Supporting the food response*	Donations, resources, in kind

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[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/

Our case studies suggested five key takeaways from this time:

1. The scale of the response was unprecedented.
2. Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses.
3. Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives and some council provision.
4. Partnership working and working together was a key enabler of responses.
5. There were clearly distinct challenges in rural locations.

Comparing local responses (September 2020 to September 2021)

Local responses continued over September 2020 to September 2021. Key features of this time were identified.

- A wide range of initiatives continued to support households experiencing food insecurity over this time: existing (pre-pandemic) initiatives (adapted for new context) and new initiatives (emerged during the pandemic).
- 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.
- The level of demand that individual food aid providers experienced after September 2020 (until September 2021) varied.
- There was a mixed picture in the trajectory of new actors providing food aid during March to August 2020 (some stopped activities, others kept operating).
- Activities were taking place to strengthen the provision of 'wraparound support'.
- 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 - 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 being increasingly integrated in local responses to food insecurity.

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

3. Recognition of the role of third sector organisations and the limitations of food aid capacity and food supply.

4. Recognition of the need for tailoring and targeting to increasing the reach of community food projects and other services.

Hearing from people with lived experience: participatory policy panel

The opening phase of the Panel focused on the **immediate COVID-19 lockdowns** (spring 2020 – summer 2021), particularly around access to food.

- Panel members vividly recalled their fear and anxiety, particularly in the initial lockdown when supermarket shelves suddenly emptied and wider concerns about infection made shopping suddenly much more challenging.
- Many turned to online shopping, only to find delivery slots were "impossible" to secure during the immediate crisis.
- Families who already struggled with food costs, because of low wages or benefits, sometimes found it particularly difficult to access food. Not only were many of the strategies, such as 'shopping around' to get the best prices, no longer possible, but they were unable to 'buy themselves out of the crisis' by resorting to more expensive options.

As the **pandemic developed**, the Panel continued to share ongoing experiences.

- How hard it was to be identified as 'extremely clinically vulnerable' and directed to 'shield', but also the worry and difficulties for those who felt they needed such additional protection and support but did not receive it.
- The challenges and additional costs of having school-age children at home full-time, as well as the various free school meals replacement schemes put in place.
- The stresses, as well as the joys, experienced by those involved in community food projects and their concerns about their increasing role.
- Most concerningly, Panel members spoke about how these difficulties overlapped with, and often compounded, wider struggles with their physical and mental health, as well as the additional challenges of increased social isolation.
- A particular issue which emerged strongly was the intense pressure experienced by families where one or more members had additional needs as they sought to adjust to life in lockdown, and the particular ways they felt let down by "one-size-fits all" support which was not always able to take their particular needs into account.

The series of deliberative policy engagement workshops, which brought together panellists with 'policy specialists' in autumn 2021 discussed five key themes:

- Income Adequacy and Security - ensuring everyone has financial resources to be able to afford healthy food.
- Crisis Support - ensuring no one is left without food because of acute financial crisis.
- Additional Provision – ensuring ongoing help is available for those struggling to afford food.
- Food Access/Adequacy - ensuring everyone can access good healthy sustainable, locally sourced food.
- Actors and power in the food system – ensuring fair food systems.

Learning from the pandemic response

Table 5 shows the key learning points from across the three packages.

Table 5: key learning points from the three packages.

National Work Package	- The nature of interventions at a national level was unprecedented: access to food moved up the policy agenda during the pandemic. - Many of the national interventions were delivered at a local level: evaluations of national interventions must consider impact and outcome at a local level. - There was variability in the levels of support and how this support was provided across the four UK nations but third sector involvement in direct food aid was a commonality. - There were limitations in the nationally procured food box scheme for people who were shielding. Suitability and acceptability for households should be accounted for in in-kind food provision. - Replacement support for households eligible for free school meals differed at a national and local level. This variation should be charted and examined in relation to outcomes.
Local Work Package	- Take a whole systems approach to tackling household food insecurity. - Retain and sustain networks and partnership working. - Harness and guide new interest in food support systems. - Retain wide engagement, from a range of audiences, for food access interventions. - Empower third sector responses in a sustainable way. - Understand, and respond to, the range of factors impacting food access.
Five recommendations made by the Participatory Policy Panel	- Hear directly from those who know. - Food security is a fundamental human right. - Rethink 'social security' so it truly offers sufficient support, at all times. - Crisis responses must be comprehensive, without compromising on dignity and choice. - Individual households, communities, businesses and the state each have different strengths and roles, in a crisis and longer term.

List of published outputs

National work package

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 online http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/

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 online http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/

Loopstra, R., Gordon, K., Okell, A., Hill, J. and Lambie-Mumford, H. (2022) Mapping and monitoring responses to the risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK. Autumn 2020 to Summer 2021, published August 2022, available online http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerabilityduring-covid-19/

Local work package

Lambie-Mumford, H., Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. and Shaw, S. (2021) 'Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020), published July 2021, available online http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerabilityduring-covid-19/

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Participatory Policy Panel

Food Exp CV19 Panel, 2021: Navigating Storms: Learning from Covid-19 food experiences [Aitchison, G. and Perry, J. (eds.)]. Church Action on Poverty. Available for download from www.church-poverty.org.uk/navigatingstorms.

Food Experiences During COVID-19 Participatory Panel Participatory, Methods in Practice: Key Learning [Perry, J. with Cooper. N and Lambie-Mumford, H.], published August 2022, available online http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/foodvulnerabilityduring-covid-19/

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