



Mapping and monitoring responses to the risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK (Autumn 2020 - Summer 2021)

Rachel Loopstra, Katy Gordon, Alexandra Okell,
Joe Hill and Hannah Lambie-Mumford

About this report

This report maps and monitors key national level interventions targeted towards food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic over the autumn of 2020 through to spring/summer 2021. It follows on from the previous reports which covered the period March to August 2020. These reports are available on the project webpage:

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

Over the autumn and winter of 2020 to 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact the lives of people in the UK in various ways, through school closures, requirements to self-isolate, guidance to not leave home if clinically extremely vulnerable, the closure of hospitality venues and other public spaces, and home working. Challenges to accessing sufficient food remained, both as a result of the impact of restrictions on physical access to food and also the financial impacts of restrictions. In turn, governments and third-sector organisations provided funding and programmes to mitigate the impacts of restrictions on the ability of people to access food over the autumn of 2020 through to spring/summer 2021.

Following our earlier monitoring report¹ covering the first wave of the pandemic over spring/summer 2020, in this report, we track key interventions targeted towards food insecurity as pandemic restrictions were variously in place over the autumn of 2020 through to spring/summer 2021. As before, we group these under the following sub-headings:

- School food: interventions to provide replacements for free school meals (and statutory breakfast provision in Wales) for eligible children during school closures or need to self-isolate
- Emergency income: New and adapted emergency grant schemes to address income shocks and shortages arising from the economic impacts of the pandemic whether in the short term (i.e. due to a self-isolating requirement) or longer term (i.e. insufficient ability to make ends meet due to loss or reduction in work).
- Emergency food: interventions by government to support food charities over the pandemic and the actions food charities took over this period.
- Shielding: interventions to support people who were clinically extremely vulnerable during periods of shielding or guidance to limit time away from home.

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 national level work presented in this report, the project is also examining local 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. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

¹ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

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Contents

Introduction	1
COVID-19 restrictions over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021	1
Potential impacts of the pandemic on food access during autumn 2020 through spring/summer 2021	2
Methodology	4
Replacement school food provision	5
Summary	5
Brief re-cap: Free school meal replacement provision during the first wave of the pandemic (March to August 2020)	6
Numbers of children receiving free school meals.....	7
Support for self-isolating and shielding students	8
Support for students entitled to free school meals during 2020 autumn school closures .	10
Support for children entitled to free school meals during the January to March 2021 lockdowns.....	10
Support for students entitled to free school meals during school holidays.....	12
Monitoring provision of free school meals through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021	15
Discussion	17
Emergency Finance	19
Summary	19
Brief re-cap: emergency finance schemes in place over March 2020 to August 2020.....	20
Emergency finance schemes in England over 2020-21	20
Emergency finance schemes in Scotland over 2020-21	23
Emergency finance schemes in Northern Ireland over 2020-21	26
Emergency finance schemes in Wales over 2020-21	26
Monitoring emergency finance schemes through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021 ..	27
Discussion	33
Emergency Food	35
Summary	35
Brief re-cap: emergency food interventions over March 2020 to August 2020.....	35
Funding from governments for the Voluntary and Community Sector over September 2020 to spring/summer 2021.....	36
England.....	36
Scotland.....	36

Northern Ireland	37
Wales	37
The UK-wide response from the Voluntary and Community Sector	38
Discussion	43
Shielding Provision	45
Summary	45
Brief re-cap: support for people who were shielding over March 2020 to August 2020	45
Shielding Provision over Autumn 2020 to Spring/Summer 2021	46
England.....	46
Scotland.....	47
Northern Ireland.....	48
Wales.....	49
Monitoring support for extremely clinically vulnerable through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021	50
Other food-related interventions to support people at higher clinical risk of COVID-19 from national governments	51
Discussion	52
Summary discussion and conclusions	53
Comparisons in provision between UK nations over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021	53
Approaches and critiques of interventions over autumn to spring/summer 2021	53
Conclusions.....	57

Introduction

COVID-19 restrictions over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

Autumn 2020

Coming out of the UK-wide lockdown of spring 2020, COVID-19 restrictions were determined by the governments of each of the four UK nations. Into the autumn, devolved and Westminster governments imposed restrictions at the local authority level, leading to local authorities having different degrees of closure of businesses and restrictions on social gatherings. The highest alert levels meant non-essential retail and hospitality sectors were closed, though schools remained open. At the highest level of local restrictions, guidance for clinically extremely vulnerable people included not going into work.

Nationwide restrictions were imposed in Wales over the 23rd October to 9th November “firebreak”.² Pupils in Year 9 and above were not expected to be in school over the firebreak, which included the autumn half term. After re-opening, from 14th December secondary schools and colleges in Wales were then moved to online learning.³ In England, a lockdown was imposed over 5th November to 2nd December, though schools remained open.⁴ In Northern Ireland, schools were closed for an extended half-term over 19th to 30th October as part of tighter restrictions announced on 14 October.⁵ National restrictions were not imposed in Scotland, though 11 of the 32 local authorities were in the highest level of restriction in November.

Winter 2020/21

By mid to late December, all four nations had imposed or were moving towards nationwide lockdowns.^{6,7} At first, most schools were set to reopen in England after the winter break and did so on the 4 January,⁸ but as part of the national lockdown announced on this date, schools then moved to remote learning from 5 January.⁹ Broadly speaking, in all four nations, schools were closed, stay at home orders were in effect, hospitality and non-essential retail were closed, and some degree of shielding advice reinstated over the months of January to early March. Restrictions as they relate to various interventions are discussed in more detail below.

² <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/coronavirus-timeline-welsh-and-uk-governments-response/>

³ <https://gov.wales/timeline-school-closures-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-31-october-2020>

⁵ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/executive-tightens-restrictions-curb-covid-19>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/timeline-school-closures-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

<https://gov.wales/timeline-school-closures-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

⁷ One exception was in Scotland, where though mainland Scotland was moved into lockdown, some islands remained at Level 3. Source:

<https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20210107103059/https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-protection-levels/>

⁸ <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/primary-schools-closed-which-remain-4-january-london-boroughs-areas-full-delay-opening-812724>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>

Spring 2021

Across all nations, restrictions began to be phased out over April to July 2021. Generally, non-essential retail and outdoor hospitality opened in April. By then, face-to-face teaching in secondary and primary schools had resumed. Indoor hospitality venues generally opened in May. In July, almost all legal restrictions were removed in England.¹⁰ Further restrictions were also lifted in Wales¹¹, Northern Ireland,¹² and Scotland,¹³ but many remained in place until August, and even then, some remained, such as facemasks being required.¹⁴

Self-isolation rules

Over September 2020 to summer 2021, from 30 July 2020, anyone with coronavirus symptoms or a positive test result were required to self-isolate for 10 days.¹⁵ Household members were required to self-isolate for 14 days after their household member's symptoms started or after their positive test result. Close contacts outside of the household of positive cases also continued to be contacted and told to self-isolate for a period notified by NHS Test and Trace.¹⁶ On 28 September 2020, it became a legal requirement for people to self-isolate, with fines for those failing to do so.¹⁷

Potential impacts of the pandemic on food access during autumn 2020 through spring/summer 2021

As in our earlier reports outlining the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on food access, the measures in place to stop the spread of the virus through the autumn and winter of 2020 to 2021 had potential impacts on the ability of individuals to access food.¹⁸ Though the supply of food in shops remained stable throughout the autumn and winter, shielding guidance and self-isolation requirements would have restricted physical access to food retailers. The closure of schools and need for pupils to self-isolate when schools were open impacted on access to in-school food, namely free school meals and breakfast programmes. The closure of businesses and missed days of work had financial impacts for those affected and working-from-home requirements continued to add strain to household costs. In turn, the charitable food sector, including both independent food banks and food banks in the Trussell Trust network experienced higher levels of demand in autumn 2020 and winter 2021 than the previous year.^{19,20} National surveys from the Food Foundation and Food Standards Agency tracking food insecurity over the pandemic also showed that whilst levels of food insecurity

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-19-july-2021>

¹¹ <https://gov.wales/wales-moves-alert-level-zero>

¹² <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-executive-decisions-29-july-2021>

¹³ <https://spice-spotlight.scot/2022/01/07/timeline-of-coronavirus-covid-19-in-scotland/>

¹⁴ <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/coronavirus-timeline-the-response-in-wales/>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-from-the-uk-chief-medical-officers-on-extension-of-self-isolation-period-30-july-2020>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-duty-to-self-isolate-comes-into-force-today>

¹⁷ [Ibid](#)

¹⁸ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

¹⁹ Trussell Trust data briefing on end-of-year statistics relating to use of food banks: April 2020 to March 2021. Available from: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

²⁰ Independent Food Banks in the UK: February - November 2019 & 2020 Available from: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-data-since-covid-19>

had dropped over the summer of 2020, they were higher again in January²¹ and March 2021,²² respectively.

²¹ https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf

²² <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/research-projects/the-covid-19-consumer-research>

Methodology

This report builds on earlier mapping and monitoring reports covering the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, March to August 2020.²³

To identify new interventions and updates to existing interventions related to school food, emergency finance, emergency food, and shielding put in place over September 2020 to summer 2021, targeted searches of government websites were undertaken using relevant key terms. These were cross-checked with Google searches which provided additional evidence from third sector organisations' websites and news media websites. Input from project stakeholders was gathered in online meetings and from emailed correspondence conducted over January to June 2021. These included descriptions of interventions, shared insights into choices made around interventions, and feedback on how interventions functioned over this time.

Each section below provides descriptions of interventions put into place by UK nations, followed by quantitative data on numbers reached when it was available. Because of differences in reporting, data are not always comparable across UK nations. Where we found evidence on how interventions worked in practice, findings from these sources are also described.

Our discussion highlights key similarities and differences in responses between UK nations over September 2020 to summer 2021 and reflections on the interventions in place over this period in comparison to the first wave and lockdown over spring 2020.

²³ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

Replacement school food provision

Summary

In this section, we look at what guidance and financial support was made available for the provision of free school meals over autumn 2020 through to summer 2021. It covers free school meal replacements for students self-isolating or unable to attend their school due to local closures, during the winter 2021 lockdowns, and over school holidays during this period.

As during the first wave of the pandemic, we saw Northern Ireland adopt a cash-based approach for replacement of free school meals, providing payments in lieu of free school meals during lockdowns and school holidays. Scotland and Wales continued to give local authorities the discretion to choose what they offered as replacements, with our stakeholders sharing that most offered cash transfers. Across these nations, there were early commitments to maintain replacement provision through school holidays over 2021 and even through 2022. In contrast, in England, schools were asked to work with their catering teams to make free school meal replacement provision to students who were isolating over the autumn of 2020. At first, this was also what was recommended upon announcement of the closure of schools during the January 2021 lockdown, though after outcry at what was being provided to students, the Government reinstated the Edenred voucher option. There was no nationwide replacement of free school meals during school holidays over autumn 2020 through 2021 in England, though local authorities could choose to use local welfare assistance funds to fund provision.

We once again observed the potential for significant variation in free school meal replacement provision, especially across England. As far as we are aware, there has been no systematic look to enumerate or describe provision to self-isolating students or students unable to attend school due to local closures over this period. Nor were we made aware of any work to systematically examine the reach and sufficiency of the different free school meal replacement schemes implemented across England or between UK-nations over the January to March 2021 lockdown, though a CPAG survey of families suggested that cash-based approaches were favoured over direct food provision.²⁴

²⁴ <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Cost of Learning in Lockdown March 2021 update.pdf>

Brief re-cap: Free school meal replacement provision during the first wave of the pandemic (March to August 2020)

Before describing how free school meal replacements were approached by each UK nation over the 2020 to 2021 school year, we briefly recap what happened during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when schools were closed from 22 March to June 2020.

In our first mapping report,²⁵ we highlighted the different approaches taken by the UK Government and devolved governments regarding the replacement of free school meals. As shown in the Table 1, local authorities in England were given the choice to offer meals or food parcels, but an England-wide scheme also allowed schools to provide Edenred vouchers, redeemable for the purchase of food at major supermarkets. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, families were given direct payments to replace the loss of school meals. Both Scotland and Wales gave local authorities the discretion to choose between direct payments, food vouchers or food parcels/meals. The value of the replacement in Wales was higher, reflecting the inclusion of replacements of free breakfast, which is a legal requirement in Wales for eligible pupils. In all four nations, provision for free school meals was extended through the summer break in 2020, though the timeline of announcements for this provision differed, as noted in Table 1.

In our report monitoring how free school meal replacement schemes worked in practice during the first wave of the pandemic,²⁶ we documented a number of concerns. These included problems with access to the Edenred voucher scheme in the first weeks of its rollout and restrictions on where the vouchers could be used. There were also debates about what type of support was most useful over this time, with some stakeholders favouring cash transfers, while others felt more comfortable with food voucher schemes. We noted there was significant variation in what was implemented between devolved nations, but also within nations where local authorities were given the discretion to choose the form of replacement they put in place.

²⁵ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

²⁶ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

Replacement school food provision

Table 1: Free school meal replacement programmes put in place over March to August 2020.²⁷

<p>England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheme announced 31st March • Schools could choose to provide meals/food parcels to families, but nationwide FSM voucher scheme implemented from DfE in partnership with Edenred • Schools signed families up for eCode vouchers; redeemed for eGift card to national retailers • £15 per week per child • Continuation of scheme through summer announced on 16th June • Schemes extended to children with parents ineligible for public funds from mid-June 	<p>Northern Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheme announced 26th March • Direct payments to families in receipt of FSM: into bank accounts or cheques posted, every two weeks • £13.50 per week per child • Summer Food Payment Scheme, announced on 30th June, continued the provision of these payments, throughout Summer: two payments over the summer
<p>Scotland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for provision of free school meals announced with closure of schools on 19th March • Local Authorities chose to either provide meal replacements, cash replacements or food vouchers. • Value of substitution varied across local authorities (from £10 per week to £20 per week) • Continuation of scheme through summer announced on 16th June 	<p>Wales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheme announced 21st March • Schools/local authorities most often provided substitutes through vouchers (retailer gift cards or vouchers); delivery of food items; or funds transferred to bank accounts • £19.50 per week per child • Continuation of scheme through summer announced on 22nd April • Welsh government encouraged local authorities to use discretion to include families with no recourse to public funds in scheme

Numbers of children receiving free school meals

Over the course of the pandemic, the number of children eligible for free school meals has risen across UK nations. In England, 19.7% of pupils were eligible for free school meals in October 2020, up from 17.3% in January 2020; 302,400 of these pupils became eligible since the first COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020.²⁸ In Northern Ireland, 97,631 pupils were entitled to free school meals in 2020-21, an increase of 945 pupils from the year before,

²⁷ Source: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

²⁸

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/free-school-meals-autumn-term/2020-21-autumn-term>

Replacement school food provision

though the proportion of children entitled remained the same.²⁹ Data from the StatsWales database showed that in Wales, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals increased from 85,731 in 2019/20 to 99,135 in 2020/21.³⁰ Data on free school meal entitlement for Scotland are usually collected in March, but due to the closure of schools in March 2021, information on school meals was not collected in the 2021 survey.³¹

Whilst we have not conducted a systematic nor exhaustive search, we note that in addition to increases in recorded levels of entitlements, there have been news media reports from schools in England describing large increases in the number of applications made for free school meals. For example, in East Anglia, it was reported that 7,135 more applications for free school meals were made over April 2020 to March 2021 than in the previous year, but that less than half of those who applied were eligible.³² Concerns about the restrictive eligibility criteria for free school meals have been raised by Child Poverty Action Group³³ and emerged from the “Covid Realities” research project.³⁴ Thus, though the following sections outline interventions to address the need to replace free school meals over the pandemic, it is important to highlight that they did not address the lack of reach among children living in poverty.³⁵

Support for self-isolating and shielding students

The Nuffield Foundation and Education Policy Institute published data on school attendance rates for all four nations in November 2020,³⁶ showing that in October, weekly rates of attendance ranged from about 85% in Northern Ireland (preceding the half term and extended closure) to just over 90% in Scotland. About 3-4% of pupils were absent in Scotland and Northern Ireland due to COVID-related reasons in November; the figure was about 6-7% in England. Reason-specific data were not available for Wales.

Further data on pupil absence in schools in England, which examined absences over the whole of the autumn term found that, on average, 7.0% of sessions (or 5 days of school) were not attended by pupils due to circumstances relating to COVID-19 (e.g. pupils having to self-isolate or shield or a class bubble being required to stay at home).³⁷ In addition, 2.5% of sessions were missed due to illness, which included cases of COVID-19. Below, interventions to provide for students eligible for free school meals when absent due to COVID-19 are described.

²⁹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020-21%20statistical%20bulletin.pdf>

³⁰ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Provision-of-Meals-and-Milk/pupilseligibleforfreeschoolmeals-by-localauthorityregion-year>

³¹ <https://www.gov.scot/collections/school-education-statistics/>

³² <https://www.eadt.co.uk/news/education/free-school-meals-applications-increases-in-suffolk-8263292>

³³ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Cost_of_Learning_in_Lockdown_March_2021_update.pdf

³⁴ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Fixing_Lunch.pdf

³⁵ <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/one-million-children-poverty-miss-out-free-school-meals-uk>

³⁶ https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/UK-school-reopening-attendance-November_EPI.pdf

³⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term>

Replacement school food provision

England

Department for Education guidance for schools on how to provide school meals through the COVID-19 outbreak has been regularly published and updated over the course of the pandemic, though at the time of writing, only the latest iteration, published on 5th October 2021, was available online.³⁸ The guidance has stipulated that though schools are not usually expected to provide free school meals to children who are not in school, eligible children required to self-isolate at home should be provided with free school meals. The guidance has suggested that schools “work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels”.³⁹ Schools have had the freedom to decide whether lunch parcels are provided weekly or more frequently, and the guidance outlines that the contents should include food items rather than pre-prepared meals, allowing parents and carers to prepare meals for their children themselves. We did not find any specific information on funding for the provision of free school meals to pupils who were self-isolating.

Wales

In late September 2020, the Welsh Government announced that the Education Minister was making available £420,000 for local authorities to provide children entitled to free school meals, which in Wales, includes a legal duty to provide breakfast, with provisions should they be shielding or required to self-isolate due to COVID-19.⁴⁰ Further guidance stipulated this funding was available for additional costs incurred due to this provision. In guidance issued by the Welsh Government, local authorities were told to choose the option that best suits the needs of their communities, with food parcels, supermarket vouchers, or direct payments to parents'/carers' bank accounts the examples provided.⁴¹ It was stated that local authorities should “consider operating a number of systems in parallel in order to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable families can be met.” Elsewhere, it was suggested that the provision they put in place in lieu of free school meals be the best possible value for money.⁴²

Scotland

In Scotland, we could not find specific guidance for the provision of free school meals for children having to self-isolate or shield through the autumn 2020 period. However, we found examples of different provision from Scottish Councils. For example, in South Lanarkshire, from mid-August 2021, parents/carers of children eligible for free school meals were provided a one-off payment of £25 if their child could not attend school because there were self-isolating due to a positive COVID-19 test or because they were a close contact identified by NHS Test and Protect.⁴³ West Lothian Council also established a payment system for pupils eligible for free school meals or school clothing grants who had to isolate due to

³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

⁴⁰ <https://gov.wales/420000-pounds-will-ensure-access-free-school-meals-learners-shielding-or-self-isolating>

⁴¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2021/10/4/1633606023/catering-and-free-school-meals-covid-19.pdf>

⁴² <https://gov.wales/free-school-meal-costs-self-isolating-or-shielding-learners-html>

⁴³ <https://www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/fsm>

Replacement school food provision

COVID-19; parents/carers had to complete a form to receive their entitlement for any period of self-isolation.⁴⁴

Northern Ireland

Similarly, we could not find specific guidance for the provision of free school meals for children having to self-isolate over September 2020 to 2021 in Northern Ireland.

Support for students entitled to free school meals during 2020 autumn school closures

Wales

The provision of free school meals through the autumn half-term continued for an additional week for pupils in Year 9 and above, who were not expected to be in school during the “firebreak” period.⁴⁵

Northern Ireland

As above, schools were closed in Northern Ireland in an extended half-term holiday until the 2nd of November. As part of the announcement of the closure, it was stated that direct payments would be made to students entitled to free school meals,⁴⁶ as they had been during the first spring 2020 lockdown and during the autumn half-term.⁴⁷

Support for children entitled to free school meals during the January to March 2021 lockdowns

England

All schools moved to remote learning on the 5th of January 2021 as part of an England-wide lockdown announced by the Prime Minister on the 4th.⁴⁸ Initially, as reported by Food for Life, the Government issued guidance that schools prioritise working with their school caterers to provide free school meal replacements during the winter 2021 lockdown and that vouchers only be issued where catering options weren't possible.⁴⁹ However, according to Food for Life, the widespread reporting of poor-quality food parcels being provided led to the Government changing their guidance to no longer recommend food parcels as a first option.⁵⁰ On the 18th of January, the Government announced in a press release that the Edenred website was again open for schools to place orders for supermarket gift cards to issue to parents and carers with children eligible for free school meals.⁵¹ This was the same scheme that ran over the spring 2020 lockdown. Schools were able to order vouchers for a 4-week period to the winter half term, which provided £15 per week per child. In the Government's press release, the Education Secretary stated that schools could continue to make their own arrangements such as providing lunch parcels through their catering

⁴⁴ <https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/article/43281/School-Clothing-Grants-Free-School-Meals-Milk>

⁴⁵ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-10/learning-guidance-during-coronavirus-firebreak-october-2020.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/statement-education-minister-peter-weir-covid-19-restrictions>

⁴⁷ <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/ministers-announce-free-school-meals-payment>

⁴⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>

⁴⁹ <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/whats-happening/news/news-post/caterer-challenges-and-changing-guidance>

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme-opens-to-orders>

Replacement school food provision

suppliers or providing vouchers for local shops or supermarkets. In this case, schools would be reimbursed for any costs incurred.⁵² Schools could also claim the costs of their provision during the first weeks of the 2021 lockdown before the national voucher scheme opened.

There was no provision of vouchers through the national scheme for the February half-term. Instead, in their press release, the Government referred to their COVID Winter Grant scheme from which local authorities could support vulnerable families with meals.⁵³ As reported by the BBC, the guidance issued from the Department for Education at that time was “schools do not need to provide lunch parcels or vouchers during the February half term. There is wider government support in place to support families and children outside of the term-time through the COVID Winter Grant Scheme”.⁵⁴

At the end of January, the Prime Minister confirmed that schools would continue to remain closed until March 8 rather than re-opening after the February half-term as hoped. In his announcement, the Prime Minister said the Government would “prolong arrangements for providing free school meals for those eligible children not in school – including food parcels and the national voucher scheme – until they... returned to the classroom.”⁵⁵

Scotland

Like England, on the 4th of January, the Scottish Government announced that mainland Scotland was moving into lockdown on the 5th. All schools were to move to remote learning except for vulnerable children and those of key workers.⁵⁶ The Scottish Government provided a total of about £12.9 million additional funding for the provision of free school meals during the periods of remote learning over January to March 2021.⁵⁷ As in earlier periods, local authorities could use the funding to provide direct payments, vouchers or a food parcel. In our meeting with stakeholders from the Scottish Government, it was reported that the majority of local councils provided direct payments or vouchers as the primary mode of free school meal replacements during periods of remote learning and during the school holidays (see below), though food parcels may have continued to be offered in circumstances where it was not deemed appropriate to provide direct payment (the example provided here was families who were in debt). Others that provided parcels did so to simultaneously support local producers, wholesalers, and school catering staff.

Wales

In Wales, all secondary schools were moved to remote learning even before the 2020 Christmas break, with many primary schools also closing.⁵⁸ No schools reopened following the Christmas break, except for school provision for vulnerable children and children of key workers.⁵⁹ During this period of school closure, the Welsh Government continued to provide £19.50 per week per eligible child for local authorities to provide free school meals. They

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55663564>

⁵⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-coronavirus-27-january-2021>

⁵⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/news/scotland-in-lockdown/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/news/financial-help-for-families-in-need/>

⁵⁸ <https://gov.wales/timeline-school-closures-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

⁵⁹ Ibid

Replacement school food provision

again could decide whether this would be distributed as a food voucher, direct payment, or food parcel. It was reported by our stakeholders that most local authorities were providing cash payments, though examples of local authorities providing food boxes were also highlighted.

Northern Ireland

In the new year, schools in Northern Ireland were closed and it was announced that remote learning would be in place until after the half term break in the middle of February, and payments would be made for children entitled to free school meals.⁶⁰ On 28 January, the Education Minister announced that schools would continue to provide remote learning until the 5th of March at the earliest. At the same time, it was announced that payments in lieu of free school meals would be continued.⁶¹

Support for students entitled to free school meals during school holidays

Over the course of the pandemic, there has been increased attention on the provision of free school meals over school holidays, particularly when these fell within periods of school closures but also extending beyond these periods. Here, we cover how governments responded to calls for free school meal provision to be extended through school holidays over September 2020 to summer 2021.

England

Despite a U-turn decision to provide replacements for free school meals over the summer 2020 holidays, in October 2020, the UK government announced no intention to provide this during the autumn half-term or Christmas holidays, citing that such provision is not normally provided.⁶² There was a debate in the UK Parliament on 21 October on the motion that the Government continue to directly fund the provision of free school meals over the school holidays until Easter 2021⁶³, however, the Opposition motion requiring the Government to directly fund free school meal provision over the holidays was defeated by 322 votes to 261.⁶⁴ Despite this decision, the BBC reported that many councils announced their intentions to provide free school meals during the autumn half-term.⁶⁵

On the 8th of November 2020, the DWP announced a COVID Winter Grant Scheme for local authorities.⁶⁶ The £170 million funding scheme was described as ring-fenced to support families and individuals with food and bills and to allow councils to provide food for children over the holidays. No guidance was issued here, instead councils were described as “best placed to ensure appropriate holiday support”. This scheme did not specifically target families in receipt of free school meals, rather local authorities were encouraged to use a “wide range of data and sources of information... to identify and provide support to a broad

⁶⁰ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/statement-education-minister-ad-hoc-committee-6-january-2021>

⁶¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/remote-learning-continue-until-march-weir>

⁶² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-10-21/debates/79C0CA8D-CADF-4562-9317-5A51810BB5DE/FreeSchoolMeals>

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04195/SN04195.pdf>

⁶⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54657796>

⁶⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>

Replacement school food provision

cross section of vulnerable households”.⁶⁷ In a guidance document’s “Questions and Answers” annex, in response to the question “Is it acceptable to use the grant funding for free school meals?”, it was outlined that the COVID Winter Grant Scheme was not intended to replicate or replace provision of meals, however, that local authorities had the discretion to use funding and that they may choose to use the scheme to support families in receipt of free school meals over the school holidays if deemed to be appropriate.⁶⁸ For example, in Ealing, the Council provided a £30 voucher for every eligible free school meal pupil over the Easter holidays in 2021. Further examples of councils doing this are provided in our local case study research.⁶⁹

In the same announcement, an expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) was announced for Easter, summer and Christmas 2021 holidays. It was stated that the programme would be made available in every local authority in England and cost up to £220 million.⁷⁰ The funding was intended to provide places for children eligible for free school meals to attend a programme 4 days a week for a minimum of 4 hours over 4 weeks of the summer, 1 week at Easter and 1 week at Christmas.⁷¹

Wales

On the 15th of October 2020, the Education Minister announced £11 million of funding to ensure free school meal provision during all school holidays through Easter 2021.⁷² Our stakeholders shared with us that further funding of £23.3 million was allocated in the 2021-22 budget to extend free school meal provision through the summer and following school year to Easter 2022. Though at the discretion of local authorities, we were again told by our stakeholders that this funding was predominantly been used by local authorities to make direct payments to families eligible for free school meals.

In addition to this provision through holidays, the Welsh Government also announced further funding for holiday programmes, such as the Holiday Hunger Playworks Project and School Holiday Enrichment Programme.

Scotland

On the 20th of October, the Scottish Government announced that a further £10 million was made available to local authorities to spend on the provision of free school meals through the winter breaks and through to Easter.⁷³ The BBC reported that local authorities were able to apply for reimbursements if they had also provided free school meals during the autumn half-term.⁷⁴ One of the research participants from one of our local case studies in Scotland

⁶⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

⁶⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

⁶⁹ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

⁷⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>

⁷¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2021>

⁷² <https://gov.wales/marcus-rashford-mbe-backs-welsh-government-decision-ensure-free-school-meal-provisions-every-school>

⁷³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

⁷⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-54652230>

Replacement school food provision

highlighted that the late timing of this announcement meant that local authorities did not know ahead that funding would be provided retrospectively and so some had not provided anything over the autumn half-term. A government document published in February later reported that £6.95 million was provided for free school meals during the October 2020, Christmas and February 2021 holidays.⁷⁵ A further £4.29 million was allocated for provision during the Easter holidays in April. Local authorities could decide the form of free school meal alternative offered, whether direct payment, voucher or food parcel. As above, we heard from our Scottish Government stakeholders that the majority adopted cash or voucher-based approaches.

In addition to this funding for the provision of free school meals through the holidays, the Scottish Government also targeted families in receipt of free school meals for Winter Hardship Payments⁷⁶ and Spring Hardship Payments. Local authorities gave a one-off payment of £100 for each child eligible for free school meals in the period between 30 November and the beginning of winter holidays. A total of 144,128 payments were made, totalling £14.41 million of spending.⁷⁷ Local authorities administered a further £100 per child during the Easter holidays as part of the Spring Hardship Payment, alongside the provision of free school meals over this period.⁷⁸

Northern Ireland

At the end of September 2020, it was reported in the Belfast Telegraph that no decision had yet been made on whether or not to provide free school meals during the autumn half-term in Northern Ireland.⁷⁹ On the 22nd of October, in a coronavirus press conference, it was announced that the Northern Ireland executive had approved £1.3 million for the provision of free school meal payments over the autumn half term.⁸⁰

In November 2020, the Finance Minister in Northern Ireland announced £98 million of funding to support the most vulnerable through the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.⁸¹ Included in this announcement was the allocation of £26.4 million to schools, of which £7.8 million was earmarked to provide holiday food payments during Christmas, winter half-term, and Easter holidays for children entitled to free school meals.⁸² The BBC reported that further funding was announced to continue this provision through summer 2021 and subsequent school holidays to April 2022.⁸³

⁷⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/news/financial-help-for-families-in-need/>

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-to-tackle-poverty-and-inequality/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus/no-decision-on-continuing-free-school-meals-during-holidays-after-100000-ni-children-aided-during-summer-39566762.html>

⁸⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-54652230>

⁸¹ <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/news/murphy-announces-ps300-million-support-package>

⁸² <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/minister-finance-statement-northern-ireland-assembly-covid-19-funding-2020-21>

⁸³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55009536>

Monitoring provision of free school meals through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

In our previous monitoring report published in December 2020,⁸⁴ we found evidence that through the autumn 2020, schools were struggling to provide their normal provision of hot meals in school settings due to social distancing requirements, and that local authorities had to make their own decisions about how to provide for pupils entitled to free school meals but unable to attend, with uncertainty about the extent to which this provision would be funded. At that time, we noted the importance of monitoring and evaluating the provision to self-isolating and shielding pupils and the need to evaluate the impact of widening eligibility for free school meals to children previously ineligible for support. We also felt there was a need to examine the impacts of the pandemic on school catering sector and viability of these businesses into the future. Over the course of collecting data for this mapping report, we identified some sources that provide insights into how provision of free school meals and school food operated over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021, however, many of the gaps in the evidence base in our first monitoring report remained.

Concerns about free school meal replacements

During the January-March 2021 lockdown, concerns were raised about the food parcel replacements that were being offered to children in England. Anecdotally, media news outlets and social media carried stories about the poor quality of food parcels offered over the January lockdown. For example, in a story covered by the BBC in mid-January,⁸⁵ a food parcel was reported to contain two carrots, two potatoes, a tin of baked beans, a loaf of bread, three apples, two bananas, a small bag pasta, cheese slices, one tomato, and some packaged snack items, which was calculated to have a value of just over £5, though the company providing the parcel stated it cost £10.20 after delivery costs were accounted for. The story went on to include statements from school catering companies that had been criticised promising to improve parcels.

Over January 2021, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee conducted a follow-up inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity for individuals and the food supply chain, covering the period since September 2020 to the first months of 2021.⁸⁶ Oral evidence received from the Food Foundation and Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food shared that they had seen examples of very poor quality and quantity of foods delivered in cases where food parcels were used to replace free school meals, though they shared they had also seen examples of good quality food parcels as well. In response to concerns about the poor quality of food parcels, the Department for Education set up a special hotline to respond to issues of poor quality food parcels being issued.⁸⁷

Survey data collected later in the Education Settings Survey in early March 2021 showed 78% of schools reported providing vouchers through the national free school meal voucher scheme; 14% were using a local voucher scheme; and 13% were providing food parcels.

⁸⁴ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁸⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55641740>

⁸⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

⁸⁷ Ibid

Replacement school food provision

Some schools were using more than one method of provision.⁸⁸ In contrast, as shared by our stakeholders, in Wales and Scotland, it was felt that schools were primarily providing cash replacements over the autumn and winter.

There were also concerns that replacements were not being offered when children were unable to attend school due to self-isolating. A non-representative survey of 1,570 parents and carers and 785 children and young people was carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in England, Scotland, and Wales in January and February 2021. Here, it was reported that among families eligible for free school meals, nearly half did not receive free school meal replacements while their children were isolating from school during the autumn term.⁸⁹

The CPAG report went on to describe how families felt about the different replacement options they received. Among families receiving cash payments as free school meal replacements, 75% indicated these worked well for them. Interviews with parents in receipt of these highlighted the flexibility of the cash option, offering them freedom to choose where to shop and ability to choose the things they know their children like. Among families receiving vouchers or food deliveries, only 40% indicated these replacement options were working well for them. Some quotes from qualitative interviews with families highlighted that families felt embarrassed to use vouchers in shops and that they did not provide the flexibility of being able to shop where you like, including online.⁹⁰ Recommendations from the CPAG report emphasised that cash replacements be prioritised for students in receipt of free school meals during periods of isolation, remote learning or holidays.

Student and parent experiences of school food

Rose et al. conducted an online survey using convenience sampling over October and November 2020.⁹¹ It was completed by young people aged 16-18 (n=39), parents of children aged 11-18 (n=152), and staff working in secondary or higher education for 16-19 year olds (n=61). Most participants were from the North-East of England. Qualitative responses elicited from open-ended questions were insightful, highlighting concerns about changes made to lunch provision since the return to school, including shortened time for meals, reduced choice, and shifts towards convenience and grab-and-go options rather than the provision of hot meals.

Concerns in the school catering sector

In an online statement on their website in mid-January 2021, Food for Life outlined the challenges for cooks and catering teams in schools in light of the winter 2021 lockdown.⁹² These included food going to waste given the sudden announcement of school closures in England in early January and subsequent drop in numbers. But at the same time, the

⁸⁸ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/free-school-meals-autumn-term/2020-21-autumn-term>

⁸⁹ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Cost_of_Learning_in_Lockdown_March_2021_update.pdf

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹

Rose et. al. 2021, 'Pizza every day – why?': A survey to evaluate the impact of COVID- 19 guidelines on secondary school food provision in the UK, Nutrition Bulletin,

⁹² <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/whats-happening/news/news-post/caterer-challenges-and-changing-guidance>

Replacement school food provision

widening criteria of *essential workers* meant that more children were in school during the lockdown, creating new challenges for caterers to provide for a reduced but significant number of children in school.

In early January, Food for Life wrote a letter to the Department for Education to encourage them to provide guidance to schools regarding working with school caterers. Subsequently, government guidance was issued urging schools to prioritise working with their caterers to provide for children both in and out of school over issuing vouchers for free school meal replacements. However, Food for Life's statement acknowledged that the widespread reporting of poor-quality food parcels being provided by school caterers resulted in the government no longer recommending food parcel be provided as the first option.⁹³

In the EFRA Committee's follow-up inquiry report, they highlighted experiences shared by the Chief Executive of the Federation of Wholesale Distributors, where schools were left with huge amounts of stock due the sudden announcement of school closures in January 2021.⁹⁴ In their written evidence of impacts on the wider sector, the Federation of Wholesale Distributors estimated that food and drink wholesalers were left with £12.2 million in excess stock due to only being provided 24 hours' notice of school closures, followed by the re-introduction of the school voucher scheme.⁹⁵ In their summary, the EFRA Committee stated it was unfortunate that a minority of poor quality food parcels resulted in failed public confidence in the ability of school caterers and wholesalers to provide good quality food parcels, which they suggested were the best option in some circumstances and which led to further difficulties in the sector.⁹⁶

Discussion

In this report, we once again observed that there must have been significant variation in how free school meal replacements were provided over autumn to spring/summer 2021 across local authorities and between UK nations given the discretion given to schools and local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland about how replacements would be provided in contrast to the unitary approach taken in Northern Ireland. We once again noted that evaluations exploring how different forms of provision supported and reached families were lacking. Information on take-up of provision, appropriateness and quality of food parcels when provided, and ability of families to use vouchers when provided should have been assessed.

Given the high rates of absence due to COVID-19 and commitments to support children who had to self-isolate, reach of replacement provision during regular term time is a particularly important consideration. For example, in England, where 1.63 million children were eligible for free school meals and the weekly absence rate was 6% due to COVID in November 2020, it would be useful to know what proportion of these 97,800 free-school meal eligible children received a replacement and on what timescale during their absence.

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

⁹⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/21918/default/>

⁹⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

Replacement school food provision

We were surprised to observe there was not a clear or well-developed plan for replacing free school meals during potential periods of school closures in England going into the 2020-21 school year. With the sudden announcement of school closures in January 2021, there was once again evidence that children were not provided with replacements of free school meals in a timely or appropriate way. The period was again characterised by concerns about the replacements being offered to children and a hasty reintroduction of the Edenred voucher scheme. We were also concerned that whereas in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, there was forward planning and commitment to replace free school meals during school holidays over 2020-21 and beyond, no such forward planning or commitment was made in England.

We note however, that variation in provision could also have occurred to a significant extent in Wales and Scotland, given local authorities were given the discretion to choose the free school meal replacement scheme that suited them. It was only in Northern Ireland that a consistent and nation-wide approach was implemented in the form of cash-based transfers to parents'/carers' bank accounts. Else, the provision of free school meal replacements over 2020 through 2021, whether due to school closures, self-isolation or school holidays can only be described as a postcode lottery with respect to what families eligible for free school meals were receiving. Research to understand the impacts of different forms of replacement free school meal provision on families is needed.

Emergency Finance

Summary

In this section, we look at what emergency financial support was offered over autumn 2020 to summer 2021 across the four devolved nations. Important to note is that this section does not cover the Job Retention Replacement Scheme (or “furlough scheme”) or Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Whilst originally due to close in October 2020, both schemes were extended to September 2021 given the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns on some industries over autumn 2020 and through winter and spring of 2021. These schemes were income-replacement entitlements, whereas this section focuses on the emergency schemes put in place to cover short-falls in household finances related to the pandemic.

In England, as was the case early in the pandemic, there was no national scheme put in place to offer emergency finance support to households. Instead, the UK government announced at various points over autumn 2020 through spring 2021 different grants for local authorities to use to support “vulnerable households” with essentials. These were the Covid Winter Grant scheme and COVID Local Support Grant.

In Scotland, households could continue to apply for Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund, which had its budget expanded at the start of the pandemic. The remaining boost to the fund (£20 million) was released for a “financial security fund” in autumn 2020 and allocated out to local authorities to use at their discretion for hardship funds or other support for households, including food provision, support with fuel or housing payments, money advice, and well-being. A further £20 million was added to this fund in February 2021. The Scottish Government also introduced one-off hardship payments for families in receipt of free school meals and in receipt of Council Tax Reduction. These were COVID Winter Hardship payments, COVID Spring Hardship payments, and Low-income Pandemic payments.

Early in the pandemic, Wales increased the limit to the number of Coronavirus Hardship Emergency Assistance Payments one could be granted until spring 2021; they allocated an extra £1.5 million to enable this limit increase to remain until March 2022. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, people facing financial crises could continue to apply for their Discretionary Support grants or loans.

In autumn 2020, England, Wales and Scotland introduced self-isolation support schemes for people who had to isolate and would lose income as a result. A scheme was already in place in Northern Ireland, the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant, but was enhanced in the late autumn 2020.

Our monitoring work highlighted some concerns about the emergency schemes put in place over this period. In England, concerns about the COVID Winter Grant and Local Support Grant raised by our stakeholders and in a report by End Furniture Poverty, highlighted their temporary nature, short timelines over which the funds had to be spent, and variation in what

support was offered across different local authorities. In Scotland, feedback collected by the Scottish Government from local authorities included similar issues.

Brief re-cap: emergency finance schemes in place over March 2020 to August 2020

In the first of our mapping reports, we noted that Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland all acted similarly in regard to operating nationally funded and managed emergency payment schemes whereas England did not provide a national emergency payment scheme. Instead, central government provided local authorities with funding to offer essential services and support to those who needed it most including provisions for rough sleepers and the clinically vulnerable. The amount of funding local authorities received was decided according to population size and weighted by a function of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation. In contrast, in Northern Ireland a Discretionary Support COVID-19 Short-term Living Expenses scheme was implemented to offer cash support for people if they or their close family were diagnosed with COVID-19 and had a low income. This was in addition to various grant schemes already in place. In Scotland, additional funding was committed to the Scottish Welfare Fund, and local authorities used their discretion to relax welfare grant limits if required. Similarly in Wales there was increased flexibility in how the Discretionary Assistance Fund's Emergency Assistance Payment scheme could be administered, including increasing the frequency of payments people could apply for.

The first of our monitoring reports noted that, to date, there is limited evidence on the impact of these emergency payment schemes implemented during the pandemic.⁹⁷ The additional funding and increased payment flexibility was welcomed by stakeholders, but there was concern raised about the reach of these schemes. Potential barriers to the reach included insufficient promotion of these schemes, especially as many of the people requiring the support of these schemes were newly eligible and may not have previously sought support. Despite providing funding for people to access food being a key aim of these schemes there is no assessment of the impact of these schemes on household food insecurity. We concluded that rigorous evaluation is required to understand the impact of these national schemes plus evaluation of how local authority schemes in England compare.

Emergency finance schemes in England over 2020-21

Local welfare assistance schemes (LWAS) (and their budgets) have been left to the discretion of local authorities in England since 2013.⁹⁸ Prior to the pandemic, it was reported that these schemes are highly variable across local authorities. A 2020 freedom of information request by the Children's Society found that 1 in 7 local authorities had no LWAS in place.⁹⁹ As in our earlier mapping and monitoring reports,¹⁰⁰ the Government announced £63 million of ring-fenced funding for local authorities to spend on emergency assistance to help with food and essentials in June 2020 of the pandemic. With the ongoing impacts of the

⁹⁷ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁹⁸ The Children's Society, 2020, Leave No Family Behind: Strengthening Local Welfare Assistance during Covid-19. Available from <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/leave-no-family-behind.pdf>

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

pandemic, in early November, a further £170 million of funding was announced for councils to run a Covid Winter Grant scheme.¹⁰¹ This fund was to be spent over 1 December to 31 March 2021. On 22 February, the Government announced an extension of the scheme, with a further £59.1 million allocated to provide assistance to vulnerable families and individuals covering the 1st to the 16th of April.¹⁰²

£170 million Covid Winter Grant scheme

Following the announcement of the Covid Winter Grant scheme in early November 2020, guidance was first published outlining the purposes and uses of the grant scheme on 23 November. The funding was allocated at the level of unitary local authorities and County Councils, with the latter encouraged to work with District Councils in their jurisdictions.

In this document, it is stated that the aim of the funding is:

“to give vulnerable households peace of mind over the Winter months during the pandemic by helping those who need it to have food on the table and other essentials, so every child will be warm and well-fed this winter period.”¹⁰³

Later, the stated objective of the scheme was to:

“provide support to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable.”

Though this aim was outlined, the guidance states that councils were to use their own means and discretion (namely, data and information they have on households in their areas) to decide who would be eligible to receive help from the scheme. Means testing or benefit checks were not required to determine eligibility unless councils established these as local eligibility criteria. Households with children were the intended focus group of the scheme, though the guidance allowed for up to 20% of the funding to be used for households or individuals without children. A range of data sources was suggested, from information on benefit receipt, to information from social workers, troubled families' advisors, and utility companies.

Local authorities were also given the leeway to decide what form of support would be provided. Listed suggestions included direct payments into bank accounts, cash payments, or vouchers. The funding was intended to predominantly provide households with support for food, energy and/or water bills, or sewerage, but up to 20% of the funds could be used to support households with other essential items, such as clothing, purchasing essential white goods, or repairing a boiler. Help with rent or housing costs were not permitted with the funding.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>

¹⁰² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme#history>

¹⁰³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

Emergency Finance

The guidance outlined that local authorities could work with third party organisations to distribute support from this fund. Examples listed included food banks, where grant funding could be used by food banks to purchase food to distribute to their clientele.¹⁰⁵

It is notable that the Winter Support package funding for local authorities came from the Department for Work and Pensions, whereas previously, it was DEFRA that provided £63million of funding for local authorities for “food and other essentials” in June 2020.¹⁰⁶ Our stakeholders suggested DEFRA was in better position to provide the summer funding package at that point in the pandemic, but that going forward, emergency finance schemes fell within the DWP’s remit.

COVID Local Support Grant

When the COVID Winter Grant Scheme came to an end, the scheme was further extended through the COVID Local Support Grant, originally covering the period from 17 April to 20 June 2021 and providing £40 million in funding to local authorities. The stated aim of this funding was to “give vulnerable households peace of mind as COVID restrictions are eased by helping those who need it to have food on the table and other essentials”.¹⁰⁷ Once again local authorities were given the discretion to target and use the funding as they chose, with the “the ability to deliver the scheme through a variety of routes including issuing grants to third parties, providing vouchers to households or making direct provision of food.”¹⁰⁸

On 21 June 2021, a further extension was announced, with an additional £160 million in funding provided to cover 21 June to the end of September 2021.

Test and Trace Support Payment

With the announcement of stricter self-isolation guidance and financial penalties for those who fail to comply, the Government announced a new Test and Trace Support payment in September 2020 of £500.¹⁰⁹ The payment scheme had to be set-up by local authorities, with £50 million available to local authorities to cover the cost of administering the scheme.¹¹⁰ Eligibility criteria announced in September included being in receipt of benefits, required to self-isolate, being employed and self-employed and unable to work from home, and losing income as a result of self-isolating.

Early in 2021, extensions were made to the period when individuals could apply, first up to 28 days after the first day of the first period of self-isolation and later this was extended to 42 days.¹¹¹ The scheme was also extended to parents and guardians of children who were self-isolating if they had to take time off work to care for a child in March 2021.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

¹⁰⁶ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-local-support-grant-guidance-for-local-councils/covid-local-support-grant-3-guidance-17-april-2021-to-20-june-2021>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-local-support-grant-guidance-for-local-councils/covid-local-support-grant-3-guidance-17-april-2021-to-20-june-2021>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-package-to-support-and-enforce-self-isolation>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-increases-support-for-those-self-isolating>

¹¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/test-and-trace-support-payment-scheme-claiming-financial-support/claiming-financial-support-under-the-test-and-trace-support-payment-scheme>

Discretionary payments from local authorities

As part of the administrative budget allocated to local authorities, £15 million was for local authorities to provide discretionary payments to people who fell outside the eligibility criteria for the scheme but who would face financial hardship on account of having to self-isolate. As of March 2021, a total of £176 million had been provided to allow them to continue to administer the scheme, with £75 million for discretionary payments.¹¹² In addition to this funding for the scheme, the Government also announced an additional £12.9 million in funding for local councils to continue to support people who had to self-isolate. Examples of what the funding could be used for included providing access to food, helping with caring responsibilities, or providing support for well-being.¹¹³

Emergency finance schemes in Scotland over 2020-21

Scottish Welfare Fund

As previously described, the Scottish Welfare fund is a national scheme in Scotland to provide people with low incomes a safety net in the case of emergency circumstances.¹¹⁴ Local authorities deliver Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants on behalf of the Scottish Government, which sets out how these funds should be used. However, local authorities have “extensive discretion” over the implementation of the scheme.¹¹⁵ As in our first mapping report, £45 million of additional funding was committed to the Scottish Welfare Fund at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with £22 million made available immediately for Crisis and Community Care grants. A further £3 million was allocated to increase budgets for Discretionary Housing Payments.¹¹⁶ In October 2020, it was announced that a remaining £20 million of this boost to the fund would be made available for a flexible “financial security” fund for local authorities.¹¹⁷ At the end of September 2020, the COVID-19 Self-Isolation Support scheme was also announced, which operated under the Scottish Welfare fund.¹¹⁸

£20 million flexible funding

On the 20th of October 2020, the release of funds held in reserve from the Scottish Welfare Fund was announced.¹¹⁹ Unlike how the Scottish Welfare Fund usually operates, local authorities were given the flexibility to choose how their allocation would be spent. They could choose to supplement their local budgets for Crisis and Community Care grants or to instead provide other forms of financial support. They could also boost their local funding for Discretionary Housing Payments.¹²⁰

Guidance on use of this funding was published for local authorities on the 3 of December 2020.¹²¹ The document outlined groups who are at increased risk of financial insecurity, listing younger people; disabled people; lone parents; minority ethnic households; people living in household with children; larger families; people living in households on low incomes;

¹¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-increases-support-for-those-self-isolating>

¹¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-increases-support-for-those-self-isolating>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-statutory-guidance-march-2021/>

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-grant-for-those-self-isolating/>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

¹²⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

¹²¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-tackling-financial-insecurity-over-winter/pages/funding-to-support-delivery/>

and people living in the most deprived areas. It also pointed out that an intersectional approach was essential, given that many at-risk groups overlap.

Though local authorities had discretion for how they decided to spend the funds, the guidance documents outlined detailed guiding principles to “support local thinking about how funding can best be targeted and deployed.”¹²² These were:

1. **Joined-up and proactive**, referring to the need for public and community services to work together to ensure people are able to access the correct services for their needs and a need to proactively engage households known to be financially at risk.
2. **Money advice**, referring to ensuring households are able to access money advice services to ensure they are receiving all entitlements they are eligible for.
3. **Scottish Welfare Fund**. A referral to the Scottish Welfare Fund was emphasised as the correct response for households experiencing an income crisis and that funds should supplement their funds to “ensure demand is met in full”.¹²³
4. **Income-based responses** were encouraged to be considered because of their ability to offer choice, accessibility, and discretion, though circumstances were outlined where they may not be appropriate. In cases where vouchers were a suitable alternative to cash transfers, local authorities were also encouraged to work with key referral partners to food banks to work with them to offer vouchers instead or alongside food bank referrals.
5. **Appropriate food provision**, referring to the need for dietary and cultural needs to be understood in cases where direct food provision is necessary or most appropriate.
6. **Support with fuel** was encouraged through working with energy suppliers to help arrange support. Pre-payment metre top-ups and other ways of using funds to support with fuel costs were suggested.
7. **Discretionary Housing Payments** Local authorities could use funds to supplement their budgets for making Discretionary Housing Payments.
8. **Wellbeing approaches** Local authorities were encouraged to think of ways to meet social and cultural needs of people and to consider the needs of people less engaged with services and those with complex needs. No specific interventions were suggested here but working with community organisations was encouraged.

A further £20 million to tackle financial insecurity

In February 2021, a further £20 million was announced for local councils to continue to invest in programmes to tackle financial insecurity at the local level.¹²⁴

COVID-19 Self-Isolation Support Grant (SISG)

From the end of September 2020, low-income earners in receipt of low-income benefits who were required to self-isolate were eligible to receive £500 if they would experience a loss of earnings to comply with this requirement.¹²⁵ The payment was intended to support them over the 10-day period of self-isolation required. On the 7th of December, the scheme’s eligibility was extended to parents or carers of children required to isolate and applicants who would

¹²² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-tackling-financial-insecurity-over-winter/pages/funding-to-support-delivery/>

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-to-tackle-poverty-and-inequality/>

¹²⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-statutory-guidance-march-2021/pages/11/>

ordinarily have an underlying eligibility for Universal Credit. In mid-February, the scheme was expanded again to include more types of low-income earners and carers of adults required to isolate. In addition, people could apply within 28 days from being told to self-isolate, extended from the 10-day requirement first established.

Though the SISG fell under the Scottish Welfare fund in terms of legislative requirements, the funding for the programme and its administration costs were in addition to the main Scottish Welfare Fund budget, with local authorities being reimbursed by the Scottish Government for each SISG paid.¹²⁶

COVID Winter Hardship Payment

At the end of November 2020, the Scottish Government announced, as part of their £100 million Winter Plan for Social Protection, COVID Winter Hardship Payments.¹²⁷ The payments were for families with children in receipt of free school meals and gave families £100 for each eligible child. Payments were intended to go out by Christmas, and there were no restrictions on how families chose to spend the payment.

Eligible families included those in receipt of free school meals because they were on low income, those waiting on a first Universal Credit payment, and in some cases, families with no recourse to public funds. Where eligibility was determined through free school meal entitlements, families did not have to apply for these payments; local authorities paid them directly into bank accounts.¹²⁸ For those already enrolled in the free school meals programme, payments were made automatically by Dec 24, 2020, and by the 'middle of January 2021' for those enrolling in or qualifying for free school meals after Nov 30, 2020.¹²⁹

COVID Spring Hardship Payment

In mid-February the Scottish Government announced a programme to give families with children eligible for free school meals another one-off payment of £100. Local authorities were asked to deliver these payments alongside the provision of free school meals offered over the Easter holidays.¹³⁰

Low-income Pandemic Payments

As part of the Scottish Budget announced on 9 March 2021, Low Income Pandemic Payments were introduced, which were to be paid households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction or to agreed groups exempt from Council Tax.¹³¹ The £130 payment had to be paid by end of October 2021. Guidance about how local authorities should make these payments specified that a "cash first" approach should be taken, but that councils could offer households credit to a household's Council Tax/Water and Wastewater account alongside the offer of a cash payment.

¹²⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-statutory-guidance-march-2021/pages/11/>

¹²⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/news/winter-support-fund-for-families-and-children/>

¹²⁸¹²⁸ <https://www.mygov.scot/covid-winter-100-child-payment>

¹²⁹ <https://www.mygov.scot/covid-winter-100-child-payment>

¹³⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-to-tackle-poverty-and-inequality/>

¹³¹ [Low income pandemic payment - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for local authorities on pandemic support payments -](#)

Emergency finance schemes in Northern Ireland over 2020-21

Enhancements to Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant

As outlined in our first mapping report,¹³² the Northern Ireland Assembly announced early in the pandemic a new Discretionary Support payment for low-income people having to self-isolate. They also announced the extension of eligibility for Discretionary Support to students. The income threshold for eligibility for Discretionary Support payments was also increased to allow more people to be eligible for the scheme.

In November 2020, in a Ministerial Statement, the Minister for Communities announced enhancements to the Discretionary Support scheme.¹³³ These included increasing the amount provided through the discretionary awards to be the same as the Universal Credit daily rate for a person and their partner.¹³⁴ Decision makers of the award were also encouraged to offer it for a longer period, with an award of living expenses to cover the whole period of self-isolation always being considered.¹³⁵

Northern Ireland's Discretionary Support also continued to be a source of additional financial help in the form of grants or loans for people on a low-income facing extreme or exceptional emergencies or crises over 2020 to 2021.

Emergency finance schemes in Wales over 2020-21

Discretionary Assistance Fund Emergency Assistance Payments: coronavirus hardship

As previously outlined, the Welsh Government made Emergency Assistance Payments more accessible and available over the pandemic. Starting from 1 May 2020, up to five grants could be received in a year, up from three grants, which was the limit before the pandemic. At the time, the new limit was going to run until the 31st of March 2021.¹³⁶ However, we heard from our stakeholders that an additional £10.5 million was allocated to the Discretionary Assistance Fund in the 2021-22 budget to enable the relaxation of the eligibility rules to continue until March 2022.

Self-isolation Support Scheme

In November 2020, the Welsh Government published the details of their support scheme for people who had to self-isolate.¹³⁷ Payments were £500. Eligibility criteria included inability to work from home and receiving Universal Credit and other benefits, with a discretionary element for people who did not meet these criteria but who would experience financial hardship due to self-isolating. Though applicants could only apply from 16 November, payments were backdated to 23 October. Applications were made through local authorities. Eligibility was expanded to include parents and carers unable to work due to children having

¹³² <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

¹³³ <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020-11-17&docID=315841>

¹³⁴ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support>

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ <https://gov.wales/discretionary-assistance-fund-daf>

¹³⁷ <https://gov.wales/self-isolation-payment-scheme-is-now-open>

Emergency Finance

to self-isolate in December, with payments allowed to be backdated until 23 October.¹³⁸ Eligibility criteria was further extended in February 2021.¹³⁹

Carers Support Fund

The Carers Support Fund was announced on 20 October 2020 to help support unpaid carers.¹⁴⁰ In January 2021, additional funding (£250,000) was added. The fund provided grants for carers of up to £300 to cover the costs of essentials, with food being highlighted.¹⁴¹ It also funded the provision of services for carers. The fund was available up to 31 March 2021 and was delivered through the Carers Trust Wales.

In their evaluation, the Carers Trust reported that 3,497 carers received Direct Carers Support Grants, of which 35% were spent on food. Direct services provided from the Carers Support Fund supported 2947 carers and included providing food boxes.¹⁴²

Monitoring emergency finance schemes through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

England

In June 2021, the DWP published grant allocations and reported expenditure from the Winter Grant scheme by local authority.¹⁴³ Information in the table included the number of awards and the percent of expenditure that went to families with children, percent that went on food and utilities, and the percent that was spent on administration. No information was published on how much of the award local authorities provided to third party organisations. This is notable because in the guidance for this scheme, it was acknowledged that third party organisations may not have the information required to know household composition of the recipients of their awards and in this case, they asked “authorities and TPOs [third party organisations] to estimate, to the best of their ability, the level of spend and the volume of awards across the different eligibility criteria”.¹⁴⁴ It is also not clear how expenditure was calculated when third party organisations such as food banks provided food parcels, rather than vouchers.

It was reported, however, that between December 2020 and mid-April, 6.29 million payments were made, with 92% of funding going to families with children and 94% used to support households with food or utility bills.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ <https://gov.wales/500-payment-scheme-now-open-parents-and-carers-children-required-self-isolate>

¹³⁹ <https://gov.wales/eligibility-criteria-self-isolation-support-payment-widened>

¹⁴⁰ <https://gov.wales/ps1-million-fund-carers-mark-launch-public-consultation>

¹⁴¹ <https://gov.wales/carers-support-fund-increased-quarter-million-pounds>

¹⁴² <https://carers.org/downloads/carers--support-fund-2021-english---final.pdf>

¹⁴³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/covid-winter-grant-management-information-1-december-2020-to-16-april-2021/covid-winter-grant-management-information-1-december-2020-to-16-april-2021#annex-authority-level-management-information-mi>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-winter-grant-scheme-guidance-for-local-councils>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/covid-winter-grant-management-information-1-december-2020-to-16-april-2021/covid-winter-grant-management-information-1-december-2020-to-16-april-2021#annex-authority-level-management-information-mi>

Emergency Finance

In February 2022, End Furniture Poverty published a report sharing their findings into local welfare assistance, which included information on COVID Winter Grant spending.¹⁴⁶ They issued FOI requests to the 151 upper tier councils in England requesting a breakdown of spending on the COVID Winter Grant (as well as Emergency Assistance Grant which ran over summer 2020 and core funding on local welfare assistance). Approximately 45% of the COVID Winter Grant funding was used for free school meals, most likely for provision over the Christmas, half-term, and Easter break holidays in 2020-21. About 28% of funding went towards direct grants provided through LWAS or other council departments. An example of a scheme not provided through LWAS was the issuing of a supermarket voucher to all recipients of Discretionary Housing Payments. Smaller proportions of the COVID Winter Grant funding went to food banks (~5%) and other third-party food organisations (e.g. food pantries) than was the case for the Emergency Assistance Grant from summer 2020.¹⁴⁷

Other observations from the End Furniture Poverty report shed some light on how the COVID Winter Grant scheme worked in practice. They found that 32 of 151 local authorities had no LWAS in place over 2020-21, while others were poorly funded. The report authors suggested the lack of infrastructure for local welfare assistance was one reason why local authorities were given flexibility in how they chose to issue assistance from the COVID Winter Grant. They also highlighted that local authorities were often given little notice of the funding they were going to receive for local welfare assistance and tight deadlines over which they had to spend the funds (shown in Table 2 below). The report authors again commented on how local authorities without pre-existing infrastructure in place to handle and distribute these sums of money would have struggled to set up direct grants for vulnerable households to apply for, leading them to instead to provide the funds to schools to distribute for free school meal replacements or other third parties, such as food banks.¹⁴⁸ The report also raised concerns that because core funding for LWAS has not been increased, spending on emergency financial assistance by local authorities is likely going to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Table 2: Analysis by End Furniture Poverty on days between announcement for local authority welfare assistance grants and spending deadline.

Grant	Total Value	Days Between Announcement and Scheme Start Date	Days Between Start Date and Scheme Deadline
Emergency Assistance Grant ⁸⁶	£63m	29	84
Covid Winter Grant 1	£170m	23	120
Covid Winter Grant 2	£59.1m	20	16
Covid Local Support Grant 1	£40m	3	64
Covid Local Support Grant 2	£160m	-1	101
Household Support Fund ⁸⁷	£421m	6	176

Source: <https://endfurniturepoverty.org/research/the-state-of-crisis-support-2022/>

End Furniture Poverty also commented on the move from DEFRA providing the Emergency Assistance Grant in June 2020 to the DWP providing the COVID Winter Grant and

¹⁴⁶ <https://endfurniturepoverty.org/research/the-state-of-crisis-support-2022/>

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ <https://endfurniturepoverty.org/research/the-state-of-crisis-support-2022/>

subsequent funds (Local Support Grants and Household Support Funds). They suggested the move between departments likely led to problems with continuity and clarity.¹⁴⁹

The Trussell Trust, in a joint call to Government made with a number of third sector organisations in February 2021, reported on some of their research on LWAS. In this call they first refer to their previously published ‘Local lifelines: investing in local welfare during and beyond COVID-19,’ which was published in October 2020, reporting on the Emergency Assistance Grant for food and other essentials’ which was provided to councils from June 2020 for 12 weeks. This report found that councils that already had a good LWAS in place were able to use this money to boost their schemes and make relevant adaptations (such as increasing award amount). However, councils that did not have well-developed infrastructure to provide local welfare support struggled to use this money as effectively in response to the COVID-19 crisis. In the later call they report on the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, drawing on data “derived from a combination of sources, including responses to a joint letter which The Children’s Society issued to all local authorities in December 2020. This is combined with insight which The Trussell Trust has gathered through its food bank network, and further desk-based research.” The data covers “around 50 local authorities”.

From this they report that the vast majority of authorities they gathered evidence from had used the COVID Winter Grant Scheme funding to deliver holiday support for families with children who have free school meals eligibility, most often in the form of vouchers with food parcels and cash grants sometimes provided. There were examples of the scheme enabling local authorities to include a far wider remit of households eligible for holiday support grants. Many councils had used the funding to improve their LWAS, leading to welcomed temporary changes to scheme policies, such as increasing award sizes, expanding the type of support provided to include items such as bedding, clothing or white goods, and allowing repeat applications from households facing repeated crises. “Some” authorities have chosen to direct all winter grant funding through their existing local welfare schemes, enabling them to pro-actively identify those in need of assistance, assess need based on additional discretionary criteria and provide a more wrap-around support offer.

For the most part, local authorities had delivered support through the COVID Winter Grant Scheme directly. However, some councils has provided small amounts of residual funding as grants to voluntary and community sector providers of emergency support; such as food banks, advice providers or local energy support schemes. This has led to some concerns regarding the use of this funding to support the provision of emergency food aid, therefore further entrenching this response.

We heard some feedback from our stakeholders about how the Winter Grant scheme worked in practice. At the time of receiving feedback (May 2021), the funding had only been extended to 21 June. The temporary nature of the funding was highlighted as a limitation, as were the short timelines over which it had to be spent. Similar to discussion in the End Furniture Poverty report, we heard from our stakeholders that it was difficult for local councils who didn’t already have LWAS systems in place to set up new ways of providing direct welfare assistance grants. This may have been why some chose to solely work with schools to distribute to families in receipt of free school meals or issued funds to food banks and other community organisations. It was noted that the freedom given to councils to use the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

Emergency Finance

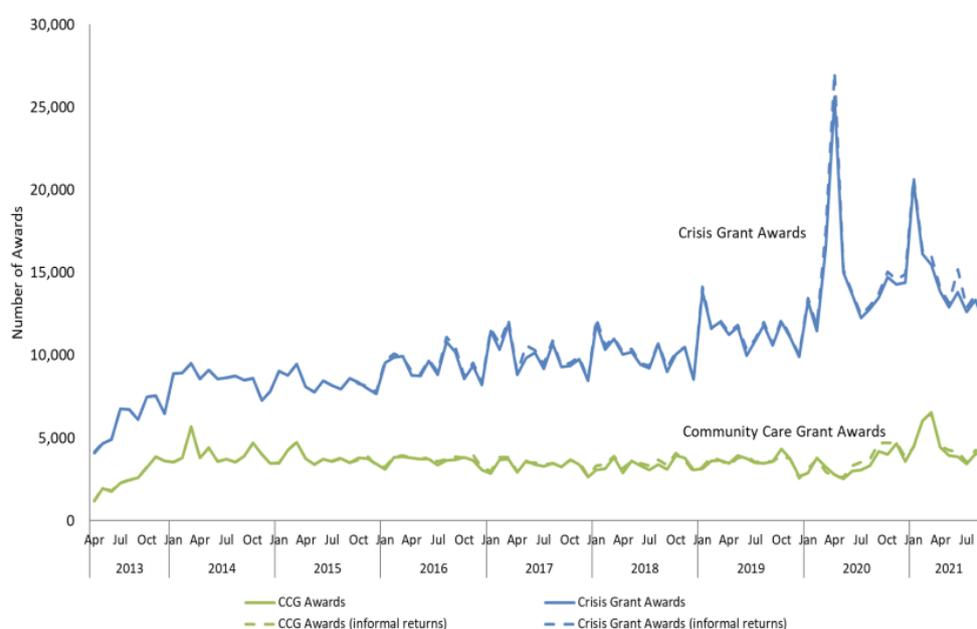
funds as they chose resulted in huge variation in what support was available across councils.

Scotland

Scottish Welfare Fund statistics

Figure 1 shows the number of Scottish Welfare Fund Awards made going back to when the fund was first established and through the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown, there were peaks in the number of Crisis Grant awards made during the first wave of the pandemic and again in January 2021 when there was another lockdown in Scotland.

Figure 1 Monthly number of Scottish Welfare Fund Awards.



Source: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-statistics-update-to-30-september-2021/>

Reporting on use of flexible local authority funding

In autumn 2021, the Scottish Government published a report summarising the activities delivered by local authorities from the flexible funding streams provided to them over October 2020 to March 2021.¹⁵⁰ The activities funded by these streams were grouped into seven categories, including emergency income, emergency food, funding to provide support for marginalised groups, emergency fuel, income maximisation, well-being activities, and partnership working. We describe activities under the first three categories, as these activities are in line with the content of this report.

Emergency income

Local authorities used the flexible funds to increase their budgets for the Scottish Welfare Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments. Local authorities also set up their own financial

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-summary-of-activities-trends-and-learning/pages/funding-context/>

Emergency Finance

hardship funds. Examples included providing advance payments to households waiting on their first Universal Credit payment, providing payments for workers ineligible for Statutory Sick Pay, providing funds for asylum seekers ineligible for other assistance, or for providing costs associated with isolating (e.g. temporary accommodation, food, fuel).¹⁵¹

Other examples under emergency income included providing free school meal replacements as direct payments and providing additional Pandemic Support Payments, which were often targeted towards low income families with children.¹⁵²

Emergency food

Local authorities also used their flexible funding on different food provision activities. These included supporting food banks and other food programmes, including organisations that had switched from community meal provision to delivery. Some local authorities also provided delivery of replacements for free school meals as food parcels or provided food parcels and meals for people requiring assistance over the winter of 2021. Funds were also used to enable the provision of food, such as building space, staff, and transportation. It was noted that some funding was also used to “refine pathways between food provision and financial assistance services” as well as for establishing food pantries, larders, and fridges.¹⁵³

Support for marginalised groups

Funding under this category included adapting food support to be culturally and age-appropriate to meet faith, ethnic, and dietary needs, to enable home delivery of food to people unable to access retailers due to age, disabilities, or geography, and increasing the amount of food support provided in acknowledge of the higher costs of food in rural and remote areas.¹⁵⁴

The Scottish Government also collected feedback from local authorities on how these schemes worked in practice and their concerns going forward. In relation to how the funding worked for them, the following concerns were highlighted:

- Data sharing limitations made it difficult to identify households who would benefit from early preventative support.
- The short-term nature of flexible funding allocations and limited notice of whether further funds would be available made it difficult to plan.
- The various nationally administered funds for community and third sector action were not always understood, with some concern around duplication and join-up.¹⁵⁵

Key observations in how funds were used were also included in the report. It was noted that though local authorities continued to run local helplines, many undertook proactive outreach to provide support to households known to be at risk of financial hardship. An example was providing a grant to households in receipt of council tax reduction. Helplines newly included

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

a focus on the whole needs of households and call scripts included money and employability advice. It was also noted that in comparison the dominant focus on food provision during the first wave of the pandemic, local authorities shifted their focus to direct financial transfers and vouchers. Lastly, it was noted that all local authorities worked closely with other sectors and services, including community and third-sector organisations. Key learning points re-emphasised these same themes.¹⁵⁶

Northern Ireland

In June 2021, the Communities Minister announced a review of the Discretionary Support scheme, led by an independent panel.¹⁵⁷ The panel was led by an academic at Ulster University and members included representatives from the Trussell Trust, Advice NI, Falls Community Council, and the Law Centre NI as well as other Ulster University academics. The stated purpose of the review was to “establish if Discretionary Support is delivering for the people who need it most”. People and organisations who used the scheme were invited to complete a survey.¹⁵⁸ The report was delivered to the Communities Minister on 20 December 2021¹⁵⁹ and released publicly on 25 March 2022.¹⁶⁰ Key findings and recommendations included the importance of Discretionary Support for recipients, the need for support to account for household composition, staggered income thresholds for determining eligibility, prioritisation of grant payments rather than loan payments, and the need for more support for people to apply.

In December 2021, the Department for Communities released their annual report on Administrative Welfare Supplementary Payments and Discretionary Support for the year 2020-21.¹⁶¹ Over this period £13.104 million was paid out in Discretionary Support Grants. In the year before the pandemic, £9.2 million was made in Discretionary Support Grants in 2019-20.¹⁶² The scheme also awards Discretionary Support Loans; £3.6 million in loans was provided in 2019-20 and this increased to £6.392 million in 2020-21.

A total of £2.389 million was paid out for 14,724 Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grants.¹⁶³

In a statement to the NI Assembly in November 2020, the Minister for Communities celebrated features of NI’s Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grants in comparison to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/communities-minister-hargey-commissions-discretionary-support-review>

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/discretionarysupportreview>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-hargey-welcomes-panels-report-discretionary-support-scheme>

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-independent-review-of-discretionary-support-22.pdf>

¹⁶¹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-discretionary-support-standards-of-advice-assistance-and-sanctions-annual-report-2020-21.pdf>

¹⁶² <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-discretionary-support-standards-of-advice-assistance-and-sanctions-annual-report-2019-20.pdf>

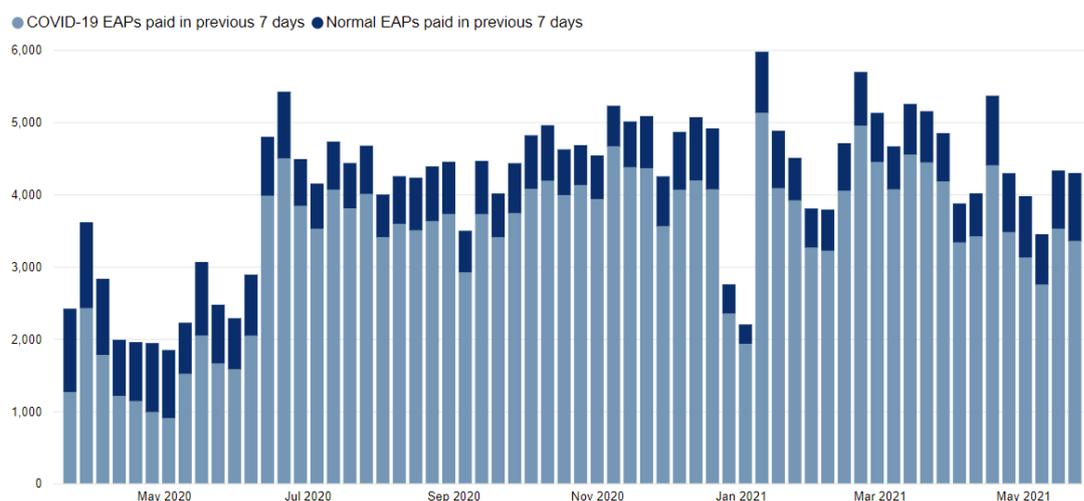
¹⁶³ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-discretionary-support-standards-of-advice-assistance-and-sanctions-annual-report-2020-21.pdf>

comparable schemes in England, Wales, and Scotland, emphasising that they were targeted towards recipients, with more money provided to households with more children and that there was no limit on the number of grants that were awarded.¹⁶⁴ It was also emphasised that grants were not restricted to individuals told to self-isolate, but also in the case of a household member having to self-isolate.

Wales

Data outlining the weekly number of Emergency Assistance Payments made in Wales were published at the end of May 2021 and are shown in Figure 2 below. In line with the changes made to allow the fund to be more flexible and provide more funding from May 2020, the number of payments increased. This flexibility remained in place over the period of monitoring to May 2021. With the exception of a dramatic dip during the Christmas 2020 period, the number of payments remained broadly similar over Autumn to Spring 2021, with various dips followed by an elevated number of payments. A clear pattern is not visible, though COVID-19 related payments continued to make up the majority of EAPs through the spring 2021.

Figure 2 Weekly number of Emergency Assistance Payments paid over COVID-19 pandemic.



Source: <https://gov.wales/summary-data-about-coronavirus-covid-19-and-response-it-26-may-2021-html>

Discussion

As in our earlier reports, it is notable that England does not have a standardised and ring-fenced fund for emergency payment schemes, as seen elsewhere in the UK. Instead, local authorities have been left to make their own decisions about whether or not to put a local welfare assistance scheme in place. The allocation of funds to local authorities for helping households with essentials in the form of the COVID Winter Grant scheme and Local

¹⁶⁴ <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020-11-17&docID=315841>

Emergency Finance

Support Grant resulted in variation in how local authorities were able to make use of the funds and how they chose to use them. There has been a lack of detailed reporting on how local authorities used the funds, with FOI requests needing to be made to understand how funds were distributed and how eligibility was determined. Importantly, the extra funding schemes put in place over the pandemic were often announced late and had short time scales for the funding to be used. This limits their utility, as it does not enable forward planning or facilitate sustainable schemes to be put in place.

In both Scotland and England, concerns were raised that it was difficult to proactively identify households to support with the hardship funding. While crisis grants or emergency assistance grants are useful, they also tend to be sought out after households are already in crisis. The ambition of local authorities to reach households before a crisis occurs and to prevent hardship from occurring is laudable, but to do this, they need access to data on benefit receipt and other markers of financial vulnerability to enable a targeted approach.

Lastly, while data on the numbers of recipients of funds is useful to know the scale of help distributed, wider data collection is needed to understand the reach of these schemes. It is notable that a review of the Discretionary Support scheme was commissioned by the NI Assembly to understand how it was working in practice. Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments should commission similar research to understand their own approaches to local welfare assistance and impacts on recipients over the pandemic and beyond.

Emergency Food

Summary

In this section, we look at the funding from governments for the voluntary and community sector over autumn 2020 to summer 2021 as well as the UK-wide response from this sector. Funding from governments for the voluntary and community sector continued. FareShare was awarded further funding from DEFRA in England. This allowed the charity to purchase and redistribute 7,600 tonnes of food, using the infrastructure already in place to do so. In Scotland, the Government's COVID-19 specific partnership with FareShare ended in November 2020. The Scottish Government set up the Enabling Neighbourhoods & Communities Fund of £1 million distributed through the Corra Foundation to award small grants to groups across Scotland over February to June 2021. In Northern Ireland, following the end of the nationally provided food box scheme in August 2020, funding was allocated to councils to support the volunteer and community sector. The Welsh Government emphasised supporting community hubs to tackle food insecurity with their £2 million grant allocated to local authorities, third sector organisations and not-for-profit organisations. In response to concerns about a lack of access to FareShare support in the north of Wales, the Welsh Government provided funding to support the development of a FareShare operation in the north and west of Wales.

National charities such as the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), Magic Breakfast, the Trussell Trust, Sustain and Feeding Britain continued support their members and networks. Food bank organisations raised concerns about increased demand for emergency food over this period, and IFAN raised concerns about staff and volunteer safety during the high transmission rates in winter 2021. There was also noted a lack of clarity around which organisations could receive food from FareShare as part of the partnership and funding provided to them by DEFRA, particularly impacting independent food banks in the IFAN network.

Brief re-cap: emergency food interventions over March 2020 to August 2020

Our first monitoring report highlighted the significant increase in the provision of food parcels over March to August 2020, and the adaptivity and responsiveness from food aid charities during this crisis.¹⁶⁵ We noted the heavy reliance on charitable emergency food aid by UK and devolved governments and targeted funding for this sector. We also saw how the pandemic and subsequent lockdown threatened various aspects of the food charity systems including food donation supply chains, the reliance on volunteers and the increased, rapid demand. We saw some challenges to funding access by independent food banks who found FareShare's membership fees a barrier to access. However, some initiatives, notably a £10 million fund from Morrison's, were directly able to impact these independent food banks.

¹⁶⁵ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

Funding from governments for the Voluntary and Community Sector over September 2020 to spring/summer 2021

England

DEFRA to FareShare - £16M

Following on from funding received from DEFRA in June 2020,¹⁶⁶ on 1 December 2020, FareShare announced they had received a second grant of £16 million from the Government.¹⁶⁷ This funding was also referred to in the announcement of the Winter Support Package from the DWP.¹⁶⁸ The funding was provided for the purchase and redistribution of over 7,600 tonnes of food to FareShare's network of members, including frontline charities, non-for-profit organisations, and community groups. There was a route for non-member frontline organisations to access this food via FareShare if they had the capacity to receive large pallets of food and distribute at scale. This provision was intended to last until end of March 2021.

Our DEFRA stakeholders shared with us that the funding was awarded to FareShare because they wanted to get the funding out quickly and efficiently. Because they had already awarded funding to FareShare in June 2020, they could extend the contract already in place for the next tranche of funding in November 2020. As described in our earlier reports, in June 2020, £3.45 million of the £16 million for food charities was made available through the Food Charity Grant scheme, which individual food charities with a sizeable annual spend could apply for.¹⁶⁹ Our DEFRA stakeholders shared that setting up such a scheme again in the winter 2020 period would have taken too long and that a quick response was needed. FareShare had existing infrastructure and the capability to purchase and deliver food at the "scale and pace required" (*Stakeholder meeting, January 2021*). These benefits were felt to override potential concerns about providing the entire amount to a single organisation.

Scotland

Funding for third sector organisations through local authority funds

Over April to June 2020, the Food Fund was available to support third sector organisations. Going forward from Autumn 2020, our Scottish Government stakeholders shared that local third sector organisations could receive funding from their local authority from the flexible funding to tackle financial insecurity outlined above. In their guidance for use of this fund, as shown above, they suggested that any direct food provision funded through these funds be "appropriate food provision, referring to the need for dietary and cultural needs to be understood in cases where direct food provision is necessary or most appropriate".¹⁷⁰ It was reported that over £80 million was also provided to community and third sector organisations through the Wellbeing, Supporting community and Third Sector Recovery Funds. Whilst not

¹⁶⁶ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/fareshare-awarded-16m-grant-from-defra-to-help-feed-vulnerable-people-this-winter/>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>

¹⁶⁹ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-tackling-financial-insecurity-over-winter/pages/funding-to-support-delivery/>

Emergency Food

specifically for food provision, food-based activity was supported alongside other well-being actions.¹⁷¹

We also learned of the Enabling Neighbourhoods & Communities Fund, which consisted of a £1 million Scottish Government fund, distributed through the Corra Foundation, awarding small grants, usually £1,000 to £2,000 (up to £5,000 maximum)¹⁷², to community and voluntary groups across Scotland who were connecting and supporting people within their communities. This scheme was closed in June 2021. Over £600k was distributed in the first phase (February 2021 - May 2021).¹⁷³

FareShare Partnership

We heard from our Scottish Government stakeholders that the Government's COVID-19 partnership with FareShare, which provided them with funding,¹⁷⁴ ended in November 2020, though the Scottish Government continued to provide funding for FareShare as they had done prior to the pandemic.

Northern Ireland

Support for community food providers

Following the end of the Northern Ireland Assembly's food box scheme in summer 2020, the Department for Communities announced £3.2 million of funding for councils to support the voluntary and community sector.¹⁷⁵ In particular, the package was outlined to support "a more sustainable and strategic response to food insecurity". The fund included a £750,000 allocation to the "COVID-19 Access to Food Fund", which was aimed at developing and strengthening the response to food insecurity. The fund also included £1.75 million allocated to the Community Support fund which was for supporting organisations engaged in food support, along with those engaged in financial need and supporting connectivity.

In May 2021, it was announced the Department for Communities would receive £1 million in funding for "food interventions" as part of an allocation of £50.3 million from the Northern Ireland Executive to help support people and communities impacted by the pandemic.¹⁷⁶ £5 million was also allocated to support charities and social enterprises under this scheme.

Support for FareShare

Our stakeholders in Northern Ireland shared that the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland gave further funding to FareShare, following on from a history of working with this organisation.

Wales

Food poverty and food insecurity grant scheme

A total of £2 million in funding for local authorities, third sector organisations and not-for-profit organisations was announced for the 2021-22 financial year with the purpose to:

¹⁷¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-summary-of-activities-trends-and-learning/pages/funding-context/>

¹⁷² <https://scvo.scot/support/coronavirus/funding/scottish-government/enabling-neighbourhoods-communities-fund>

¹⁷³ <https://www.corra.scot/grants/enabling-neighbourhoods/>

¹⁷⁴ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/communities-minister-announces-ps32m-covid-funding-boost>

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/hargey-welcomes-additional-covid-19-funding-allocation>

- support already-established community food organisations to “meet the needs of households living in food poverty”
- “support communities to invest in initiatives that help tackle the root causes of food poverty and food insecurity and develop healthy, sustainable solutions which involve the communities that are affected”
- “support an increased number of people facing food poverty by strengthening existing community food initiatives across each local authority including a focus on activity that helps to address the root causes of food poverty”¹⁷⁷

The funding was equally divided between providing capital grants and revenue grants. The former was for the purchase of equipment, such as fridges, freezers, or IT, and the latter for providing the development of projects, such as social supermarkets or community cafes. Our Welsh stakeholders shared that the emphasis of the fund was to support community hubs, bringing together support services such as advice services with food provision.

The UK-wide response from the Voluntary and Community Sector

In our August 2020 report, we described the numerous actions taken by third-sector organisations that specifically focus their work (or aspects of it) on interventions to address food insecurity. Here, we update on key actions that were taken over September 2020 to spring/summer 2021. Campaigning for the furlough scheme to continue, in the first instance, beyond October 2020, and for the Universal Credit £20/week uplift to remain in place beyond October 2021 were also critical elements of the work of these groups over this period.

FareShare

As outlined, FareShare received £15 million in funding from DEFRA in late November 2020. Our FareShare stakeholders reported that all of this funding went to purchase food to distribute to its members. Purchases were made from different retailers and catering firms, including Brakes and Compass. The demands on the food retail sector at this time (Christmas 2020 and the run up to the end of the Brexit transition period on 31st December 2020) meant it was important for them to source food from multiple outlets. Their members were not charged for the food provided using DEFRA funds and as above, a route was also established for non-FareShare member frontline organisations to receive large volumes of food if they had the capacity to distribute it.

Our FareShare stakeholders commented on the role they had at this time, namely that the distribution of purchased food rather than surplus food was not in line with the organisation’s mission or strategy. They emphasised they took on this funding and role because they had the infrastructure in place to allow widespread food distribution to their members.

In the 2020-21 Annual Report, the major shift towards distribution of purchased food is evident: in 2019-20, only 525 tonnes of purchased food were obtained; in 2020-21, this figure was 12,587 tonnes.¹⁷⁸ There was also growth in surplus food acquisition (from 22,255 tonnes in 2019-20 to 35,299 tonnes in 2020-21) and donated food acquisition (from 763

¹⁷⁷ <https://gov.wales/food-poverty-and-food-insecurity-grant-scheme#:~:text=About%20the%20grant.households%20living%20in%20food%20poverty&text=provide%20funding%20for%20services%20which,or%20third%20sector%20in%20Wales.>

¹⁷⁸ <https://fareshare.org.uk/annual-reports/>

Emergency Food

tonnes in 2019-20 to 6,317 tonnes in 2020-21). As a proportion of the total amount of food obtained by FareShare, 23.2% was purchased food in 2020-21 vs 2.2% in 2019-20.

In our stakeholder meeting with FareShare, we were also updated on how their membership evolved over the pandemic. As described in our earlier reports, many of their members had shut down during the first wave of the pandemic then reopened as food banks, food pantries, or food stores, losing much of the “social eating” aspects that had previously defined the organisations that made up the majority of FareShare’s membership before the pandemic. Though our stakeholders reported some organisations had started engaging in meal provision again over the winter of 2021, as of the spring, many were still providing parcels of food. Again, it was reiterated that FareShare did not see this type of food aid work, namely provision of ingredients rather than meals with a social aspect, as their role. They expressed the view that direct food provision should be the secondary role of their activities, not the primary. They also pointed out that food parcel provision is not well suited to surplus food redistribution work because of the form that surplus food takes (i.e. big packages, need to use-up quickly etc). In their 2020-21 Annual Report, food banks newly made up the largest proportion of types of charities they supported.¹⁷⁹

In a June 2021 press release, FareShare reported providing more than 55,000 tonnes of food and converted this to 132 million meals between April 2020 and March 2021.¹⁸⁰

FareShare Cymru

An issue raised early in the pandemic was a lack of access to FareShare support in the north of Wales. Our Welsh Government stakeholders shared how £100,000 in funding had been provided to FareShare Cymru before the pandemic, but that the organisation’s reach was primarily in South-East Wales. In May 2020, the Government provided additional funding to support the development of a FareShare operation in the north of Wales and to help expansion into the west of Wales. Over 2020-21, the number of members supported by FareShare in North Wales grew from 9 in the first quarter to 31 in the last quarter.

Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN)

Data collected from a sample of independent food banks by IFAN in November 2020 indicated that through the autumn, food parcel distribution had again increased from the previous year but also from February 2020, the month before the impact of the pandemic took hold.¹⁸¹ In November 2020, independent food bank use was over 145% higher than it had been in February 2020.

Over autumn 2020 to spring 2021, IFAN was engaged in a number of activities to support their members and advocate for systemic change. A key activity was working to co-develop cash-first referral leaflets in different local authorities, in partnership with local groups. These leaflets are tailored to local areas and outline sources of available advice and cash first support options.¹⁸² They also worked in partnership with academics and other national charities to run a webinar series on structural inequalities and food insecurity.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/fareshares-work-during-pandemic-recognised-with-3-awards-in-queens-birthday-honours-list/>

¹⁸¹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-data-since-covid-19>

¹⁸² <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets>

¹⁸³ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/webinar-series>

Emergency Food

From IFAN, we heard about how members continued to adapt their services over the pandemic including providing food deliveries, setting up food collection sessions outside, or only letting one or two people in to collect food at a time. Some independent food banks had two rosters of volunteers in the case of volunteers needing to self-isolate. Over the winter 2021 lockdown, there was significant concern in their membership about transmission, given the high rates of COVID-19 in the population at that time. Even though food banks were equipped with PPE, IFAN highlighted in a letter to the Prime Minister in January 2021 the risk posed by the virus to volunteers and people being supported in food banks.¹⁸⁴ It was also not clear whether food bank volunteers would be prioritised for vaccines.

Another trend among their IFAN member food banks was the provision of shopping vouchers rather than food parcels¹⁸⁵. This type of intervention was seen to be more practical during the pandemic and a more efficient way for them to use the financial donations they had received. Vouchers are seen by IFAN as a step away from food parcels, offering more choice and dignity, as shown in IFAN's infographic (figure 3).

Figure 3: Independent Food Aid Network's infographic on responses to food insecurity.¹⁸⁶



IFAN members also had different experiences of receiving help from FareShare over Winter 2020 to Spring 2021. It was felt that there was a lack of clarity around which organisations could receive food from DEFRA's funding to FareShare. While members would receive food through the scheme, non-members were required to be able to receive a prescribed quantity of food (i.e. a certain number of pallets of food), which was not possible for some independent food banks.

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n27>

¹⁸⁵ <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/1484ea21-0f08-46b5-952e-fe943518ecf2/Shopping%20Voucher%20Briefing%20-%20Final%20280721.docx.pdf?id=3570787>

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/infographics>

Emergency Food

Magic Breakfast

In their “Keeping Breakfast Going Through Covid” report published Oct 2020,¹⁸⁷ Magic Breakfast described working with their partner schools to ensure breakfast provision was being offered. This involved continuing to provide home deliveries and in-school socially distanced provision. They reported that as of Autumn 2020, they were reaching 35% more pupils than they had been reaching prior to the pandemic. In their 2018-2021 impact report, they reported that during the COVID-19 response phase, an additional 650 schools joined their programme.¹⁸⁸

The Trussell Trust

The Trussell Trust continued to support food banks in their network to offer their services to people in financial need of food in their communities, whether this be via food deliveries or through food banks operating with new social distancing guidelines in place.¹⁸⁹ Our local case study research revealed a mixed picture in different places, with some food banks resuming face-to-face operations, while others continued delivery only.¹⁹⁰

In their End-of-Year Stats briefing, they shared how distribution of food parcels changed over the period of the first COVID-19 lockdown and to spring 2021.¹⁹¹ As shown in Table 3, the large increase in distribution experienced in the first wave did not persist into other quarters of the year, though rates remained significantly higher than in 2019-20. As discussed in detail in their report, there was variation in the extent to which food banks saw change in demand for their services, with 31% of local authority areas experiencing a decline in food parcel distribution in 2020-21 in comparison with the year before. Their report discusses potential reasons for this variation, including the potential impacts of changes in food bank operations over the pandemic, new providers of food aid and other help forms of assistance.¹⁹²

Table 3 Food parcel distribution by quarter in the Trussell Trust Food Bank Network over April 2020 to March 2021.

	Apr – June 2020	July – Sept 2020	Oct – Dec 2020	Jan – Mar 2021
Total parcels distributed	759,308	499,286	643,514	637,984
% change from 2019/20	84%	16%	22%	19%

Source: The Trussell Trust. https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/Trussell-Trust-End-of-Year-stats-data-briefing_2020_21.pdf

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e1e2e224-8cbc-4b6c-9a2d-c86f75d139c4>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=d103e841-da36-4d2c-abdc-bcd083afde00>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2021/06/07/whats-happening-at-food-banks-as-restrictions-lift/>

¹⁹⁰ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Local-responses-to-food-insecurity-Sept-20-21-Full-Report.pdf>

¹⁹¹ https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/Trussell-Trust-End-of-Year-stats-data-briefing_2020_21.pdf

¹⁹² https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/Trussell-Trust-End-of-Year-stats-data-briefing_2020_21.pdf

Emergency Food

In the first half of 2021-22, the Trussell Trust reported the total number of food parcels distributed was 935,749, which was lower than in the first half of 2020-21 (1,262,308), showing how extraordinary a time the first wave of the pandemic was for food parcel distribution.¹⁹³ However, the Trust noted that in comparison to pre-pandemic figures in 2019, food parcel distribution was still 11% higher over April to September.

In addition to their work supporting their member food banks, the Trussell Trust continued to play a significant role in lobbying for better policies to address food insecurity. They launched their Strategic Plan for 2020-2025¹⁹⁴, involving reducing the need for food banks in local communities, working to change policy, and working to change the public's minds about drivers of poverty and build more empathy and understanding.

Food Matters, Soil Association and Sustain - Sustainable Food Places (SFP)

To further support the work of their members during the pandemic, the Sustainable Food Places programme, with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, provided Food Resilience grants to their SFP members.¹⁹⁵ Funding was provided to enable their members to scale up their responses and invest in initiatives to build greater resilience within their local food systems.

Sustain - Food Power

Food Power continued to support the work of their member alliances over autumn 2020 to spring 2021. This included providing advice on the COVID Winter Grant scheme and comparable schemes in the other nations and food provision during periods of school closure and guidance for alliances and local authorities on local food resilience. They also provided additional funding for organisations within food poverty alliances to support access to nutritious food for children and their families, enabled by a new partnership with the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) which ran from summer 2020 to spring 2021. Going forward from spring 2021, Food Power focused on supporting projects to explore and build local food resilience¹⁹⁶ and captured and shared learning from the response during the pandemic and the Food Power programme as a whole, including during the four-day online Food Power Festival in May 2021¹⁹⁷.

In their 2021 evaluation report,¹⁹⁸ activities of individual Food Power alliances over the pandemic are described, with many echoing the findings in our local case study work.¹⁹⁹

Feeding Britain

Coming out of the pandemic, Feeding Britain has placed an emphasis on development of what they call “affordable food networks”, variously encompassing social supermarkets, food pantries, or food clubs.^{200,201} As of November 2021, they reported supporting or establishing 96 “affordable food settings”. Across this network, it was reported that members spend on

¹⁹³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/about/our-strategic-plan/>

¹⁹⁵ https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/food_resilience_grants_jan21-/

¹⁹⁶ <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/mar21-food-power-local-food-resilience/>

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.sustainweb.org/events/2021-the-food-power-festival/>

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/food-power-evaluation-report-responding-to-covid19/>

¹⁹⁹ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/#case-studies>

²⁰⁰ <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Affordable-food-provision-in-the-community-Jan-21.pdf>

²⁰¹ <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/flagship-projects/affordable-food-networks/>

average £4.70 each time they shop and take home food and household items worth about £17.²⁰²

Discussion

In contrast to national grant schemes made available to third sector food charity organisations during the first wave of the pandemic, over autumn of 2020 through to the spring/summer of 2021, equivalent schemes were not available. It is notable that, in England, FareShare did exclusively benefit from financial support from DEFRA in November 2020, however. Smaller scale and local organisations were not targeted specifically by any scheme, though in Wales, third sector organisations could apply for support through their local authority for the Welsh Government's Food Insecurity and Food Poverty fund, and local authorities in England and Scotland could also use their local welfare assistance and financial insecurity funds to support third sector organisations.

Over this period, we began to see the emergence from the "crisis mode" observed in our first mapping and monitoring reports, with stakeholders discussing, and funds being allocated for, more sustainable solutions. As evidenced in our work at the local authority level, these national funds were often directed towards establishing food pantries or similar interventions.²⁰³

Our previous mapping showed that over March to summer 2020, responses by both governments and national third sector organisations to food insecurity were particularly focused on providing emergency funding and logistical support to provide food aid (with some notable exceptions, for example, cash payments for replacement of free school meals). In this mapping report, we continued to see a strong emphasis on food provisioning from FareShare over the autumn 2020 to spring 2021 period, which continued to focus on food distribution to frontline organisations, with funding support from DEFRA. As we heard, over the pandemic the organisation's activities newly involved purchasing food with the aim to support frontline food aid organisations, with significant growth in the number of food banks now being a part of the FareShare membership.

However, unlike during the exceptional early months of the pandemic, it was evident that there has been a growing emphasis on cash, rather than food, responses from some charitable food organisations over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021. As above, IFAN began a strong focus on cash-first approaches in over summer 2020 and going forward, promoting this through co-development of cash-first leaflets with local authorities. As before, a focus on financial solutions to food insecurity is also evident in the Scottish Government's guidance on financial insecurity funding and they have also provided support for IFAN's cash first referral leaflet work in Scotland. These shifts at a national level, were also observed at a local level as documented in our local case studies work.²⁰⁴

Importantly, though it appeared that the scale and scope of funding for third-sector organisations was not at the level observed in the first wave of the pandemic, it is evident that within devolved nations, funding continued to be targeted towards this sector, though a

²⁰² <https://feedingbritain.org/feeding-britain-affordable-food-networks-reporting-november-2021/>

²⁰³ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Local-responses-to-food-insecurity-Sept-20-21-Full-Report.pdf>

²⁰⁴ *ibid*

Emergency Food

new emphasis on sustainability and interventions focused on improving financial circumstances were evident.

Shielding Provision

Summary

Requirements for people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 to shield were lifted for all four devolved nations in summer 2020. However, with further lockdowns across autumn 2020 to spring 2021, shielding guidance was reintroduced at various points. In England and Wales, shielding advice was reintroduced during some periods and people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 were advised to no longer attend work or school. In England, this group was advised to only leave their homes for exercise or medical appointments. In Scotland, advice for people who were clinically extremely vulnerable depended on the level of restrictions imposed at a local authority level. However, full shielding guidance was never reinstated at any level. In Northern Ireland, advice rather than requirements was issued in December 2020 and reiterated in early January 2021 stating that those who were extremely clinically vulnerable shouldn't go into the workplace, should avoid social gatherings and should avoid going to shops unless absolutely necessary. Across all four devolved nations the national schemes which had provided food boxes for people who were shielding were not reintroduced but priority supermarket delivery slots for people in the highest clinical risk group continued to be available. Our monitoring research suggested that various charities and third-sector organisations were concerned about the impact of online delivery charges on people who were shielding and having to rely on supermarket delivery through lockdown periods.

Brief re-cap: support for people who were shielding over March 2020 to August 2020

In our first mapping report,²⁰⁵ we reported that across the UK from March 2020 people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to severe complications from COVID-19 were advised to “shield” which included not leaving the house to go food shopping. In order to supply this group of people with food, a food box scheme was initiated in all four devolved nations by the start of April 2020. In Northern Ireland eligibility was extended to people who were economically vulnerable to food insecurity. The intention was to provide weekly provisions of ambient food to those required to shield. There were differences noted between how clinically extremely vulnerable people were able to request and access food boxes with those in Wales asked to contact their local authority to receive a box whereas those in England and Northern Ireland registered via a telephone hotline or website whilst those in Scotland received an SMS if they were eligible. Eligibility criteria varied across the four nations and was broader in Northern Ireland, as mentioned earlier. In England, people had to declare that they had tried other means to obtain food, such as purchasing online or via family and friends to be eligible.

Our monitoring report documented various concerns about the support for people who were shielding over March 2020 to August 2020. Despite the scheme being implemented quickly with large reach and scale, the contents of the boxes have been critiqued for not including

²⁰⁵ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

Shielding Provision

adequate or sufficient fresh, healthy and/or culturally sensitive produce. There were also practical concerns regarding whether the boxes could be easily lifted by recipients plus questions about whether local provisions were being utilised and amplified sufficiently.

Shielding Provision over Autumn 2020 to Spring/Summer 2021

Requirements for people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 to shield were lifted in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland at the end of July 2020 and in mid-August in Wales. However, with subsequent lockdowns, shielding guidance was reintroduced in some instances, as detailed below. Though the number of people identified as clinically extremely vulnerable changed over the course of the pandemic,²⁰⁶ the following data were available:

- In early March 2021, 3.79 million people were on the shielding list in England.²⁰⁷
- In August 2020, 178,708 people were on the shielding list in Scotland.²⁰⁸
- In late March 2021, 138,470 people were on the shielding list in Wales.²⁰⁹
- About 80,000 people were estimated to have received a shielding letter from a GP in Northern Ireland.²¹⁰

England

In England, following the announcement of a national lockdown on the 31st of October, a press release was issued on 4 November to provide updated guidance for people who were extremely clinically vulnerable, which outlined that they should only leave their homes for exercise or medical appointments.²¹¹ With the return to tiered restrictions in December in England, shielding advice was again relaxed, however, on 21 December, it was again reintroduced for clinically extremely vulnerable people living in Tier 4 areas.²¹² With the national lockdown announced in early January 2021, England-wide shielding guidance was again put in place,²¹³ only lifted on the 1st of April 2021. With the re-introduction of shielding guidance over these periods, people in the clinically extremely vulnerable group were: “strongly advised not to go to any shops or to pharmacies, and government support is available for those who need it while they remain at home.”²¹⁴ With each announcement of the re-introduction of shielding guidance, statements like the following were included, outlining what support was available to this group:

“Individuals in this group will also be able to use an online service which will help people to request priority access to supermarket delivery slots and to inform their council they need help. NHS Volunteer Responders can also

²⁰⁶ For example, see detail in press release about addition of up to 1.7million people to the shielding list in England after anew predictive risk model was developed: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shielding-advice-for-the-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-to-stop-from-april>

²⁰⁷ Ibid

²⁰⁸ <https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/media/2948/covid-19-shielding-programme-scotland-rapid-evaluation-data-report.pdf>

²⁰⁹ <https://gov.wales/shielding-patient-list-wales-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-29-march-2021>

²¹⁰ <https://www.cdh.org/shielding-northern-ireland>

²¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/clinically-extremely-vulnerable-receive-updated-guidance-in-line-with-new-national-restrictions>

²¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/advice-for-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-in-new-tier-4-areas>

²¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>

²¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/advice-for-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-in-new-tier-4-areas>

Shielding Provision

help with a regular, friendly phone call, and transport to and from medical appointments.”²¹⁵

In the 4 November press release, the government announced £32 million of government funding for upper tier councils to support people who were shielding in November. The funding was suggested to support councils to provide access to food deliveries and signposting to befriending services.²¹⁶ The “priority access to supermarket delivery slots” referenced in the quote above refers to the service that had been coordinated by DEFRA since spring 2020. Access to priority supermarket delivery slots remained in place for people clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 even after shielding guidance came to an end in July 2020.²¹⁷ As such, this scheme continued to be offered to this group when shielding guidance was again in place. After shielding guidance came to an end in April, priority access to supermarket delivery slots was continued until 21 June 2021.²¹⁸

It is notable that despite the re-introduction of shielding guidance in England, the Shielding Grocery Box scheme, which provided free food boxes to people on the shielding list from end of March 2020 through July 2020, was not re-established. Our DEFRA stakeholders shared that this intervention was seen as an emergency response to an emergency situation given the unprecedented introduction of shielding measures and the first lockdown in March 2020. By the time subsequent periods of restrictions were put in place, it was felt that other, and more appropriate, interventions were available, such as widespread access to priority delivery slots and increased capacity for food deliveries from major supermarkets,²¹⁹ support with shopping from volunteers, and support from local authorities. The limitations of the Shielding Grocery Box scheme described in our April-September 2020 monitoring report,²²⁰ were acknowledged by our DEFRA stakeholders, and it was felt that the other approaches in place since summer 2020 allowed people in the clinically extremely vulnerable group more choice and control over food acquisition when shielding guidance was in place.

Scotland

Following the pause to shielding advice at the end of July in Scotland, people on the shielding list were never again asked to not leave their homes for shopping. Shielding guidance described how people in this group should limit or avoid meeting people outside their own household, although the extent of this differed across the different levels of local authority area restrictions..²²¹ At levels 3 and 4, people were advised to limit the number of times they go to a shop and shop at quieter times. When mainland Scotland went into

²¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/clinically-extremely-vulnerable-receive-updated-guidance-in-line-with-new-national-restrictions>

²¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/clinically-extremely-vulnerable-receive-updated-guidance-in-line-with-new-national-restrictions>

²¹⁷ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

²¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shielding-advice-for-the-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-to-stop-from-april>

²¹⁹ [Tesco announces massive increase to online delivery slots | News | The Grocer](#)

²²⁰ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring-responses-to-risk-of-rising-food-insecurity-during-the-COVID-19-crisis-across-the-UK-FINAL-1.pdf>

²²¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/pages/4/>

Shielding Provision

lockdown from 5 January, the guidance on shielding did not change, except that people who were unable to work from home were told not to go into work.²²²

Given this guidance, Government food parcels for people who were shielding were never reinstated. Our Scottish Government stakeholders reiterated that the distribution of food boxes to people who were shielding over March to July 2020 was because over this time people were told that they could not go out to shops; thus, the fact that this was never again advised made food box deliveries unnecessary. Clinically extremely vulnerable people were encouraged to get in touch with their local authority if they were struggling to access food.²²³ In addition, a £30 million flexible fund was established for local authorities to allow them to support those at highest clinical risk while public health measures were in place.²²⁴

Our Scottish Government stakeholders shared that priority supermarket slots for people in the highest clinical risk groups, which were established from April 2020, had stopped taking new sign-ups in August 2020, but that these were reopened for new sign-ups in November 2020 as cases began to rise again. Those who had signed up over April 2020 to August 2020 remained able to access slots over the entire period. In May 2021, our stakeholders reported that about ¼ of people on the shielding list were still making use of priority delivery slots.

Our stakeholders also emphasised that people on the shielding list in Scotland were provided guidance on how to access food in the regular Chief Medical Officer letters issued as well as from guidance on the Government website, the free national shielding helpline, and an SMS service. Advice included details on options for shopping safely and ways to access help from their local authorities.

From 26 April, all areas of level 4 in Scotland were moved to level 3. For people who were shielding, the advice changed from working from home or not going to work if unable to work from home to returning to the workplace.²²⁵

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, advice to shield was not again reinstated after it was paused at the end of July 2020. However, a statement was issued on 23 December 2020 cautioning against attending social gatherings and avoiding shops unless absolutely necessary.²²⁶ However, new guidance also stated that should clinically extremely vulnerable people not be able to work from home, they should not go into the workplace. It was stated, however, that this was advice only and that people were free to make their own judgements. This same guidance was reiterated on 7 January 2021.²²⁷

²²² https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/*/https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-protection-levels/

²²³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/documents/>

²²⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-summary-of-activities-trends-and-learning/pages/funding-context/>

²²⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-letters-to-the-high-risk-group/>

²²⁶ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-changing-advice-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-people>

²²⁷ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/advice-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-remains-place>

Shielding Provision

These press releases did not contain information about support available for people to access food.

From 12 April 2021, clinically extremely vulnerable people were advised to continue to work from home if possible but if not, that people in this group could return to their workplace provided safety measures were in place.

Wales

In the Welsh Government's Winter Protection plan, published in September 2020, shielding guidance was discussed.²²⁸ It was outlined that the Shielding Patient List would be maintained should shielding advice need to be implemented again, though given its associated harms, the advice for people to remain entirely at home would not be advised without careful consideration. It was stated that local authorities would continue to receive an update of the shielding list to enable them to provide support for this group and that supermarkets would continue to offer priority delivery slots, even whilst shielding advice was paused.²²⁹

With the introduction of the firebreak in Wales on 23 October 2020, people who were clinically extremely vulnerable were *not advised* to begin shielding again.²³⁰ Instead, in letters that went out to this group, they were advised on different ways to protect themselves, which included to "shop online or consider doing one big shop at quieter times of the day." They were also reminded that they were still eligible for priority access to supermarket delivery slots, but that the food box scheme was no longer available. They were advised to contact their local council if they needed support and didn't have anyone to help them.²³¹

Wales moved into alert level 4 at midnight on the 19th of December, but this did not include the reintroduction of shielding. However, on 22 December 2020, the Welsh Government announced that people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 should no longer attend work or school.²³² With the extension of alert level 4 restrictions in Wales through January, on 29 January 2021, the advice for clinically extremely vulnerable people was to continue to work from home and not attend work until the 31st March. No further advice about going out for essential items was issued at this time. On 12 March it was announced that measures for the clinically extremely vulnerable would be lifted from the 1st of April 2021.²³³

²²⁸ <https://gov.wales/winter-protection-plan-health-and-social-care-2020-2021>

²²⁹ <https://gov.wales/winter-protection-plan-health-and-social-care-2020-2021>

²³⁰ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-new-letter-chief-medical-officer-wales-those-who-were-previously-shielding>

²³¹ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-new-letter-chief-medical-officer-wales-those-who-were-previously-shielding>

²³² <https://gov.wales/written-statement-new-advice-those-who-are-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-previously-shielding>

²³³ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-advice-those-who-are-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-01-april>

Monitoring support for extremely clinically vulnerable through autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

England

In their follow-up inquiry into food insecurity and food supply issues, the EFRA committee received updates on available support for clinically extremely vulnerable people, which emphasised the availability of priority supermarket delivery slots. However, oral evidence from Disability Rights UK raised concerns about the online delivery charges for people on fixed incomes and that disabled people are more likely to be digitally excluded. Evidence from other organisations also raised these issues. The EFRA inquiry also heard from representatives from the wholesale sector, who pointed out that the shift away from shielding food parcels towards supermarket delivery slots negatively impacted the wholesale sector, as they were no longer being relied upon directly to source food for people who were shielding.²³⁴

Scotland

Over 21 December 2020 to 11 January 2021, a survey of clinically high-risk people was conducted in Scotland, namely, those who had previously received a letter from the Chief Medical Officer advising them to shield.²³⁵ The survey gathered information on awareness of the guidance at the time, behaviours since shielding guidance stopped, whether or not support services were meeting their needs, and expectations about vaccination. A total of 4,590 responses were received, but it was notably not a representative survey, with respondents being more likely to be female, less likely from older age groups, less likely to be from deprived groups, and with a different distribution of chronic conditions compared to data held on the shielding population in Scotland.²³⁶

The survey revealed important findings on how the ongoing pandemic continued to affect the behaviours of clinically vulnerable people. Since July 2020, when shielding guidance came to an end in Scotland, 20% of survey respondents had never visited shops and 30% only did so once or twice a month; 84% had never been on public transport.

Twelve percent (or n=753) of respondents had asked their local authority for support since July 2020, with a majority (62%) of these respondents indicating they had done so to receive help with access to food. Respondents asking local authorities for help were asked if they had found the support helpful, of whom only 11% indicated it was unhelpful. Eight percent (or n=543) of respondents had asked a third sector organisation for support, of which 34% had asked for support to access food, with help with emotional support being slightly more often indicated (37%).

Respondents were also asked if they had used the priority supermarket shopping service which continued to be available over July to winter 2020. Over half of respondents, 59%,

²³⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

²³⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/>

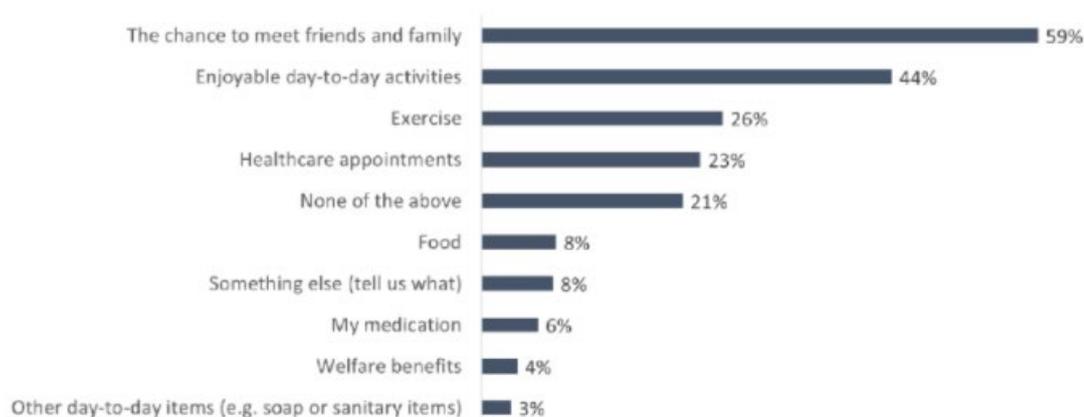
²³⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/pages/8/>

Shielding Provision

reported using the service to receive deliveries, with 92% of those who used the service finding it helpful.

Survey respondents were asked if there was anything they were struggling to access at the moment; 8% reported struggling to access food, as shown in the figure below.²³⁷

Figure 4 What clinically high risk people were struggling to access over late December to early January 2021 (n=4047 survey respondents).



Source: Scottish Government survey of clinically high risk people, December 2020 to January 2021. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/pages/6/>

Other food-related interventions to support people at higher clinical risk of COVID-19 from national governments

England

From the start of the pandemic, DEFRA identified a group they described as the “non-shielding vulnerable”.²³⁸ This included people who were isolating because they were at higher risk of complications arising from COVID-19 (but not clinically extremely vulnerable), for example, because they were of older age, or people self-isolating because of positive COVID-19 test.

Our DEFRA stakeholders shared with us that, as in the first wave, food support for this group continued to be led by local authorities. However, as previously described,²³⁹ in May 2020, local authorities could sign up for a scheme arranged and promoted by DEFRA that allowed non-shielding vulnerable groups registered through their local authority to sign-up for priority delivery slots from Tesco and Iceland. As of January 2021, over 90% of local authorities in England had signed up for this scheme. This scheme had been due to end in October 2020 but during the COVID winter period (2020-21), it was extended to March 2021.

²³⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-shielding-survey-report-january-2021/pages/6/>

²³⁸ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-Vulnerability-During-the-COVID-19-Crisis-first-project-report.pdf>

²³⁹ Ibid

Discussion

Despite ongoing risks for people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 over the September 2020 to spring 2021 period, nothing on the scale of shielding food boxes provided in the first wave were available in subsequent periods of high COVID-19 infection rates and related lockdown restrictions. The lack of such an intervention being repeated may have been due to guidance changes, where in Scotland and Wales, people were not instructed to shield again after this guidance was lifted in the summer of 2020, however, notably, in England, people were instructed not to go out again for any reason in the January-March 2021 lockdown. Instead, it could be that in light of the shortcomings of the scheme, documented in our research and by others, and as acknowledged by some of our stakeholders, there was a reluctance to roll out a similar scheme again, despite opportunities for refinement. The availability of priority online supermarket slots for people clinically extremely vulnerable was the main intervention in place. The ability of governments to rely on this scheme in the later waves of the pandemic was possible because supply chain and delivery capacity issues were no longer concerns after the spring of 2020.

The guidance issued to people who were clinically extremely vulnerable to contact their local authorities if they needed help beyond the online priority supermarket delivery slots is consistent with other messages over the pandemic that local authorities had responsibility for anyone who fell through the gaps in nationwide policies. In our local authority case studies, we heard how some local authorities took on provision of food parcels to people who were shielding in the first wave of the pandemic for a number of reasons including 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. Many of these responded to shortcomings of the "one-size-fits-all" shielding box programme. Between this guidance and the focus on online supermarket delivery slots, it is clear that national governments felt the responsibility for the provision of food to people who were clinically extremely vulnerable in later waves of the pandemic sat elsewhere. Given food provision was originally enacted to enable people to shield, it would be interesting to examine whether the ability of people to shield was compromised in later waves due to less food support being available, though the obvious failings of the food box programme meant that even in the first waves, this support may not have been adequate for enabling people to shield.

Summary discussion and conclusions

Comparisons in provision between UK nations over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

In the chapters above, we have outlined the ways that the governments of the four UK nations continued to provide funding and support for initiatives intended to address risks of food insecurity as the COVID-19 pandemic continued over September 2020 to summer 2021. In Table 4 below, we summarise key features of the interventions in place through the autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021 to support groups at risk of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key points of comparison as raised in the discussions above 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. We observed that 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.

It is also notable that the Westminster Government put no commitments in place to specifically target and replace free school meals over the holidays. Whilst the Holiday Activities Fund was extended to all areas of England, the scheme does not cover all week days and significant variation in reach and accessibility of this programme may be present. Again, the implications for families at risk of food insecurity over the summer months needs to be examined, as this is an equality issue for low-income families across the UK. The discretion local authorities had to use their local welfare assistance funds for holiday meal replacements also undoubtedly created inequalities in provision across England.

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

Lack of forward planning

Despite the warnings of rising rates of COVID-19 in the population going into the autumn of 2020, there appeared to be a lack of forward planning regarding the potential for school closures and last-minute decision making related to replacement of free school meals in England when schools were once again shut in January 2021. This observation raises questions about what resilience planning will be put in place going forward. Future school closures are likely inevitable, whether arising from other outbreaks or extreme climate events. There is a need for straightforward and easily implementable interventions to replace free school meals in these cases. As was evident in the research, cash replacements offer many benefits with regard to food choices and the scale and speed with which they can be transferred to recipients.

The lack of forward planning for emergency finance schemes also was evident in the research. Whilst responsive funding in the face of increased demand for emergency finance assistance is important, to be able to use funds effectively and efficiently, systems for distributing the funds through grants already need to be in place. We heard that it was inefficient for local authorities to devise and implement new schemes when they didn't know if the scheme would be funded into the future. In this way, the Scottish Welfare Fund and Welsh Emergency Assistance Payments are exemplars, as both were able to widen eligibility criteria and support more recipients over the pandemic as extra funds from respective devolved governments were made available.

The lack of forward planning for local welfare assistance in England not only affects the provision of emergency finance in local authorities but also the provision of free school meal replacements during school holidays. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there was ring-fenced funding for free school meal replacement vouchers going forward from 2021 announced; in England, local authorities could use the late-announced local welfare assistance funds to provide replacements. This means there is no guarantee that children and their families will be provided with free school meal replacements during the holidays going forward.

Outreach/proactive distribution vs. crisis applications

Another theme that emerged from this mapping and monitoring research is the extent to which interventions were put in place to respond to crisis or prevent crisis. This idea was evident in the review of the Scottish Government's Financial Insecurity funding, which raised that many local authorities proactively provided grants to households at risk of experiencing financial hardship and, as a result, food insecurity. This differs in approach to emergency finance schemes and food charity, where support is offered in response to a crisis point being reached. The ability to target people in need before crisis occurs is a key consideration in discussions about how to prevent the need for food banks. What systems and social policies provide resilience to financial crises and resulting food insecurity?

Difficulty evaluating effectiveness

Over the course of our mapping and monitoring research, we have noted the difficulty in assessing how different interventions have worked in practice. In part, this has been hindered by a lack of outcomes data related to food insecurity. Very few, if any, local authorities have a way of monitoring food insecurity in their local populations and of monitoring programme use. Whilst the amount of funding or awards distributed may have been tracked, it was not possible to know what impacts these had on recipients. Where reporting requirements were in place, only high-level data were required. We also were unable to locate descriptive data on the types of free school meal replacements put in place or detailed descriptions of how local authorities used their local welfare assistance funding in England. Given the discretion allowed by the various schemes, it is particularly important for information on what is being offered by different local authorities to be mapped.

Competing priorities for food supply sector and recipients of assistance

Compared to March – August 2020, there was a marked decrease in direct food provision through statutory (national and local) schemes. However where in-kind assistance was in place during autumn 2020 to summer 2021, there were further problems with its lack of flexibility and poor quality (i.e. in relation to replacement food parcels for free school meals). Yet, over this time, we also observed the view from school caterers and wholesalers that offering in-kind provision was a way to preserve their businesses through lockdowns. This highlights a need to consider impacts of interventions across the whole food system, as well as signifying potential tension between advocates for cash-based assistance in response to concerns about food access and those involved in the food system in the provision of food.

Should national or local government direct food insecurity interventions?

Our previous local case study report asked the question about the appropriate level of support – local or national, with there being some advantage to local level interventions. As observed in this report, there remained an ongoing emphasis on local authorities having the discretion to decide how to use their funds, with a notable absence of harmonised and nationally-designed interventions. The only exception evident during this time period was Northern Ireland’s decision for all free school replacements to be cash payments, and in all nations, the continued availability of priority supermarket deliver slots. There is scope for more research on how delivery, whether at national or local level, may impact on reach and effectiveness of food insecurity interventions.

Table 4 Key interventions in place targeted towards support with food acquisition over autumn 2020 to spring/summer 2021

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Free school meal replacements				
For isolating students	Food parcels from school catering	Council’s choice of cash payment, vouchers or food parcel	Council’s choice of cash payment, vouchers or food parcel	<i>Not identified in desk-based or stakeholder research</i>
During remote learning	Initially food parcels from school catering; then choice of national voucher scheme, food parcels, or local vouchers	Council’s choice of cash payment, vouchers or food parcel; predominantly cash or voucher payments	Council’s choice of cash payment, vouchers or food parcel; predominantly cash or voucher payments	Direct cash payments
Autumn half-term 2020	None provided	Funding provided by national government for replacements in form of cash,	Funding provided by national government for replacements in form of cash,	Funding provided by national government for replacements in

		vouchers or food provision	vouchers or food provision	form of cash payment
Christmas break 2020	National funding for COVID Winter Grant scheme, which could be used to provide free school meals during holidays.	As above	As above	As above
Winter half-term 2021	As above	As above	As above	As above
Easter 2021	As above	As above	As above	As above
Holidays until April 2022	Not committed; instead, roll-out of Holiday and Activities Fund to all parts of England	Committed	Committed	Committed
Emergency financial assistance				
Self-isolation	£500; extended to caregivers of children self-isolating in March 2021	£500; extended to caregivers of children self-isolating in December 2020	£500; extended to caregivers of children self-isolating in December 2020	Amount based on household composition; included provision in cases of household member self-isolating; in place from start of pandemic.
Emergency grants	No local welfare assistance scheme in 32 of 151 local councils Schemes, spending and eligibility at discretion of local authority	Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grants or Community Care Grants	Emergency Assistance Payments	Discretionary Support Grants or Loans
Financial support for charitable food organisations	£16 million to FareShare in December 2020; funding made available to local authorities which could be used to support	Funding made available to local authorities which could be used to support charitable food organisations; funding available through	Funding made available to local authorities which could be used to support charitable food organisations; funding for FareShare to	Funding made available to local authorities which could be used to support charitable food organisations

	charitable food organisations	Enabling Neighbourhoods & Communities Fund	support extension into North Wales	
Shielding guidance and support for clinically extremely vulnerable people	Shielding guidance re-introduced in January-April 2021 Priority supermarket delivery slots	No re-introduction of shielding Priority supermarket delivery slots	No re-introduction of shielding Priority supermarket delivery slots	No re-introduction of shielding Priority supermarket delivery slots

Conclusions

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.



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