



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

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

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

Early signs of food access issues

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

Three phases of the response

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

Actors

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

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

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

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

Targeted interventions

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

Helping people access information, advice and support

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

Dynamics across the food response actors

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

Resources for local responses

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

Key questions raised

- What worked?

It is very hard to map and even harder to comprehensively evaluate local responses to food access issues. Systematic evaluation was beyond the scope of this research, but our data captured participants' reflections on what they perceived to be some of the key strengths and challenges in local responses. A key strength was felt to be the benefits of community

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

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

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

- Local and/or national responses?

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

- Cash or food?

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

Key takeaways

- The scale of the response was unprecedented.

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

- Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses

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

- Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives

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

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

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

- There were clearly distinct challenges in rural locations.

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

Accessing the full report and individual case study reports

The full report '*Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' is available on the project website alongside eight local area case studies and the methodological appendix.

These reports can be accessed here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>



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