

Parliamentary briefing: Food and the Covid-19 pandemic, May 2020

Executive summary

Our food system has been under incredible strain during the Covid-19 pandemic. Millions of people have struggled to access the healthy food they need. Consumers have been blamed for stockpiling but empty shelves exposed weaknesses in the supermarkets' 'just in time' delivery chains. Fresh produce has failed to reach consumers causing waste;ⁱ restaurants and local markets have closed; farmers have struggled to access supply chains and recruit the labour they need;ⁱⁱ many food businesses have collapsed; and smaller producers have been forced to source their own food at food banks.ⁱⁱⁱ

On the other hand, shorter supply chains have sprung up or expanded and local businesses have stepped in to fill gaps. Veg box and similar scheme providers report increased sales^{iv} and local markets have continued to serve their communities.^v

Admirable national and local efforts were made to identify and support 1.5 million clinically vulnerable people but this would have been much easier had the infrastructure of a thriving meals-on-wheels service already been in existence. Furthermore, the Government has been reluctant to acknowledge *financial* vulnerability which was already prevalent in the UK and has only been exacerbated during the pandemic. Before Covid-19 struck, over 8 million people in Britain were already living with household food insecurity. Over 1 million older people were already malnourished and over 1 million children in low-income households were slipping through the security net of free school meals^{vi}.

Many school caterers have found innovative ways to continue providing meals but headteachers have reported difficulties accessing the replacement voucher scheme and families reported difficulties redeeming them. Lower income families will also have missed out as the project to digitise Healthy Start vouchers, which help low-income families buy healthy food, has been delayed, and support networks with paper applications will have been closed.

In the short term we have millions of vulnerable citizens who need help to buy food *now* and longer term we must find solutions to identifying vulnerable people and ensuring they can access the food they need.

Billions of public and private funds are being invested to help people and businesses through this Covid-19 crisis. We should use the investments and what we learn from this crisis to drive a resilient, fair, sustainable system of food, farming and fishing that works for everyone. The food system must provide everyone with healthy food and also be fit to tackle climate change and restore nature, whilst providing good livelihoods in food production.

1. Supply chains

In our view the pandemic has exposed a profound lack of resilience in our food system. Supermarket profits soared^{vii} as consumers prepared for isolation and government interventions directed people to their stores^{viii}. Meanwhile, farmers, suppliers and food producers struggled with interrupted supply chains.^{ix} In many cases, corner shops^x, local food producers/fishers^{xi}, veg box providers^{xii} and local markets^{xiii} have stepped in to fill gaps in supply.

Farms – interrupted supply chains

Farmers have had to find new routes to market, often with lower returns at cost or below cost of production and more complex packaging demands. Some have literally thrown produce down the drain^{xiv} or have planted crops they can't get to market.

Farms – government support

Recent market volatility led the NFU to comment that many farms would struggle to meet profitability criteria for the Coronavirus Business Interruption Scheme.^{xv} Dairy farmers have had a particularly hard time and government help and financial support has been provided. This may help in the very short term but the systemic flaws in supply chains need deeper attention in most sectors. The new statutory supply chain codes of conduct enforced by a regulator – a possible but not a definite outcome of the Agriculture Bill, supply chain transparency and Fair Dealing clauses – are urgently needed. Future disruption would then be less impactful as farmers would have more secure contracts and better treatment by the supply chain. In addition, the new farm support policies, following our exit from EU, need to be implemented and well-funded to give farmers clarity on future support and any transition aids needed.

Farms – labour

The reliance on skilled but cheap migrant labour to deliver low priced produce has caused farm vulnerability^{xvi}. Industry initiatives have driven interest and now the UK Government has set up a 'Pick for Britain' website^{xvii} to match UK workers with farms. However, prospective workers have found work wasn't immediately available, living or wages conditions were lower than expected and the demands not family-friendly^{xviii}. The Alliance of Labour Providers reported 50,000 applications of interest which by 20 April had secured only 112 offers of jobs. The situation remains highly concerning with the start of the summer harvest season already begun, but many growers also fear next year when freedom of movement ends. Ultimately, a new approach to farm work is needed, which the government needs to facilitate, where better working conditions and wages are secured through new contractual arrangements and greater value reaching the farmers and growers to cover the costs. Smaller farms in our network, offering better paid, steady jobs have not experienced this labour crisis, proving that a more dependable, mutually beneficial farming system is possible^{xix}.

Fishers

The fishing industry has been floored by Covid-19 – a colossal 80% of the fish we catch is exported^{xx}, mainly to restaurants in Europe and Asia where the market has all but disappeared due to Covid-19. In some places prices of catches have dropped 85%^{xxi}. A £9m Fisheries Response Fund (FRF) was announced on 17th April, which was largely welcomed by the industry,^{xxii} but many businesses were too small to meet the qualifying threshold.

Taking a long-term approach, recovered fish stocks could deliver an additional 5,000 jobs^{xxiii} and much-needed coastal economic growth if fishers are supported back onto the water with

world-leading sustainability measures in place. If fisheries aim for sustainability certification they can earn a better price for catches^{xxiv} and would have more to catch. Investment is needed in local infrastructure to make local customers more accessible, UK-landed fish should be prioritised in government procurement, and small/local retailers need support.

Supermarkets

The Government has channelled support to vulnerable people via large supermarket chains' delivery slots, volunteer programmes and Free School Meal supermarket vouchers, ignoring other retail chains and local shops. But in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, an emergency food box scheme was set up using supplies from local food businesses (see below for more detail).

Local markets

On 23rd March, central Government clarified^{xxv} that food markets could stay open during the crisis however, two thirds subsequently closed across England and Wales.^{xxvi} Sustain has identified Covid-19 safe good practice and campaigned for markets to stay open. It seems closures were mainly down to landowners, including Local Authorities, fearing the risks of allowing people to gather. We found evidence of market operators and traders finding new ways to trade, often delivering food to people's doors^{xxvii} but markets need support to stay open.

Smaller traders, markets, veg boxes

As supermarkets struggled to fill their shelves, sales of veg boxes increased by 111%^{xxviii}. Better Food Traders^{xxix}, a national network of sustainable food retailers, saw a 35% increase in orders for sustainable organic veg boxes. Riverford organic farmers and delivery scheme experienced its "highest ever number of deliveries outside of Christmas"^{xxx}, and Big Barn^{xxxi} – a web platform for local sales - saw traffic grow from 3k users to 20k.

Bakeries

Sustain runs the Read Bread Campaign²⁸ and surveyed 900 micro and SME bakery, cookery schools and small mill owners in March 2020. Their initial concerns were about the impact of lockdown on their ability to trade and that they had not been advised of any business and employee/self-employed support from government. As information and assurance came from government, the main concern continuing at time of writing is interruption of flour supply. Microbakeries in particular are finding that mills are unable to fulfil, or even accept, orders, while home bakers are unable to find flour. We understand that this is largely due to restrictions with packaging.

2. Vulnerability

The government was quick to define and identify 1.5m clinically vulnerable people who might have difficulty sourcing food while shielding.^{xxxii} Supermarket slots were prioritised but those reliant on the government food parcels reported they were nutritionally inadequate.^{xxxiii}

Furthermore, the Government has been reluctant to acknowledge *financially* vulnerable people and many have been going hungry. Relief efforts have been greatly hampered by Government's failure to have an existing methodology and dataset to identify vulnerable people. We deeply regret the Government's long-standing resistance to measuring household food insecurity and addressing the root causes.

Prior to the pandemic there were already 8.4 million people in Britain^{xxxiv} living with household food insecurity and very large numbers of vulnerable people are suffering due to having insufficient money to buy the food they need. The largest food bank network, Trussell Trust, reported an 81% increase in emergency food parcels during the last two weeks of March 2020; and food banks in the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) reported an increase in need of 59%^{xxxv}. Yet hunger and food insecurity due to financial vulnerability are wholly preventable.

The Government has failed to provide sufficient money to people on a low income to buy the food they need via social security benefits, or via local authority welfare assistance programmes. They have also failed to recognise a duty on government to assist people vulnerable due to their socio-economic status. We deeply regret that section one of the Equalities Act that deals with socio-economic inequalities remains unenacted, ten years on from the Act's introduction.^{xxxvi}

The Government has also failed to adequately implement ministerial duties under the Civil Contingencies Act – to assess, plan and advise on the supply of money and access to supply of food in this national emergency. It has also failed to identify clear structures and responsibility for coordination and accountability (accountability is clearly missing) on financial vulnerability, involving Cabinet Office, DWP, HM Treasury, MHCLG and Defra.

Along with a large group of food aid and poverty organisations, we are calling for additional money to be distributed via social security benefits and local authority welfare assistance grants, but the Government seems to expect local authorities and charitable food aid to be able to feed hundreds of thousands of people, in both the short term and longer term. We believe this is unrealistic, results in discrimination and puts unreasonable burdens on local authorities and struggling frontline charities. There is also no long-term food plan.

We are extremely concerned that government planners and ministers seem to view food banks as part of the solution to existing and new food insecurity. Food aid organisations already struggled to meet existing need and should never be considered as anything other than a short-term sticking-plaster solution.

The healthy food needs of four main groups of people are going unmet, or at least unassessed.

1. Older/clinically vulnerable non-shielded people

Pre-pandemic more than 1.3 million people over the age of 65 in the UK were malnourished but in recent years meals on wheels services have [declined to less than half \(42%\) of council areas](#). Feeding vulnerable/older people in an emergency would have been much easier had meals on wheels services been in place across the country.

A well-run meals on wheels service can relieve isolation and provide welfare checks and links to other services. In areas where there is such a service to take referrals, this has been invaluable in responding more quickly and effectively to the pandemic. Other countries have been able to scale up such services now thanks to their existing extreme weather plans. There is a clear case for ensuring there is sufficiently scaled-up meals on wheels capacity in every part of the country to ensure every older or clinically vulnerable person (shielded or non-shielded) has access to at least one hot meal a day (with options for paid, part-subsidised or free provision, depending on need).

2. Children on Free School Meals

There was a lack of preparedness for the closure of schools, and the impact this would have on children receiving free school meals. Whilst we accept the logic of the prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable children, the Department for Education (DfE) failed to recognise the one million children aged 7-16 who live in food insecure households but do not receive free school meals, and Universal Infant Free School Meals were suspended. Furthermore, schools were encouraged to extend provision to children in the 1.4 million households who have recently applied for Universal Credit before applications were assessed, taking on financial risk. The Free School Meal voucher scheme (England) was quickly overwhelmed, beset by technical difficulties and does not include shops that many lower-income families frequent. Whilst the voucher scheme is centrally funded, schools using alternative local free meal/voucher or cash mechanisms are only able to claim reimbursement as “exceptional costs” if they can demonstrate risk to their reserve levels or long-term financial stability^{xxxvii}. Only after lobbying did the voucher scheme extend to the Easter holidays, however the Government then failed to extend school meal funding over May half-term, with growing concerns for summer holiday food provision. In May 2020, Food Foundation estimated that 1.7 million children were in households still experiencing food insecurity two months into Covid-19 lockdown^{xxxviii}.

3. People in household food insecurity

Colleagues in the Food Foundation estimate that there were more than 8 million people *already* facing food insecurity before the crisis^{xxxix}. Preliminary data suggests those who are most affected by household food insecurity linked to Covid-19 are adults with disabilities, Black and Minority Ethnic individuals, and families with children^{xl}. Sustain and food aid colleagues led a call^{xli} in March for government to release funds to eradicate household food insecurity, and to ease certain costs and welfare constraints. As well as wanting to ensure people can access the food they need, we were also concerned that vulnerable people would be less able to follow advice on self-isolating and this might put pressure on social services and charities at a time when these should be prioritising shielded and older/vulnerable people.

With an additional 1.8 million applications for Universal Credit we have been concerned about families accessing benefits and passported benefits such as Healthy Start vouchers, which help low-income families buy healthy food. Reduced contact with health and community services alongside library closures have left families struggling to access and complete paper applications for Healthy Start. In 2019, take-up of vouchers had fallen to 54% (c.£46 million lost to low-income families). Digitisation of Healthy Start needs to be re-prioritised.

Asylum seekers, EU nationals and those with no recourse to public funds

Asylum seekers and people with “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF, an immigration condition) are particularly vulnerable to household food insecurity due to very limited access to welfare support and paid employment. Both groups have reported severe difficulties affording food during the pandemic.^{xlii} Many asylum seekers face the additional challenge of living in shared dispersal accommodation meaning they have limited space to store food and inadequate kitchen facilities.^{xliii} Their children are eligible for Free School Meals, but not Healthy Start.

NRPF restricts access to benefits or social housing, making the holders extremely vulnerable.^{xliv} In response to Covid-19, the Government (after a legal challenge) extended Free School Meals support to some families with NRPF, but many are still missing out. We are also concerned that Government plans to remove this support as soon as schools are open to all.^{xlv}

3. Local response

Case study – Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency

Where food does need to be provided to housebound shielded and non-shielded people, we highlight the work of Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency,^{xlvi} working in partnership with the Royal Borough of Greenwich and Charlton Athletic Community Trust. Within just two weeks of establishment, it was already delivering 200 Food Boxes, which rapidly grew and is scalable to thousands to vulnerable non-shielded people (with paid and free options) that meet Covid19-safe as well as nutritional guidelines, is acting as a vehicle for other services such as Healthy Start, and supported by the local authority environmental health team to ensure food safety. Greenwich also pioneered a vital triage system for helpline callers that integrates financial vulnerability questions and welfare assistance referrals, a model not adopted by Government, but which we have promoted to local authorities and Local Resilience Forums.

The Royal Borough of Greenwich procures food from local businesses, supporting the local food economy and jobs that Greenwich's diverse communities rely on in the longer term. The system is strategic, well planned and is scaling up. Greenwich and other pioneers such as Brighton & Hove were in a position to move quickly as they already had active food partnerships in place and are part of the Sustainable Food Places network^{xlvii}.

Mutual Aid Groups

There is also a proliferation of 4,000 hyper-local Mutual Aid groups across the UK^{xlviii}. There is evidence of these groups stepping in to do shopping, crowdfund food parcels, start meals on wheels services^{xlix} and support families whose Free School Meals vouchers were delayed^l. These groups are admirable but have themselves raised questions about safeguarding vulnerable people and how to take payment for food or support those with insufficient money.

Community gardens

Sustain surveyed over 100 community farms and gardens and the majority reported they were continuing to grow food during the crisis. As well as food and jobs they provide vital therapeutic spaces. However, uncertainty forced many to close. We wrote to government asking that they be given guidance to stay open and access to the small business grant fund.^{li}

For further information, please contact: Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive of Sustain, email: kath@sustainweb.org or Orla Delargy on orla@sustainweb.org.

Sustain is the UK alliance for better food and farming (registered charity number 1018643). We represent around 100 not-for-profit national organisations and many more at local level. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been supporting community groups, food enterprises, food aid groups, local authorities, and government and industry liaison on the emergency food response, organised around three headline issues: Securing food for vulnerable people; Supporting the local response; Defending our food supply. Find out more at: <https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/>

Policy recommendations (Supply Chains)

1. The Government needs to amend the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan scheme as the terms have made it difficult for farmers to access it, and in future conduct more consultation with farmers.
2. With regards to support with farm labour, Government should consider measures such as providing farmers with necessary equipment, low interest finance and guidance, such as on accommodation, transport and restructuring.
3. Agriculture workers require better pay and conditions to create the kind of work that would make people proud to 'Pick for Britain'. The Government should create a new body for England, as exists in Wales and Scotland, to ensure better wages and conditions can be developed between industry and workers.
4. The Government should communicate strongly to all sector buyers to support UK growers and take account of a new UK picking workforce.
5. Government should set aside a Transition Fund for smaller food businesses to help diversify production for new diverse supply chains.
6. We would recommend that food supply chains be included in any future government Covid-19 inquiry, and that the inquiry includes consideration of smaller, local, arguably more robust supply chains, not just supermarkets.
7. In the short term, we recommend that Government recognises the role that small, independent food producers such as bakers play and would ask it to represent their supply interests in discussions with the food industry. Longer term, we recommend diversifying, and so strengthening, the grain supply chains and that any future inquiry asks questions about how better to serve domestic customers (e.g. flexibility with packaging).

Policy recommendations: Helping vulnerable people access food

8. We recommend the Government update, with urgency, its methodology for identifying, measuring and categorising people vulnerable to household food insecurity, to include both isolation and financial vulnerability and that this be incorporated into related legislation.
9. Ensure that all older people who need it have access to at least one hot meal a day during ongoing shielding or self-isolation. This can be delivered by expanding existing meals on wheels services, school catering and other public sector caterers, some of whom have already shifted to meals delivery⁴¹ and by community organisations which have expanded or repurposed their services. Government should urgently identify any areas where there is currently insufficient capacity and remedy this. This should form part of contingency planning for a potential second wave of the pandemic

10. Suspend the five-week wait for Universal Credit and make any advance payments a grant, not a loan. Suspend the benefit cap. Uprate child benefit; suspend the two-child limit and make provision for adequate sick pay for all workers.
11. Integrate adequate consideration of, and provision for, financially vulnerable people into emergency planning to include cash distributed via the benefits system, sufficient funding allocated for local authority welfare assistance grants, capping or freezing utility bills etc There should also be support for those with no recourse to public funds and cash grants for charities who provide meals (e.g. domestic violence refuges).
12. Commit to funding schools to maintain alternative free school meal support for all eligible children over the summer holidays. Reinstate Universal Infant Free School Meals at the earliest opportunity; consider further extension of FSM to all primary age children as well as for all secondary school students from households in receipt of Universal Credit; maintain and extend free school meals to the children from families with no recourse to public funds. Government should also establish a review of the voucher programme.
13. Re-prioritise and accelerate digitisation of the Healthy Start voucher scheme and in the interim, accelerate/prioritise the rollout of the online application form for Healthy Start to make this available to more people more quickly.
14. Suspend the “No Recourse to Public Funds” condition at least for the duration of the pandemic so that all people in need can access support.

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