



Covid Responses in Northern Ireland

Belfast Food Network, Final report, April 2021

Supporting community responses to food insecurity during the pandemic

Covid-19 meant that Belfast Food Network (BFN) had to change the focus of our Healthy Start work from south Belfast to national. We could no longer reach the groups we were targeting and what we were planning to deliver was no longer valid due to the changes in Healthy Start.

As things has progressed this has meant that we have been able to have a bigger impact, by aligning national and UK activities, ensuring that stakeholders are working together to maximise the promotion of the increased voucher and digitisation of Healthy Start in Northern Ireland.

BFN took on a number of covid emergency response programs to tackle food poverty from different angles. We delivered over 60 low-cost cookery videos to help build peoples food knowledge and skills during the pandemic, linking with Food for Thought, a grow your own programme run by Keeping NI Beautiful. Over 500 growing packs were delivered to individuals and community groups to improve health and wellbeing.

We secured funding to deliver 27 micro grants to very small food growers and suppliers across the country, to help them change their business models to adapt to covid, for many this meant new delivery and online options to serve an increasing customer base. These grants provided a lifeline to many of these small businesses, with many dealing with increasing waiting lists. Farm shops, organic growers, community supported agriculture projects, greengrocers, bakers and fish mongers all benefitted from the scheme. A shared platform is being developed to promote sustainable producers and encourage peer learning.

Governmental responses were wide ranging, with NI delivering the most pragmatic free school meal response, by paying money directly into parents' bank accounts. Unfortunately, the £6.3million government emergency food response was not so successful and is widely recognised as being a sticky plaster to a much broader problem. The scheme could have been delivered in a way that really promoted fresh, healthy food, increased jobs and made the most of existing food networks. The scheme was delivered very quickly with little thought to the lasting impacts. Future emergency responses should be agreed now and regularly reviewed.

Our challenges and learning

The biggest challenge caused by Covid was the loss of direct access to our 'hard to reach' groups, directly or through community links. Many of the people we were working with did not have online access for virtual activities; this was very difficult at the beginning and forced use to use our social media channels to reach a much broader audience. We have adapted all programs to be delivered from home and managed to build on our food poverty work through unexpected channels, including Northern Ireland's first Food, Farming and Land Convention that we initiated and delivered in February.

***“We have already fallen over the cliff edge. Poverty as we know it has reached an all-time high, with use of food banks reaching a record high, we are beyond the language of warning signs. We need to redesign systems by taking bold actions and work in collaboration to find sustainable solutions. The Basic needs approach taken in NI is inadequate; it does not address the root causes of poverty. Belfast Food Network is one of the very few Organizations in Northern Ireland that seeks long-term solutions to food poverty that are well beyond the food bank.*”**

Ursula Doherty, Manager, Strabane Community Project

Our next steps

BFN is taking stock of food poverty work in Northern Ireland. The current food redistribution model does not tackle the root causes of poverty, and we are working closely with the Strabane Community Project to explore different approaches. Our work is likely to focus on a cash first approach and promoting this across NI.

Our key achievements and impact

- BFN distributed £50k of emergency micro grants to 27 small businesses and initiatives that provide fresh food, helping them to survive and thrive during the covid pandemic.
- Over 1500 people accessed our low-cost cookery video's last year, improving their food knowledge and skills.
- We reached over 800 people through our Food, Farming and Land Convention, which called for better policy to tackle food poverty.
- BFN has aligned Healthy Start activity in NI with UK activity, ensuring that promotion of the new digitised scheme will reach as many eligible parents as possible.

Simple Swiss Chard Pasta

Nourish- Food for Thought
Presented by- Jade Bradley
Nutritional Therapist

Logos: Food For Thought, COMMUNITY FUND, TCV, BELFAST FOOD NETWORK, LIVE HERE LOVE HERE, KEEP NORTHERN IRELAND BEAUTIFUL, Food For Thought

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www.foodpower.org.uk

