# Learning from the response to food vulnerability during Covid-19
## Summary report from the Food Power Gathering 2020

June 2020

## Introduction

On 11 June 2020 over 100 people from food poverty alliances, food partnerships and other local networks attended the online Food Power Gathering 2020. Attendees were from all over the UK, including from the four nations and both urban and rural areas. They shared a range of perspectives and included people providing food and/or financial support, people helping to coordinate their local area's response to the pandemic and people with personal experience of food insecurity in their family or community.

Our aim was to provide an opportunity for attendees to share their reflections on the response so far to food vulnerability during Covid-19, how they think it should evolve and what further support is needed. At the start of the workshop attendees reflected on the overall response to food vulnerability during Covid-19, followed by small group discussions on one of three topics: *Financial support – cash and vouchers*, *Providing food to prepare at home* or *Providing meals - ready to eat or re-heat*. Discussions were structured by a version of the RSA's tool to consider how activities could restart, stop, continue and change.

The discussions during the event were incredibly rich and we've tried to summarise them here in an accessible way. This inevitably means that not every point raised is included and we have particularly focused on those points which were raised multiple times during the day. We did not aim to achieve consensus on a particular issue or action; the views of attendees and their organisations varied and attendees did not necessarily agree on all the points made.

## Reflections on the overall response to food vulnerability during Covid-19

**Responses to food vulnerability during Covid-19 has been highly variable, both between different areas and within areas themselves.** This is very apparent in terms of the level of coordination in areas, with attendees having very different views on the level of coordination, communication and coherent approach in their area.

**People and organisations worked together has been vital, in some cases overcoming previous barriers or forging new partnerships.** Attendees told us how having a food poverty alliance or similar assisted with the local response. There have been new collaborations and barriers to joint-working have broken down – particularly between the public sector and community organisations. This has led to helpful developments and innovations including funding being made available, centralised triage systems, sharing resources across sectors, rapid responses (such as all street homeless people being offered accommodation) and even very small organisations being part of a wider response.

> 'Groups and organisations coming together and working together in ways they never have before.'

> 'Barriers came down – the unimaginable became possible.'

> 'A lot of our partners were not taken seriously before, and are now seen as integral.'

**At the same time, in other areas there was a lack of communication and coordination at a governmental and/or local level.** Attendees shared how this had resulted in food being provided for people who did not want it, prepared meals going to waste, people in need being missed, a failure to respond to the sheer scale of need, a lack of nutritional standards and smaller organisations being left out of any coordination. For some there was concern that a focus on the crisis response had meant any long-term strategy was overlooked, intentionally or otherwise.

'Uncoordinated chaos and the most needy have been missed.'

'The pre-existing food aid providers have nutritional guidelines they must follow which is also not necessarily being followed by new response groups.'

'There have been lots of complications due to who was on the shielding list and who needed support due to a lack of coordination because of replication by the local councils setting up new responses units which has wasted a huge amount of time. They need to work with food programmes who are already networked.'

'For smaller organisations it's difficult to know how to feed into strategy and address structural problems for people in local communities.'

'Need to switch from responding with our hearts and instead respond with our heads – duplication and triplication of work because people are doing ad-hoc, siloed work (with best intentions, but not well managed).'

**Covid-19 has shone light on the vulnerabilities within our food system and the number of people experiencing or at risk of food poverty.** In some cases this has been about decision-makers understanding these problems for the first time, as well as national and local government taking on roles to address food insecurity. The crisis has further highlighted the impact of community responses to food poverty. Some also noted a stronger focus on ensuring people have access to fresh food, rather than only tinned or packaged food, as well as a better understanding of the role that local food producers and suppliers do and can play.

'It has shone a light on how fragile our food system is to those who were unwilling to see it before.'

'Already some awareness of stark inequalities before Covid, but amplified now. This highlighted poverty and food poverty at a senior level at the local authority. Sheer number of residents contacting for parcels highlighted the scale of issue, and it won't go away soon.'

**However for many attendees there were a range of concerns about the nature of the response to food insecurity.** Some were concerned about the 'blanket' nature of provision, avoidable barriers and confusion within some eligibility criteria, an over-reliance on food banks risking further institutionalisation of emergency food aid, the lack of cultural appropriateness of food provided, an expectation that people should eat re-distributed surplus food, the shortfalls in the operation of the free school meal voucher system and an over-reliance on supermarkets. Some felt that the government response should have taken a much stronger approach to simply put more money in people's pockets to help them to avoid falling into crisis and drawing down on food aid.

'Government's shielding parcels absolutely the opposite of dignity.'

'People having to jump through hoops to get food, lack of clarity of eligibility in some areas.'

'Trying to get a hold of shielded lists. People were not getting food for weeks.'

'Centralised government systems which don't work. "How can I send back my food parcel?" the most asked question – at the same time as others in great need.'

**People are concerned about a shift away from addressing the root causes of food poverty.** For attendees this particularly included a worry that the response had focused on providing food aid when financial support would have been more effective. This increases the risk of institutionalisation of food aid and some were concerned that there was no existing plan and/or long-term sustainable approach to tackling food insecurity in their area. Financial drivers of food insecurity raised included the ongoing hardship caused by the five-week wait for people's first Universal Credit payment.

'Too much emphasis on this being a food logistics issue, whereas it is also an issue of food insecurity and income.'

'Emergency food aid being seen as a substitute for income replacement.'

'One of our boroughs diverted everyone to a food bank. That's the only work they did. It wasn't being considered that if you don't eat well, there are so many other issues. It's not just about feeding your belly, other considerations are needed.'

'Government has never paid for food aid in this way before and it's got many parallels to the US system. The government has essentially worked as a gigantic food bank, which is concerning.'

**Attendees were already concerned about the increasing number of people falling into, or at risk of, food poverty during the pandemic and beyond.** They also shared concerns about ongoing stigma around accessing help, risks to safeguarding and how a significant number of people in food poverty are also digitally excluded and the failure of some responses to take account of this. There was demand to ensure that the scale of the issues is properly evidenced. Some stressed the importance of this monitoring leading to meaningful action, given their previous experience of requests for evidence not being followed up by concrete steps. While governments across the UK should play a role in understanding the issue, to be able to improve resilience this national monitoring shouldn't mean that local areas are excluded from making decisions.

'Need to make sure anything provided by volunteers and furloughed staff isn't seen as resolved – as soon as people go back to work, mutual aid won't be able to handle demand, can't be an excuse to remove government support – mutual aid shouldn't be providing all this.'

'How do we go from counting beans to growing beans?'

Alongside the limited resources, alliances are also challenged when funders support individual projects rather than core costs or ongoing coordination. . Some thought that councils had taken on too much themselves and should have partnered more with the local organisations. Yet some identified an over-reliance on third sector organisations to respond and a lack of government advice for the community food sector. The need to provide support within social distancing requirements was also noted as a specific challenge.

'Third sector organisations filling the gaps.'

'Exhausted.'

'In some cases councils taking too much on – needed to build relationships and work together with VCS.'

## Opportunities for a better approach

Despite the variability of the response and issues highlighted above, many attendees identified opportunities to improve the response and develop more equitable access to food in the long-term. Suggestions for action focused on leadership, avoiding working in silos, coordination including funding for a permanent coordinating role, shifting power and decision-making, calling an emergency food summit, updating food poverty action plans, food strategies or resilience plans, developing more localised and targeted responses, making the most of the current focus on food and in some cases more 'can-do' or entrepreneurial energy and championing local food. Connect primarily online was seen by some as an ongoing opportunity to efficiently link across a local area, as well as involve people with lived experience, as long as they have the equipment and internet connection to join.

'It's shown where power and decision-making lies and where it SHOULD shift to in the future.'

'We [a local council] want to work with, not dictate to the voluntary sector. We set up a network of anchor organisations and within them the food response partners who are delivering food. To ensure the food aid is there but also safeguarding and other structured elements. We expect some format of this structure to continue going forward.'

'The moment where things suddenly seem possible – need to hold onto this broadening of window of what is possible.'

'We are already having conversations to think about how the infrastructure should work around community food responses. There's a move away from a county level to a district level so that we can focus in where attention is needed.'

'We need a local food champion!'

We need responses that are rooted in food justice, rights and a whole system approach, which involve people experiencing food poverty in decision-making and maximise the dignity of those accessing food aid. For some attendees the crisis has really highlighted the value of and need for compassion, kindness, generosity and dignity within support offered to people. Some people expressed how there is also an onus on those providing food aid to ensure policy-makers address the root causes of food insecurity, provide funding for financial support to be able to move away

from food aid and champion a range of sustainable responses. Others highlighted the need to involve people with lived experience in shaping local areas' response to food poverty.

'We have a responsibility as food provision services and organisations to push for change. More often than not there is the assumption that if people are being fed that we can ignore the poverty that people are experiencing. We need to get better at putting political pressure for wider issues to be addressed.'

'Need to re-claim narrative of not institutionalising food aid. Be much louder again about this not being the answer in long-term.'

'The emergency and pop-up food banks that have been established are well meaning, but as we move out of crisis response there needs to be a dialogue so that informal groups link into the established food network so that there is a coordinated effort. If we replicate too many things in one area, we may miss some areas.'

'Refocus on getting rid of food banks in the longer term – seeing the big picture – restart the upstream focus – move away from the firefighting.'

'Poverty action plans were dropped to deal with emergency response so need to be brought back but adapted based upon learnings since Covid.'

'Participatory decision-making and involving people with lived experience – get input from those who are users of food bank etc.'



*Feedback capture: What should we continue from the response to Covid-19?*

## Responses to food poverty before and during Covid-19

During the breakout discussions, attendees had many suggestions for what should be restarted, stopped or changed from how things were done before the crisis and what should be continued, stopped or changed from the crisis response. These tables provide a summary of points made during discussions.

*Financial support and advice: Before the crisis*

|  | **Activities to restart from before the crisis** | **Activities to change from before the crisis** |
|---|---|---|
| **Signposting, advice and information** | • Coordinated, wrap-around signposting, advice and support, including face-to- face contact which is often the best way to understand people's wider support needs. <br> • Training and support for staff and volunteers to signpost people effectively. | • Unnecessarily burdensome and complicated bureaucracy and processes which hinder rather than assist people getting support |
| **Local welfare assistance** | • Delivery of cash support for people via local discretionary funds | • People being referred for food aid before being offered any immediate financial assistance |
| **National social security** | • Taking a preventative approach to avoid people falling into unsustainable debt | • Social security payments not reflecting the real cost of living for those both in and out of work <br> • Damaging Universal Credit policies and processes, including the five-week wait <br> • Punitive approaches |
| **Free school meals (FSM)** | • Allow children to roll over any 'change' from their FSM entitlement | • The ongoing stigma that can be attached to receiving free school meals |
| **Healthy Start / Best Start vouchers** | • Accelerate improvements to the scheme including the introduction of an online application form <br> • Continue to increase awareness of the vouchers and where they can be spent | • Increase the value of the voucher to reflect the increased cost of food <br> • Ensure the improved scheme still works for those who are digitally excluded <br> • Make the scheme 'opt-out' |

*Financial support and advice: <u>During</u> the crisis*

|  | Activities to **continue** from the crisis response | Activities to **change** from the crisis response |
|---|---|---|
| **Signposting, advice and information** | • One single triage system within a local area to avoid duplication and increase coordination<br>• Greater connectivity and clear referral pathways between local authorities and community partners | • Need to strike a balance between providing financial for families while also meeting wider support needs, particularly of vulnerable children. |
| **Local welfare assistance** | • Increased budget for, and awareness of, local welfare assistance schemes<br>• Joined-up referrals between local welfare assistance schemes and food aid providers to better understand need | • Ensure increased support for local areas leads to more direct financial support for people |
| **National social security** | • Maintaining the increase in Universal Credit payments, pauses in sanctioning, automatic deductions and rent evictions<br>• Develop a system based on Minimum Income Standards, Universal Basic Income or similar | • Provide financial support to families during the school holidays alongside holiday provision with food |
| **Free school meals (FSM)** | • Cash payments for families during term-time and school holidays<br>• Keeping the higher FSM threshold for families with No Recourse to Public Funds<br>• Schools continuing to provide meals and delivering to families, where this is people's choice | • Allow families to easily use support where they would normally shop (including markets and more affordable/ local outlets)<br>• Avoid systems that require printing vouchers and/or using a smartphone or tablet, including cash transfers<br>• Children should not have to wear their school uniform to collect meals or vouchers<br>• Ensure meals are hot and nutritious |
| **Healthy Start / Best Start vouchers** | • Increased awareness that the application form no longer requires a health professional's signature<br>• Increasing number of markets and affordable veg box schemes accepting Healthy Start and Alexandra Rose vouchers | • Ensure vouchers can be spent at local shops and markets<br>• Accept at community food outlets such as pantries, social supermarkets and box schemes |

*Providing food: <u>Before</u> the crisis*

| | Activities to **restart** from <u>before</u> the crisis | Activities to **change** from <u>before</u> the crisis |
|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | • Providing culturally appropriate food | • Move away from means-testing for food aid<br>• Stop the competitive process of holiday activities funding |
| **Supply** | | • Ensure any use of surplus food does not undermine focus on nutrition or quality<br>• Avoid random, ultra-processed food<br>• Stop converting low quality food into meals |
| **Community food provision** | • Supporting food clubs, social supermarkets, food pantries<br>• Running 'Eco Shops' in schools | • Consider fostering independent social supermarkets versus 'bolting them onto' existing food banks |
| **Promoting dignity** | • Pick-what-you-want provision<br>• Community fridges and other more informal provision<br>• Pay-it-forward models | • Reduce stigma by providing high quality food |
| **Access and skills** | • Access to good food markets to buy fruit and vegetables<br>• Continuing or bringing back slow cooker training sessions<br>• Network of local growers and community gardens to supplement ultra-local food security<br>• Targeted upskilling where people ask for this | |

*Providing food: <u>During</u> the crisis*

|  | **Activities to <span style="color:red">continue</span> from the crisis response** | **Activities to <span style="color:red">change</span> from the crisis response** |
|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | • Offer training to new groups and providers so that there are part of shared collective approach<br>• Support for specific areas or groups not previously engaged, such as people in social housing or sheltered accommodation | • Move back to model focused on resilience rather than crisis<br>• Do no over-rely on volunteers, including many furlough people returning to work<br>• Ensure food organisations are funded to offer support around wider issues |
| **Supply** | • Use gleaned food from farms<br>• Developing centralised local food hubs<br>• Buying from smaller scale local producers and retailers who have adapted their models<br>• Greater attention to need for high quality food | • Poor quality of food for shielded people<br>• Adhere to nutritional guidelines<br>• Stop companies using crisis for marketing purposes<br>• Stop competing over access to surplus food<br>• Harness collective purchasing power, while also protecting smaller producers |
| **Community food provision** | • Pop-up or mobile services around a local area, rather than fixed to one site, e.g. fruit & veg bus or van<br>• Increased membership of food coops | • Where people are able to pay, revert back to paid-for model or return to previously higher fee (to help sustainability) |
| **Promoting dignity** | • Access to good food seen as a right, greater awareness that anyone could experience difficulties accessing good food<br>• Delivery of food parcels to save people travel money and carrying heavy bags, plus maintains dignity<br>• Photos of food options available so that people can make choices remotely | |
| **Access and skills** | • Support and advice for recipes for cooking on limited budget or with the foods that can be bought with Healthy Start vouchers<br>• Continue online advice and support, while acknowledging some are digitally excluded | • Ensure people have adequate equipment to cook meals |

*Providing meals: Before the crisis*

| | Activities to restart from before the crisis | Activities to change from before the crisis |
|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | • Clear communications on availability and affordability of different options, including face-to-face communications<br>• Link into wellbeing, social care and health and safety checks in a dignified way<br>• Local food projects which are un-intimidating spaces helping to reduce isolation and share skills<br>• Bring people together again through social eating, generating benefits beyond food itself<br>• Reconvene previous groups of volunteers | • Include meals within other services and support so that it is not an isolated issue<br>• Offer meals on a more universal basis to tackle wider issues<br>• Ensure any donated surplus food is of high nutritional standards<br>• Avoid the reliance on redistributed surplus food |

*Providing meals: During the crisis*

| | Activities to continue from the crisis response | Activities to change from the crisis response |
|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | • Continue to support people beyond the formal end or relaxation of shielding<br>• Community-driven and community-owned projects<br>• Higher end restaurants involved in cooking freshly-made nutritious meals<br>• Novel ways of delivering meals e.g. by bike in urban areas<br>• Support mutual aid groups at the hyper-local level with training, best practice and bringing them into the coordinated response<br>• Delivery of freshly prepared meals to hostels and other accommodation for homeless people | • Consistent and proportionate application of environment health regulations and premises licensing<br>• Overcome barriers to school kitchen use<br>• Avoid cliff edge of support ending when lockdown ends<br>• Do not over-rely on volunteers<br>• Models which are unsustainable and unmonitored in the long-term<br>• Ongoing or increased support from the local council, including funding, access to premises, land etc. |

## What next?

Attendees identified a number of ways that government, councils, local networks and programmes like Food Power could support a better response to food vulnerability and build resilience.

### The role of national and local government

The crisis has put access to food in the spotlight, so there is an opportunity to use this moment to take action. For some attendees this meant focusing in on poverty as the most important factor and therefore on projects which address this. Ultimately many called for a government response to food vulnerability that takes a cash-first approach, given poverty and low incomes are the principle drivers of food insecurity. This needs to factor in the large numbers of people who are already experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic and plan for further people affected by the expected economic downturn.

There was also a call for government to recognise the value of locally-led solutions and to fund local authorities to enable these. This would include funding holistic food provision that addresses more than access to food, supporting more small organisations, offering streamlined funding opportunities rather than lots of little pots, and avoiding unnecessary competition for funding.

Many attendees called for the food response to be part of ongoing emergency planning for other future threats. At a government level this is about ensuring that the food system is more widely understood, nurtured and supported, working with business and independent retail and other players. Where things have not worked so well to date, attendees called for better links between the community sector and councils. This should include reviewing together what has gone well and what has not during the food response to Covid-19. There was a lot of support for moving away from crisis response to coordination and developing sustainable infrastructure at a local level. Some called for a senior decision-maker to be the voice of food in an area. This would help to maintain a high profile for the issue, but also support coordination.

### Calling for policy change

Attendees identified a number of potential campaigns to address the root causes of food insecurity and to further build the food justice movement. Some highlighted how it could be important to focus on one particular campaign to marshal combined efforts and energy, and to have a shared set of values and priorities. These included:

- Fundamental structural reforms to benefits system to remove draconian elements, take account of the recent influx and genuinely support people to meet the real cost of living
- Maintain the uplift to Universal Credit, remove the five-week wait and address other weaknesses
- Continue the pause of sanctions, money coming out of benefits and rent arrears evictions
- Increase uptake of the real Living Wage and adoption of this by government
- Introduce a Universal Basic Income or Minimum Income Standard

- Re-claiming the narrative of not institutionalising food aid
- Local right to food campaigns
- Support for the Children's Food Charter

- Increasing the value of Healthy Start vouchers and their uptake
- Advocate for quality British-grown food paid for by national government to go into foodbanks and parcels
- Ensuring that ultra-processed food is not seen as an appropriate solution to food poverty
- Continue to promote importance of partnerships/alliances, particularly on joined-up response post-Covid

*Sharing learning across the Food Power network and beyond*

There was clear demand for regular regional or thematic meetings to enable sharing of learning and experiences, including on what has or hasn't worked well. Potential topics include:

- Financial support – cash and vouchers (including as economic downturn hits, CTS and furlough ends, evictions etc.), training for food providers, volunteers, mutual aid groups on effective support and signposting for information/ identifying root causes of someone's problems, making things easier for people new to accessing support, interaction of food insecurity and digital exclusion
- Embedding dignity and kindness towards new people
- Ensuring a coordinated response across an area, taking action to address gaps in the local response (inc. geographical or specific groups), developing sustainable responses, reviewing food poverty action plans in light of Covid-19 (changed/ additional priorities, new partners etc.), securing support for food poverty alliances, food partnerships etc., including funding for coordination
- Mapping of food poverty and the response in a local area
- Managing the next phase of Covid-19, ongoing support for people as shielding is eased and support for people self-isolated as part of track and trace
- Involving people with lived experience, activists, allies in online processes
- Continuing and sustaining central food hubs
- Increasing uptake of Healthy Start vouchers, increasing buying power of Healthy Start vouchers e.g. developing a veg box scheme which accepts Healthy Start vouchers, linking with pay it forward schemes
- Increasing and monitoring uptake of free school meals, planning for and delivering summer holiday provision
- Sustaining meals deliveries, developing good food deliveries, accessing investment for a good food agency
- Developing or expanding food clubs, community shops, pantries etc. including help with where to find venues, how to navigate landlords and the general 'nuts and bolts'

*Involvement and participation*

Online working can open up opportunities for people with lived experience of food poverty to be involved. However, it's important not to assume that everyone has access to a smartphone, tablet or computer as well as internet access. There should be a variety of ways for people get involved if possible, including creative activities such as podcasting or video production. Organisations' social media should have a mix of posts such as videos, discussions, polls and advice. By providing a platform to join in and generate their own discussions, people can feel proud about what they've learned or created.

## Resources and examples shared during the Gathering

Food Power has a range of publications, case studies and previous webinars. Sustain has published guidance for local authorities on the response to food vulnerabilities during Covid-19. Sustainable Food Places has published case studies and local examples of the response to Covid-19.

*Signposting, advice and information*

Good Food Oxford training to empower volunteers to have difficult conversations, help identify other needs and signpost accordingly.

*Healthy Start*

Food Power Healthy Start toolkit and case studies of local areas' activities to increase uptake.

*Free School Meals*

Just Change campaign which calls for unspent FSM money to be rolled over

*Community food projects*

Food Power briefing on community food retail' (2018) such as community supermarkets and pantries. We know people were asking about whether we could produce a toolkit around this. While we look into this, please see page 5 for the questions to consider when establishing a project.

The Emergence of Social Supermarkets in Britain (Coventry University, 2018)

Your Local Pantry in different locations in England, Scotland and Wales, Family Action Food Clubs in Greater Manchester, Bristol and the South West, and Southend-on-Sea, Lancaster Food Clubs, Hope Food Club

Food Works freshly-cooked meal delivery service and Regather, a food co-operative

*Access and skills*

Slow cooking project cuts energy bills of Cornish families and Cardiff Cooking Together, celebrating food and culture across communities

## Acknowledgements

| | |
|---|---|
| Alexandra Rose Charity | Greater Manchester Health & Social Care Partnership |
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| Birmingham | Herefordshire |
| Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance | Incredible Edible Ilfracombe |
| Bradford | Interfaith Food Justice Network |
| Brighton & Hove Emergency Food Network | Islington |
| Brighton & Hove Food Partnership | Jubilee Food Network (Sandwell) |
| Brighton COVID-19 Emergency Food Response | Lancaster District Food Poverty Alliance |
| Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance | Leeds Food Partnership |
| Cardiff | Liverpool |
| Cardiff Food Poverty Group | Luton |
| Cardiff University | Merton's Community Fridge Network |
| Chesterfield | Middlesbrough Food Partnership and Food Power Alliance |
| Church Action on Poverty | Monmouth |
| Cornwall | North Wales Food Poverty Alliance |
| Edible Edinburgh | Northampton |
| Edinburgh Community Food | Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network |
| ENUF | Oldham |
| Feeding Bristol | Plymouth Food Equality Alliance |
| Bristol Food Network | ShefFood - Sheffield's Sustainable Food Partnership |
| Feeding Coventry | School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP), Flintshire |
| Feeding Derbyshire | Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance |
| Food Cardiff | South Gloucestershire |
| Food for Good Glasgow and Govanhill Foodbank | Southwark Food Action Alliance |
| Food Newcastle | Stockton Food Power Network |
| Food Plymouth | Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming |
| Food Poverty Action Aberdeen | Sustainable Food Places |
| Food Power Newcastle | Tameside Food Partnership |
| Food Sense Wales | The Food Domain |
| Good Food Flintshire | Tower Hamlets |
| Good Food Oxford | Wandsworth Food Partnership |
| Greater Manchester Food Poverty Alliance | |