

Food for vulnerable people in a no-deal Brexit



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September 2019: A call to action on issues that national government, local authorities and Local Resilience Forums need urgently to consider



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“We are dismayed at the government’s lack of attention to the impact of a no-deal Brexit on food for the most vulnerable people in our society – old people, those living with long-term illness or disabilities, people living in care and children in low-income families.”

“Other European countries are declaring no-deal Brexit a ‘natural disaster’ to trigger contingency funds. In the UK, Secretary of State for welfare Amber Rudd, has twice made fleeting reference to a ‘hardship fund’ being considered by the Government to help vulnerable people cope with food price rises or donations to food banks drying up. Yet here we are, just weeks from a possible no-deal Brexit cliff-edge, and no detail has been published, with no funds allocated. This inaction is absolutely shameful.”

Kath Dalmeny, chief executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming

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September 2019: A call to action on issues that national government, local authorities and Local Resilience Forums need urgently to consider

This briefing focuses on the impact of no-deal Brexit on food supplies for vulnerable people, to inform no-deal Brexit resilience planning by national government, local authorities and Local Resilience Forums.

By “vulnerable people”, we mean those already food insecure or are at risk of becoming so, typically due to low income, disability, infirmity, illness, care responsibilities or personal crisis; with little resilience to predicted no-deal Brexit food price rises or disruption. Additionally, we mean people who rely for all or a significant part of their food on either frontline charities or public-sector institutions. There are likely to be thousands of people in each of the UK’s 45 Local Resilience Forum areas who have low or very low food security – sometimes tens of thousands of people, or hundreds of thousands in the case of larger cities.

Our key concerns are under three themes, with distinct considerations and possible solutions, where people have already been identified as vulnerable and are receiving some level of food support, namely:

1. **Frontline charities:** Such as homeless shelters, domestic violence refuges, school breakfast clubs, holiday hunger projects, drugs rehabilitation and mental health programmes. Many of these groups rely on supply chain surplus food, typically donated by retailers and manufacturers, distributed via the specialist redistribution charity [FareShare](#) and by local or regional equivalents.
2. **Food banks:** Local voluntary groups distributing food to people in crisis; food purchased from shops, typically donated by individuals. The [Trussell Trust](#) supports a network of more than 1,200 food banks; this makes up around two-thirds of UK food banks, with many more operating independently, as the [Independent Food Aid Network records](#).
3. **Public-sector institutions:** Schools, hospitals, state-run nurseries, care homes, places of detention – food organised in diverse ways, from centralised procurement and outsourcing to large foodservice companies; through to individual institutions managing in-house catering.

The briefing is by the Sustain food and farming alliance, which has been coordinating food aid charities, poverty and health groups and public sector food organisations to express their serious concerns about the possible impact of a no-deal Brexit on food for vulnerable people. It reflects evidence and recommended solutions from food aid professionals and public sector groups who feed millions of vulnerable people each year.

The urgency of need for government action has grown throughout 2019, as the possibility of a no-deal Brexit has increased. Concerns have also grown as information has emerged about the likely ‘reasonable case’ and ‘worst case’ scenarios being considered by government as part of their Yellowhammer no-deal Brexit resilience planning.

Concerns have been further fuelled by statements from food industry associations such as the Food and Drink Federation and British Retail Consortium. Key issues identified include fresh food shortages; delays caused by border checks and freight traffic congestion; unpredictability of availability for ingredients in manufactured foods; likely food price rises of perhaps 6 per cent; and the possibility of food donations to charities drying up. All such circumstances could greatly increase the food insecurity of millions of vulnerable people in the UK.

1. Frontline charities

Scale of need: There are approximately 9,000 frontline charities providing services (including food) for people who are especially vulnerable due to personal circumstances. FareShare has calculated that these frontline charities would need c.£5m per month in total to buy food, if supply chain surplus donations dried up due to disruption, unpredictability and shortages caused by a no-deal Brexit (figures submitted by FareShare to Defra, August 2019). There is likely to be a significant number of such frontline charities in each Local Resilience Forum (LRF) area.

With no-deal Brexit, what is the sector worried about? (evidence from FareShare and other distribution groups): concerned that policy-makers do not have vulnerable beneficiaries and frontline charities on their radar, and are not making funds available, nor engaging systematically to plan for no-deal Brexit. Concerned that frontline charities' have low resilience to food price increases or food supply disruption likely decreased food donations; no money or facilities to stockpile – and on the basis of their experience in Scotland (Scottish Government has ring-fenced funds for no-deal Brexit food stockpiling by FareShare to serve frontline charities feeding people in need in Scotland) consider this impractical for England.

What the sector recommends: Acknowledge that frontline charities serving acutely vulnerable people are not resilient to food supply disruption and likely decreases in food donations. Calling for a national hardship fund which provides emergency cash grants for people on low incomes, and cash grants to frontline charities to enable them to buy food during the period of disruption. Estimated cost for the latter: £5m per month. Work with national government to bring frontline charity representatives, food industry, Local Resilience Forums and surplus redistributors together, lifting confidentiality constraints to enable open discussion of solutions (contacts available via FareShare and others). Each LRF should be in contact with the frontline charities operating in their area; map likely vulnerabilities; help create a plan for responding to need; join calls for national hardship fund availability and effective disbursement.

What progress so far? The main food surplus food redistributors started to be consulted by government in July 2019; Defra received financial evidence from FareShare in August 2019; no official response so far.

2. Food banks

Scale of need: Food banks (Trussell Trust, plus independent food banks) gave out an estimated 3 million emergency food parcels last year. Trussell Trust data shows the most common immediate triggers for needing a food bank are low income, benefit changes and benefit delays. Demand is already worryingly high and rising; food banks are already struggling. Illustratively, to give a sense of scale of need in one LRF area, the Greater London Authority recently calculated that 1.5 million adults and 400,000 children are at risk, having low or very low food security – up to a third of children in deprived areas.

With no-deal Brexit, what is the sector worried about? (evidence from Trussell Trust, Independent Food Aid Network and others): Resilience planners' focus on commercial supply, not the substantial number of people who are food insecure and cannot afford the cost of essentials. Concerned about a perfect storm of an increase in food prices and need for food bank support, plus a fall in food donations. Concerned that policymakers' apparent expectation that overstretched, volunteer-led food banks will respond to need; keen to avoid institutionalisation of food banks as a response to crisis and severe poverty.

What the sector recommends: Food banks cannot and should not be expected to pick up the pieces; national government should ring-fence part of a national hardship fund for cash payments directly to vulnerable individuals, with clear triggers and methods for effective disbursement, e.g. via benefits, local authority welfare schemes (where these exist), etc. Each LRF should be aware which local services are key points of contact for people in crisis (typically, but this is not a full list, local authority welfare teams; citizens' advice bureaux; Age UK; health service providers; schools, food banks) and what support is

available for people to be referred to (ideally a national hardship fund, but not yet confirmed). LRFs could join calls for a national hardship fund to be available; emergency food aid groups are strongly of the opinion that the only practical and responsible approach is to give vulnerable people enough money to cover food costs, not to expect expansion in voluntary emergency food aid provision.

What progress so far? The main food bank providers started to be consulted by government in July 2019; DWP Secretary of State Amber Rudd has indicated that a 'hardship fund' has been considered at Cabinet level; but no funds have been publicly committed, and no detail has been published.

3. Public-sector institutions

Scale of need: Public-sector institutions provide food for vulnerable people in:

- Schools: 10.2m pupils, which includes approximately 1.5m children across the UK currently eligible for free school meals due to families living on a very low income
- Hospitals: 142,000 bed spaces
- Care homes: 430,000 people
- Meals on wheels: around 100,000 people in 2015 (estimated figure after cuts to services affecting an additional 220,000 older and infirm people and people living with disabilities)
- Prisons: 93,000 people

With no-deal Brexit, what is the sector worried about? (based on comments from [40+ national organisations](#) expressing concern, and others): Food price rises; lack of buying power and flexibility in public sector; food supply unpredictability and disruption, most especially fresh produce (fresh produce most likely to be disrupted; 31 October exit is at the end of the British growing season, at that time of year we import a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables from other EU countries); ability to meet mandatory quality and nutritional standards / food safety / allergy / special nutritional needs for e.g. schoolchildren, hospital patients, care home residents.

What the sector recommends: Larger foodservice companies, suppliers and manufacturers have been stockpiling (though this is not possible for fresh produce). More advice, impact assessment and open sharing of information would be helpful. The Government needs to reassure schools that extra funding will be reliably available to ensure schools can continue to feed children well, especially the 1.5m children reliant on free school meals, and those whose families might fall into crisis due to e.g. job losses.

What progress so far? There is not much information in the public domain. NHS England has said food for hospitals has been planned for. The National Association of Care Catering has expressed concerns about food supplies for care settings such as old people's homes. Ministry of Justice for prisons and young offender institutions are working on food resilience planning. 40+ groups have expressed concerns about food for schools. According to a recent response to a Freedom of Information request, some local authorities have ring-fenced contingency funds for stockpiling or extra costs of public food such as school meals (e.g. Bristol); others may be ring-fencing similar contingency funds, but probably not.

4. Additional general considerations and recommendations

National action is needed

This briefing seeks to address the imminent possibility of a no-deal Brexit and its likely impact on food for vulnerable people. Sector specialists have been working together for over two years to raise these issues with policy-makers, Parliament and the media, making slow progress. In September 2019, our alliance is focusing on the now critically urgent need for acknowledgment of food for vulnerable people as an issue

with its own distinct considerations, not solved by the current focus on food flows, border checks, transport and commercial supply chains. We believe that local action will undoubtedly help, but that national funds and effective methods for disbursement and provision of other support must be guaranteed to manage the worst impacts on the most vulnerable. It is salutary to note that other European countries are considering declaring no-deal Brexit a 'natural disaster', in order to trigger access to contingency funds.

But it's not just no-deal

It is also worth noting that other Brexit scenarios may also affect food prices, fresh food shortages, delays and continuity of supply, such as changes to import and export tariffs, border checks and shortages of vets and inspection staff necessary to ensure food safety and quality standards. It would be beneficial for food resilience and food vulnerability to become a subject for routine review, systemic solutions, and clear apportionment of responsibilities and resources as part of resilience planning, in the longer term.

And it's not just Brexit

Sustain believes that Brexit resilience planning has amply demonstrated there is no established national response for peace-time food supply disruption, especially to address vulnerability, of the possible severity and length being predicted in either no-deal Brexit reasonable-case or worst-case scenarios. When the immediate crisis is over and the political dust has settled, we believe it would be highly beneficial for food resilience and food security for vulnerable people to find a permanent place in resilience planning as well as in legal responsibilities for public authorities. We suggest that the no-deal Brexit process has revealed major gaps in resilience planning and that the Civil Contingencies Act therefore needs to be updated to reflect food resilience objectives, including provisions for vulnerable groups. In the new era of climate and nature emergency, this must be considered in light of national and global threats to food supply, such as conflict, resource depletion, natural system decline and climate change, as well as UK commitments to meeting UN Sustainable Development Goals. In a climate emergency, all of us are potentially vulnerable to food insecurity. The one silver-lining to the no-deal Brexit cloud may turn out to be that we all remember not to take our food supply for granted.

Author: Kath Dalmeny, chief executive of Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming; member of the London Food Board and lay advisor to the London Resilience Forum on food resilience matters

A selection of 2019 news items providing additional evidence for our concerns (in reverse chronological order):

- [September 2019](#): Mayor [of Liverpool] calls for benefits rise to help vulnerable cope with food price rises in a no-deal Brexit
- [September 2019](#): Sustain's concerns about food supplies raised at Prime Minister's Question Time
- [September 2019](#): Gordon Brown teams with Sustain to ask government what happens to food in No Deal
- [August 2019](#): School children could go short of food in no-deal Brexit say children's health charities
- [August 2019](#): Leaked government documents warn of no-deal Brexit food shortages, price rises and vulnerable people unable to access food
- [August 2019](#): No-deal Brexit will cause 'mortal damage' to food and farming, says industry body the Food & Drink Federation
- [July 2019](#): Ministers challenged to guarantee food for vulnerable people in the event of a no deal Brexit
- [March 2019](#): DWP Secretary Amber Rudd confirms Government considering food hardship fund in event of no deal Brexit
- [March 2019](#): Charities and public sector demand 'hardship fund' to prevent no deal Brexit food crisis
- [February 2019](#): Government no-deal paper a stark warning for the UK's food and farming industry
- [February 2019](#): Government considers national hardship fund to avert no deal Brexit food crisis
- [February 2019](#): Food for schools, hospitals and frontline charities must be protected from no deal Brexit, says Sustain

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, The Green House, 244-254 Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9DA. Tel: 020 3559 6777. Website: www.sustainweb.org/brexit

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