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Catherine McKinnell MP  
Chair of the Petitions Committee  
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Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter regarding petitions and public interest in Defra's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Defra is working hard to provide support to everyone in society, and to make sure that we respond robustly to the greatest public health challenge of our times.

I am very happy to answer the questions you raised, and hope that they provide reassurance to those who are feeling anxious and worried.

*How will access to food and supplies for everyone – and particularly the elderly, vulnerable, and key workers – be maintained as the outbreak develops?*

Access to food and other household supplies for everyone is a priority for our department. The Government is currently tailoring support to address the needs of the shielded, the vulnerable (including the elderly), and key workers.

Over the past week in partnership with industry the Government has started to deliver Shielding Packages, comprised of essential supplies and food to those who are clinically vulnerable and have requested this support through the NHS website. This will ensure that up to 1.5 million people in England identified by the NHS as being clinically vulnerable will have access to the food they need.

In line with data protection law, we are also now sharing with supermarkets details of those who are registered with the NHS as clinically vulnerable and in need of basic food and essential supplies. Supermarkets will use this data to prioritise online delivery slots for those most in need.

We are also working quickly to support people who do not fall into the category of being clinically vulnerable, but still need help getting essential food supplies. This could include those who are elderly, disabled or have health conditions that make it difficult for them to get the food they need.

We are speaking to food retailers, delivery organisations and volunteer groups to help prioritise those individuals to access essential food. Wherever possible, people should continue to rely on friends, family and wider community support.

Finally, we are absolutely committed to supporting our key workers and their ability to access food and supplies. Public Health England have updated their guidance regarding “premises which have to close” to be clear that where there are no practical alternatives, workplace canteens can remain open to provide food and/or provide a space for breaks for those key staff the nature of whose roles mean that they cannot work at home. The guidance also sets out that where possible, staff should be encouraged to bring their own food, and distributors should move to operating a takeaway service. Measures should be taken to minimize the number of people in the canteen at any one given time, for example by using a rota.

Supermarkets are protecting shopping time for NHS workers and we are in close and regular contact with industry to discuss further ways to help with their preparations, including how they can support our key workers.

*What is being done to address panic buying and prevent price hikes of key items?*

We, across Government, regularly speak to food industry leaders, and the industry is continuing to monitor the situation and take the necessary steps to address issues where they arise.

Government quickly introduced new measures to make sure businesses are able to replenish stores more rapidly, such as extending delivery hours to supermarkets and flexing rules on driver’s hours to allow a higher frequency of deliveries to stores to ensure shelves are being replenished more quickly. We have also temporarily relaxed elements of competition law to enable supermarkets to work more closely together to ensure people can access the products they need.

As a response to increased demand by consumers, the representatives of our leading supermarkets appealed through national media to customers to shop considerately, and the Government echoed that call. I have had regular calls with retailers, who have continually provided me reassurance that supply chains remain resilient and that there is plenty of stock available.

We know that changes to costs are a cause of worry for households and businesses. Rest assured, retailers are working hard to mitigate any disruption to their supply chain that could impact on their costs, and to keep customer prices down as far as possible. Most food industry sectors are accustomed to fluctuations in supply chain costs, which do not necessarily translate into price rises.

The Government is aware that the COVID-19 outbreak has prompted concerns that some businesses might exploit consumers through harmful practices and excessive pricing, actions which we would condemn in the strongest terms.

The Competitions and Marketing Authority (CMA) has created a COVID-19 taskforce and has written to the pharmaceutical and food and drink industries and the major online platforms warning firms that they should not capitalise on the current situation by charging unjustifiably high prices for essential goods or making misleading claims around their efficacy. I welcome this decisive action by the CMA, and also by platforms such as Amazon and eBay who are continuing to take action against harmful pricing practices.

*What is being done to increase availability for online delivery slots, to enable people to buy essential goods without having to leave their home unnecessarily?*

We are continuing to work closely with industry to discuss any additional support government can provide. Supermarkets have significantly increased capacity: recruiting more staff, prioritising delivery slots for those who need them most, and limiting shopping hours so they have more time to restock.

The food industry is working hard to deliver a crucial service for everyone, and industry leaders have also issued a rallying call for everyone to play their part in the national effort by looking out for their friends, family and neighbours.

*How are foodbanks being supported to continue operating during the outbreak?*

Firstly, the Government has put in place a clear exception for the operation of food banks in the guidance that it issued as part of the closure of community centres, youth centres and similar premises. Further information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close-guidance>

We have launched a £3.25 million food waste fund to support food redistribution organisations who are facing operational challenges due to the coronavirus outbreak. The fund will support food redistributors who are struggling to operate as usual due to social distancing measures, a decrease in volunteers, or a reduction in their regular support from corporates or other networks. It will also aid organisations in diverting food from restaurants and the hospitality sector while they are temporarily closed.

Our department is working closely with other departments and with food aid organisations to consider how best to facilitate those who are financially vulnerable still having access to essential supplies through the mechanism of frontline charities and food banks. Officials have been engaging with food aid providers, to understand the impacts the outbreak could have on food banks and front-line charities. We are continuing to have these discussions to identify where Government can facilitate support if necessary.

Daily calls with the food supply sector have included discussions about food banks, and we are working with supermarkets and others in the supply chain to ensure that they get access to the supplies they need. Food banks are also working with their networks and can explain how they can support individuals at this time.

I would like welcome this opportunity to commend your committee for its work helping to keep the public informed and reassured in times of unprecedented concern.

If there are any more questions that arise from public petitions regarding the work of Defra, I am more than happy to answer them, and to update the answers already given.

Finally, I would like to once more thank all those in the food sector for their hard work and dedication in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. I am thankful and proud of their bravery and commitment to helping the vulnerable and shielded during this concerning time.

We will continue to support the sector and monitor the situation carefully.

Yours sincerely,

George Eustice