

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Covid-19 and food supply: follow up, HC 1156

Tuesday 9 February 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on Tuesday 9 February 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray.

Questions 1 - 49

Witness

I: Emma Revie, Chief Executive, Trussell Trust; Fazilet Hadi, Policy Manager, Disability Rights UK; Anna Taylor, Executive Director, The Food Foundation; Councillor James Jamieson, Chairman, Local Government Association.

II: Kate Nicholls, Chief Executive, UKHospitality; Ian Wright, Chief Executive, Food and Drink Federation; James Bielby, Chief Executive, Federation of Wholesale Distributors.

Written evidence from witness:

- [Trussell Trust](#)
- [The Food Foundation](#)
- [Food and Drink Federation](#)
- [Federation of Wholesale Distributors](#)

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Emma Revie, Fazilet Hadi, Anna Taylor and James Jamieson.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the EFRA Select Committee. We are continuing our evidence sessions looking into Covid and the food supply, and the food supply in particular to those in society who most need food and are struggling to get food. We are delighted to have our four witnesses here today. Would you like to introduce yourselves?

Anna Taylor: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

invitation to be here. I am Anna Taylor, executive director of the Food Foundation.

Emma Revie: Good afternoon. Thanks for having me here today. I am Emma Revie. I am the chief executive of the Trussell Trust. We support a network of 1,200 food bank centres across the UK.

Fazilet Hadi: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Fazilet Hadi. I am head of policy at Disability Rights UK, which is an organisation led by disabled people to promote the interests of disabled people.

Councillor Jamieson: Good afternoon. I am James Jamieson. I am chairman of the Local Government Association, which represents councils in England and Wales.

Q2 **Chair:** To date, how many people have experienced food insecurity because of the pandemic?

Anna Taylor: We have just completed our very latest survey at the national level, so these are UK-wide figures. Over the last six months, our estimates are that 9% of all households have experienced food insecurity. This is moderate and severe food insecurity, so this is where people cut back on the quantity of food eaten. It is about 12% of households with children. It is worse among households with children.

These levels are broadly similar to the first six months of the pandemic. We have seen the situation improve very slightly for households with children, and that may well, I hope, be a reflection of some of the impact of the programmes that have been announced. For the general population the situation has remained broadly the same as the first six months, and that is elevated compared to pre-Covid.

Q3 **Chair:** For you as a charity, that is putting extra pressure on you. How is the charity sector coping generally, as well as Government?

Anna Taylor: Emma and others around the table will be much more on the front line. As you know, we do quite a lot of their evidence collection. What we are hearing directly from households with children is that, for those households that are least affluent, the challenges of being able to guarantee that they can put a healthy meal on the table are immense. While some really important measures are in place, they are not going far enough at the moment.

We have also just done a survey of children aged between eight and 17 years, asking them about their experiences of food insecurity over the Christmas period. One in five of those have experienced some form of food insecurity. Some of those are milder forms; they are not all at the severe end. This captures things like being sent to other relatives to eat because there is not enough food at home or seeing your parents not eat because there is not enough food at home.



Overall, 12% of children—this is, again, a nationally representative survey—have visited a food bank or their family has visited a food bank over the Christmas period. We know the economic impact of the crisis, combined with the social impact, is having detrimental impacts on children in particular, as well as on other sections of the population, which you will no doubt hear about from other witnesses.

Emma Revie: Our data reflects much of what Anna has shared already. We continue to see record need, and have had the busiest half-year period since the Trussell Trust was established. In the first six months of the pandemic, we distributed more than 1.2 million emergency food parcels to people in crisis, which was a 47% increase on the previous year. This was building on year-on-year increases in the previous five years. We saw a 74% increase in demand over those five years. It was already at a record high level before going into the pandemic.

We are conscious that our data only reflects Trussell Trust food banks, and that is only the tip of the iceberg, which sits alongside Anna's data. We have seen countless new community organisations, independent food banks and local authorities stepping in to provide emergency food during this time. As alarming as our data is, it is just the tip of the iceberg.

Reflecting, again, what Anna's data is showing, families with children have been particularly hard-hit. Of the 1.2 million parcels we provided in the first six months of the pandemic, 470,000 were to children. That meant that, on average, we were distributing 2,600 food parcels to children a day during the first six months of the pandemic. We have also seen more people coming to food banks who have never had to access a food bank before. In that first six-month period, 100,000 households who had never visited a food bank before found themselves forced to turn to emergency food to get by.

The other thing our data shows us is that this need continues to be driven not by a lack of access to food but by a lack of affordability: a lack of income to be able to afford food. As the Committee recognised in its last report, food security is rooted in financial insecurity. That is shown in our data.

There is a close relationship between food bank use and people experiencing destitution. Our *State of Hunger* report, which Heriot-Watt University produced for us in 2018, showed that 94% of people who were coming to food banks were experiencing destitution and were unable to afford essentials such as food, staying safe, dry and warm, and access to resources to keep clean. That has continued and been compounded by the pandemic.

Q4 **Chair:** That just shows how serious it is.

Fazilet Hadi: I would reinforce everything Emma and Anna have said about the interrelationship between poverty and food insecurity. Figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show that 14 million live in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

poverty, 7 million of whom are either disabled people or live in a household with a disabled person.

In terms of the things that are causing food insecurity, 2.2 million disabled people are not getting the £20 uplift to universal credit, because they are on legacy benefits. Immediately, their incomes are low. A report brought out last week stated that for many of them it is a choice between eating and heating; it is a choice between essentials. We also have disabled people with impairments and particular health conditions who are now struggling to go to supermarkets due to their impairment, because they cannot physically distance or because they have been told to stay at home by the Government.

We have people who are very digitally excluded in this group. Disabled people are disproportionately digitally excluded, as are poor people, yet a lot of the information is online, and people are expected to navigate their own way to that information. The problems continue, and I fear that older people and working-age disabled people have become more invisible to the wider population.

Q5 Chair: It is very serious. James, within the Agriculture Act, the Government have to report on food security at the end of the year. On both parts of the first question and on that one, where do you see local government? Can local government help collect this data? What is local government finding? In many places, local government is stepping up to the plate, through schools and others, to help feed those who need food.

Councillor Jamieson: The key point—the three previous witnesses have said this—is that this is not about a shortage of food per se; it is about financial poverty limiting access to food. It is a much more complex situation, because there are other issues associated with it. A simplistic national solution will not really work that well.

While we welcome the uplift to universal credit, which is really important, and the free school meals initiatives—this is where local government really comes into its own—this is about local solutions that are tailored to the people in front of them. In some cases, that will be poverty, and it is not so much access to food but paying for it. In other cases, such as the shielded group, they may very well have had the financial resources, but they were not able to go out and shop. That is a different issue. It is therefore very important that you tailor it.

We learned a lot in the first lockdown. In lockdowns 2 and 3, we had a much more significant role for local government in providing emergency food parcels, along with the voluntary sector, and much more use of slots with supermarkets for those who had the digital connectivity and the financial wherewithal. That allowed us to focus on those who were more financially constrained, but poverty is not just about food. It is about housing; it is about affording your utility bills.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The real thing this has emphasised is the importance of a preventive approach and getting in front of it, rather than coming up with emergency aid. As much as that is valuable, would it not be better not to need the emergency aid and to prevent the problem in the first place?

Q6 Chair: That is a very good point. On collecting the data about food insecurity, local government should be able to help with that, I would have thought.

Councillor Jamieson: Yes, we are doing quite a lot of work in that area. We are working with the University of Southampton on that, but we also have a rather good data system called LG Inform, which pulls together a lot of metrics around our populations, not just on food poverty but on pretty much every metric associated with local government and what we do. That is a very valuable resource for people to utilise. It is free for any MP to use, if they so wish.

Chair: I will make sure I use it, then. Emma, Fazilet and Anna, as you answer the second question, if you want to talk very briefly about the collection of data on food security for the end of the year, that would be useful. I am just conscious of time.

Q7 Ian Byrne: Both this Committee and the national food strategy called on the Government to take more cross-departmental action on food insecurity. In light of what we have just heard in the answers to the first question—undoubtedly, there is a humanitarian crisis sweeping our communities—are these calls being taken seriously enough?

Anna Taylor: Referring back to the national food strategy is helpful, because it had four main recommendations, one of which was for a task force on food vulnerability to be reinstated—Chair, this speaks to your point about data—so the Government could have an ongoing data monitoring and a cross-Government co-ordination function to make sure that the data was being acted upon. That recommendation, as far as I am aware from what I see from the outside, has not yet come to pass. It would enormously help to underpin what happens next.

There were also three other recommendations, one of which has been fully implemented around the holiday provision commitment, which is really fantastic and excellent to see. The second is around healthy start, where the vouchers have been increased but not extended to everybody on legacy benefits and universal credit. The extension of free school meals to all children in poverty has also not been tackled.

There has been some really good progress, but a lot more needs to happen. Others will speak about the universal credit lifeline and the income support measures that are needed, but alongside that we have seen, during the pandemic, the extent to which there are cracks and weaknesses within children's provision, in the set of programmes we have to provide a nutritional safety net for children, which need to go alongside those income measures.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lots of things have gone wrong and many children have missed out. We now need to start thinking about how we fix this in the longer term, as well as in the immediate term, to have a more permanent set of measures in place. That is what needs to happen next and urgently. We have been calling for a review on free school meals to inform that process, so the Department for Education can get ahead of the curve on this issue and try to solve some of these problems in the long term.

Emma Revie: We need to commend the Government for having taken significant steps forward, with the different schemes they have brought in, particularly related to the national food strategy. However, as both Anna and I have identified in our data, families with children are still being disproportionately affected through the pandemic. I would be happy to talk about the £20 universal credit uplift, if that would be helpful.

Ian Byrne: That would be immensely helpful, yes.

Emma Revie: If we take the wider schemes into consideration, there is no question that the Government have put in place unprecedented measures to protect people's jobs and incomes through the pandemic to date. We firmly believe that that prevented many more people having to come to food banks during this time. The £20 uplift to universal credit has been a vital lifeline to people on the lowest incomes.

Our latest research, which we have just released, found that seven in 10 people, 72%, who have been on universal credit since early 2020 said it has made buying essentials such as food much easier. Conversely, when asking them what the loss of that £20 uplift might do to them, the statistics were very concerning. We would be very concerned that, if that uplift was lost from the end of March, a million people could be pushed to have to use food banks and many more would go hungry.

Our research found that one in five people claiming universal credit think it likely that they would need to use the support of a food bank if they lost the £20 uplift. Four in 10 people claiming universal credit fear having to cut back on food for themselves, which represents 2.4 million people. We also know that parents will go without food for a long time to protect their children. In this survey, one in eight parents claiming universal credit told us that, if they lost the £20 uplift, they would have to cut back on food for their children, which represents 220,000 families.

There have been significant measures put in place both around local welfare assistance and around the £20 uplift to universal credit, but, as we come to the end of March, when the Covid winter grant scheme comes to an end and the uplift to universal credit is due to end, we are very concerned about what that will do to families, their access to food and their ability to feed their children.

Q8 **Ian Byrne:** To build on that, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that 14 million people are living in poverty. Do we have any figures on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

what will happen to the 14 million if that £20 were taken away? Has there been any data analysis on that?

Emma Revie: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation also reported that, of those people who were experiencing poverty, 670,000 people more were going to fall into destitution and be experiencing destitution by the end of the year. As I have said, there is a strong correlation between severe food insecurity, between people coming to food banks and destitution.

Fazilet Hadi: From my point of view in terms of disabled people, central Government have not done anything except devolve responsibility to local government and hopefully give local government some money to go with that responsibility.

If I remember, when I was talking to this Committee last summer, there were issues about the confusion that had been caused by the clinically extremely vulnerable list. That was great, because they were being given supermarket online delivery slots, but disabled people were having them taken away. There was absolute chaos, and some disabled people could not go into stores because of the queueing.

After the end of July last year, all food boxes sent out by national Government were stopped. I appreciate they were not always of the greatest quality, but nevertheless they were sent out until the end of July. In September, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published guidance for retailers because there had been so many complaints about the lack of reasonable adjustments made by supermarkets for disabled customers both online and in store.

When we went into the recent lockdowns in November and January, those in the clinically extremely vulnerable group were sent a letter basically giving them sources of help that they could contact if they went online, primarily. Disabled people were not given any particular support. I hope, as James says, they were picked up locally, but I have no evidence of that.

Because everything has been devolved locally, it is very hard to get a grip on what is actually happening. Who is communicating to disabled people about what is possible and what happens if they cannot access food? The big issues have become online delivery charges, which for people on fixed incomes are very, very high, and people being wrongly refused access to supermarkets because, for a disability-related reason, they are not wearing face coverings. It is a different situation to last spring, but it is still very much a live issue for disabled people and those with ill health.

Q9

Ian Byrne: We touched on the national food strategy, Anna. Just two weeks ago, Liverpool declared itself a right to food city. Manchester last week declared itself a right to food city. This is sweeping the nation as we speak. Councils and local authorities are understanding the gravity of where we are now. We have 14 million people in poverty and 11 million people who potentially cannot put a meal on the table. What impact will



that have on the second part of the national food strategy, which is hopefully due to be reported on in the summer?

Anna Taylor: Part 2 of the national food strategy has a really broad scope, but it has as a central theme looking at how we can re-orient the food system so everybody can eat well. In the context of the pandemic, the importance of that theme is greater than it has ever been. I believe it will still be a very strong focus. It will definitely also reflect on the progress from part 1 of the national food strategy. Yes, it remains a key priority.

If you do not mind, building on a point Fazilet said about disability, we have also seen this in our statistics on ethnic minority households. We have been comparing levels of food insecurity pre and post crisis, and the extent to which the disparities have grown among households with disability and ethnic minority households is extreme. Once you have controlled for income and all the other things that have an impact on food insecurity, levels of food insecurity in households with a disabled adult are now 12 percentage points higher than the average household. Going into the crisis there was a six percentage point difference, and that has doubled over the period of the pandemic.

We have seen a really similar increasing disparity for BAME households. This is a really, really concerning thing. Fazilet has explained all the reasons for that, but we see it in our data as well.

Q10 **Ian Byrne:** To finish off, James, would you like to add anything?

Councillor Jamieson: I want to go back a step. We are talking about food poverty, but why is someone in food poverty? It is money. As Emma said, the £20 on universal credit is really important. We need to stand back a bit. Before we start asking, "Should we have more free school meals?" and so forth, if we have a sum of money, maybe it would be better spent increasing universal credit rather than just providing free school meals. Fundamentally, it is about money.

The other thing that has impacted the ability of local authorities to support councils is local welfare funding, which was removed. We were very pleased that we got the winter grant, which was given to us at very short notice, and has been used very successfully. In a way, it sought to mirror, to a small extent, the sort of preventive support work that local welfare funding provided. Standing back, of the various tools you could use to support poverty, local welfare funding would be at the top of my list, because it allows you to tailor to the need.

I very strongly agree with the £20 on universal credit. Fazilet raised some very important points about knowledge and data. We are not very good in the public sector at sharing data. If a local council is aware of the disabilities of somebody when they are trying to provide a service, it makes it much easier to deliver the right support and the right service. It is really important that, as a point of principle, you share data across the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

public sector and put in data protocols to facilitate that, and that there is an element of co-design.

The food parcel was a classic of this. It was put in at short notice. I understand why there were failings, but it was a single system for everybody. It cost quite a bit of money and it was not tailored. Had you done that through local government and had more time, frankly it would have cost less and it would have been better.

Ian Byrne: Yes, absolutely. Those were excellent points.

Chair: Those were good questions and good answers, which we can put to the Minister when we get her in later.

Q11 **Geraint Davies:** Do you agree with me that the right to food should be a central proposition in the national food strategy? By “right to food”, I mean the right to enough money for sufficient nutritious food on a daily basis after paying for other essential costs of living, like a roof over your head and heating.

Anna Taylor: I share your view that we want everybody in the UK to be able to afford to eat well and to pay their bills. That is unequivocal in my mind. When we look at our data on the affordability of a healthy diet, if you are in the bottom quintile, once you have paid for your housing, you are going to have to spend 40% of your disposable income to be able to afford a healthy diet. We are in a situation where we do not have that outcome at the moment, and we need to deal with that.

There is a harder challenge about the right way to achieve that. Different countries have gone down different routes with respect to the right to food and how they capture that within their legal framework. Some countries have gone down the route of strengthening data tracking and accountability. They have embedded citizens in some of those leadership structures within Government. We can learn a lot from how other countries have gone about trying to enshrine the right to food in their different legal structures.

There are choices. I suppose what I am saying is that there is not one very simple way to do this. We have talked today about income and nutritional safety nets. There are multiple other ways in which we can support people in this area.

Q12 **Geraint Davies:** So I am clear, in your estimation, how many people in Britain at the moment do not have the right to food and, on a virtually daily basis, are not getting enough nutritious food each day? Is it 10 million? How many is it?

Anna Taylor: What we have not really measured is the quality side. The numbers I have been reporting today about 10% of households are quantitative reductions. That is the severe end of the situation.

Q13 **Geraint Davies:** It is about 7 million people, then.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anna Taylor: It slightly depends on household size and so forth. I can give you a set of numbers afterwards, if that would be helpful, and submit those on an email laying it out for you.

Chair: Yes, let us have it in writing, please.

Q14 **Geraint Davies:** That is very helpful. Let me turn to Emma from the Trussell Trust now. Do you believe, as I do, that the right to food should be a central proposition in the national food strategy? It should mean enough money to have daily nutritious food and not go hungry while also paying for other bare essentials like heating and a roof over your head. We are the sixth richest nation in the world. Should we not all have the right to food?

Emma Revie: I absolutely agree 100% that everybody should be able to afford the essentials. We know that we would not need food banks, if that were the case. If people had enough money for the essentials, there would be no need for food banks any more, which is absolutely our aspiration. We commend Ian for the work he has been doing on the Right to Food Campaign and the spotlight that it has placed on food insecurity. We also support the Committee's recommendation for the Government to consult on the right to food.

I would be keen, as you have quoted in your question, that the mechanism will hold us effectively accountable about the amount of money people have to afford food. We need a solution that is crafted around tackling the underlying drivers of poverty—not food poverty but poverty—which leads to food insecurity and leaves too many people with insufficient money for food but also those other essentials like housing and heating. That is a longwinded way of saying that I strongly support people having enough money to afford the essentials.

Q15 **Geraint Davies:** James, from the local government point of view, would you support the right to food? By that I mean sufficient financial resources to have daily nutritious food after paying for other basic essentials like heating and a roof. Should we have that right centrally in the national food strategy and work from there?

Councillor Jamieson: Again, I have to support what the others say. Everyone should have the right to the key essentials. Whether that is paying for your utilities so you are in a warm place with a roof over your head, or having enough money for clothes and food, everyone deserves that.

The point I was trying to make is that it is a more complex problem than just providing somebody with food. It is about providing them with resources. To the point I was making earlier, how can we get ahead of this? We are talking a lot about essentially emergency support. As Emma has just said, we would rather there were no food banks, because we would rather that nobody needed a food bank. That would be the optimum solution.



Therefore, we do need to think about the preventive agenda I was just talking about. Everybody deserves to have a decent job that provides them with enough money in order to support themselves. That would be an ideal world. How do we support people to get decent jobs? What I am trying to hint at is that it is a more complex problem than just saying, "Everyone has a right to food". We need to address all these other issues as well.

Q16 Geraint Davies: It would be a driving force or a guiding light, would it not? If you accept that we all need the right to food to live, obviously, the Government should bear that in mind when they put together the package of opportunity that we have in our society. After all, we are in the developed world, as it is called.

Councillor Jamieson: What I am trying to say is that I would like the focus to be on preventing someone having that need for emergency support rather than really focusing on the emergency support. We absolutely need emergency support, but we should be trying to move, as far as we can, to reduce the need for it.

Fazilet Hadi: I totally agree that everyone should have the right to food, heat and a roof, but, if we have a benefits system that is not providing the people on it with that basic safety net, surely we have to look at that first. If it is not a safety net, we have to question what it really is. If people have that safety net, they are not going to be living in massive mansions but they have a roof, food, heating and light. They can afford to buy basic clothes et cetera.

Obviously, there are some other issues disabled people will face in accessing food. Sometimes the reasonable adjustments are not made by supermarkets and other retailers. I do not understand why that is when the energy sector and the banking sector—I made this point at the last evidence session—seem much more clued up on how to support disabled people to access a vital essential service. That is something we should look at. Then there is digital exclusion. To get some of the best bargains et cetera, people are now shopping around, not just for food but for other things. If you are digitally excluded, you are barred from that.

I like the idea of a right to food in the sense of galvanising people's concern, but I suspect the real fundamental solution is giving people decent income.

Q17 Geraint Davies: The right to food is the right, really, to have enough resources to buy the food alongside the necessities you have mentioned: heating, housing and, to a certain extent, digital engagement and support.

Emma Revie: I want to add to something James said about the importance of preventive work and the role of local authorities and local support structures within that. As I have said, I commend the increase in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

local assistance funding that has come, first the £63 million and then the £170 million that came through the Covid winter grant scheme.

We know from early research that, in most local authorities, that was used to fund free school meals, yet the Government have committed to and often mentioned local welfare assistance as being a critical part of providing local support. James has mentioned that as well, but one in seven local authorities do not have a local welfare assistance scheme. A critical part of supporting people going forward, supporting people not to have to arrive at a food bank and not to have to experience food insecurity, is about long-term investment in rebuilding local welfare assistance in those regions where it is not in existence.

We know that £250 million per annum would bring England in line with the other nations of the United Kingdom. To reinforce what James was saying, that investment is a really critical part of preventing increased food insecurity and starting to address the food insecurity we have.

Chair: Thank you for some good questions and good answers.

Q18 Robbie Moore: My question focuses on the role of local authorities throughout the pandemic. Fazilet, it is good to see you again. I remember when you were before this Committee last time, and you touched on some of these points. We have seen things change in the role local authorities have had throughout this process. During the first lockdown, clinically extremely vulnerable people were eligible to receive food parcels. We have also seen some of the challenges associated with the quality of the food parcels. Current Government guidance now highlights that local authorities can offer support to shielding people and people who have difficulty shopping because of a disability et cetera.

James, I would like to come to you first. How much support are local authorities providing to different vulnerable groups? How easy is it for people to access that support?

Councillor Jamieson: Of course, what I have just said about local authorities is that we provide local solutions for local issues, and they will be very different. I do not have really good data—I can certainly try to get some—about the exact levels across the country. It will vary depending on the need in the local area. It is a bespoke solution. We are also clearly using the voluntary and community sector across the country.

We have seen a very large number of shielded people. It was nearly 2 million in the first lockdown, with some 3 million food parcels. In the latest system there are far fewer food parcels, but we have managed to get people supermarket slots and so forth. It has been much more tailored and much more effective.

A standard food parcel does not necessarily include baby milk, because not everybody needs it. That is a classic example of where that local solution would be so much better. As I said, the issue for a large



HOUSE OF COMMONS

proportion of the population was accessing food, not paying for it, and similarly in getting your prescriptions and so forth. That is what local authorities have been able to do and will continue to be able to do.

We have also found throughout this pandemic, as things settled down, the call for emergency support—"I cannot get out; I cannot get any food"—declined as localised community systems were put in place. I am not talking about the food bank element, which is driven by financial hardship. I am just talking about where people could not access and they had the financial wherewithal to do it. That is where councils will deliver better, more effectively, cheaper and faster.

If I try to remember back to the original food parcels scheme, it took about three weeks before it actually ended up delivering on the doorstep. In the same way, I had so many residents phoning up and saying, "Okay, I am sorted now. How do I cancel this?" Food parcels were being delivered that were not needed. If you are going to spend money efficiently—I will constantly say this, and I say it to the Chancellor—the best way is to provide the resource to the local authorities, who will deliver a bespoke solution in their area more effectively and better than central Government. That applies just as much to food parcels as it does to many other areas.

Q19 Robbie Moore: Fazilet, would it be okay to come to you next to get your view?

Fazilet Hadi: Yes, I wanted to chip in. James, I agree with you that local government could have played a more central role earlier, but I suppose, looking at it from where we are now, there is no national communication about what you are entitled to. Whatever we say about the food parcel thing between April and July last year, if you were on the clinically extremely vulnerable list, you knew you had an entitlement to an online delivery slot. Charities knew that; they could tell people that; they could tell disabled and older people that; they could be clear about it. The minute it goes to local authority level, with all of you doing your own local thing, it is much harder to communicate. I would not know what to tell someone in Wigan, Norfolk or Bournemouth. It is all very different.

Communication becomes a problem. It is not clear to people what they are entitled to. There is also a bit of a sense of paternalism about it. "We will find the needy and give them help". Do not get me wrong: it is brilliant that local authorities are doing some great work, but the problem is that it is really hard to communicate what your right is and what the service is. We could not put something on our website for disabled people that was consistent and meaningful across England, and that is a problem.

Robbie Moore: Thank you for the honesty there.

Councillor Jamieson: I have to agree that clarity of messaging is really important, by clearly saying, "You have a right to a supermarket slot and



this is how you get it". There are some things. I do not want to pretend that everything can be done best at the local level.

Where we are talking about a standard package for every household across the country, that clearly would not be right. A single person does not need the same as a family and so forth. It is about getting that mix right. I agree with Fazilet. Comms is so important, and that is why data is so important, as well as sharing data across the public sector so everybody knows what is required, where it is required and what the information is.

In the first instance, when we were talking about the 2 million shielded, a number of councillors volunteered to knock on doors. When you talked to people or you put out a leaflet, you actually found that three people had already contacted them. Data sharing is really important as well.

Emma Revie: In terms of people not being able to access food, that is less the area that we work in. We worked very closely with local authorities across the UK to differentiate between people who were unable to afford food and people who were unable to access food. As the pandemic has progressed, the relationships between food banks and local authorities have been smoother. We have been triaging and referring between local authorities and food banks.

I might cheekily add some information about disabled people accessing food banks, if it would be helpful to provide that now. Our statistics in our new research show that 62% of working-age people referred to food banks are disabled. We have always had very high numbers of people coming to food banks who are living with disability. That is three times higher than the general population.

One issue we are finding around access to food for people who have a disability is that the extension of the universal credit uplift to legacy benefits was not applied from March. This is a group of people that the data shows have more difficulty accessing the workplace already, with many people on legacy benefits. There is a higher proportion of people with disabilities on legacy benefits, and yet they have not had the uplift that was applied to universal credit applied to them. We are seeing a higher number of people coming to food banks as a result of that. I thought now might be a helpful time to mention that.

Robbie Moore: Thank you for that. It is much appreciated.

Anna Taylor: We have seen the benefit of the response being designed locally around school meals. When we got to the point where schools were able to choose between vouchers, meal hampers and hot meals—there was a whole mixture of responses, and schools were able to design that with a mix of possible ways of doing it—it worked better for families.

To Fazilet's point about the need for that local action to be set within a clear national framework, that is where the task force, which I mentioned



HOUSE OF COMMONS

at the beginning, should be showing that leadership and setting out those parameters for the response so that, to deal with Fazilet's point, it is clear what everybody should be getting, and we have real clarity and ownership of the data.

Chair, you asked about monitoring earlier. We have not sorted this out sufficiently. It is great that the Agriculture Bill now has a requirement to report on food expenditure—that is how it is framed—but that is not sufficient yet. We measure food insecurity by asking about people's experiences of it. DWP is starting to do some of that; the FSA has done some of that. We need to get a grip on that data piece to understand what is happening to households with disability and different sections of the population, and make sure that we have the measures in place to protect them.

Q20 Mrs Murray: James, my local council was using food banks to distribute some of the hardship money the Government gave them. Do you know how many local councils did it this way and whether they could keep a grip on individual cases?

Councillor Jamieson: I am sorry; I cannot answer that question as to how many did it that way. This was a very welcome scheme—do not get me wrong—but there was not much lead-up time to it and we have instituted things very quickly. Different councils will have picked different solutions in order to do the best they can, so I cannot tell you. I will certainly ask the question again and see if there is any further data. If there is, I will forward it on.

Chair: Yes, supply it in writing, please.

Q21 Mrs Murray: That would be really useful. Where you have two-tier authorities, districts and counties, this could be the reason why we heard the statement that not all local authorities got funding to distribute.

Councillor Jamieson: You are right: funding was generally given to upper-tier authorities in this instance. People talk about two-tier local government. Do not forget the role of parish and town councils, who have done a very good job on this as well.

Mrs Murray: Yes, I do not want to show any disrespect to town and parish councils, which I agree do an important job. It was the fact that we heard that some councils did not have any funds. Clearly, that is the reason, because some cover the same area. That is the point I was trying to get out.

Rosie Duffield: Apologies, but my dog has just jumped up on the sofa next to me unexpectedly.

Chair: That is all right. We do a lot on animal welfare, so your dog is most welcome. Carry on, Rosie.

Q22 Rosie Duffield: This is mostly aimed at Anna and James. We have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

covered an awful lot of this, but Anna was talking about specific asks so I wondered if she could perhaps put that into her answer. Broadly speaking, what is the best way to ensure that children eligible for benefits-related free school meals are supported during holidays and school closures like now? I wondered if you could get a few bullet points in there with your biggest asks.

Anna Taylor: The holiday activities fund, which the Government have committed to from the Easter holidays onwards, is a really fantastic model. The pilot has done a really good job in bringing together food provision with a set of activities that make holidays more enjoyable for kids and give them a lot of fun stuff to be getting on with. That is where we want to be.

Now, when schools are closed, we have the right package of things in place. As I said earlier, there is the ability to choose between vouchers and food parcels. Indeed, some children are still being fed in school. The challenge we have is that there are too many children falling outside of eligibility at the moment, because their income does not quite fall below the £7,400 threshold. That is something we have to deal with pretty urgently in my view, because there are too many children in poverty who are just not eligible for free school meals.

Councillor Jamieson: It is a great opportunity for me to put my list of requests down. I would agree with Anna that the holiday activities fund is very important, particularly for another reason: because a lot of the most vulnerable children have missed significant schooling and will be the most disadvantaged by it. Anything that extends the school year, in effect, to some extent is really important for that group, as well as the food element to it.

We mentioned universal credit. The £20 has been very beneficial. Where I might slightly disagree with Anna is that I would err more on increasing universal credit rather than using the money for free school meals, given the choice about where the funding goes. It is really important that we look again at local welfare funding. There has been mention of £250 million. It was stopped in 2015 at £218 million. If you index that with inflation, it ends up somewhat closer to £300 million than £250 million. That is really important. It would allow us to do those longer-term programmes that are well planned and really important.

I cannot overemphasise the issue of data: sharing data, co-designing data and having the right protocols in there. This is not an issue of money; this is just about ensuring that we have good-quality data and that no one gets missed. We have talked a lot about children, but Fazilet has rightly talked a lot about the vulnerable and those with disabilities. Having the right data in the right place allows us to get the right packages, the right support or the right access for everybody.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

My four requests are those. I like the HAF scheme; we need to keep the £20 for universal credit; we need local welfare funding; and there should be a principle about sharing data.

Q23 Rosie Duffield: There was a second part to the question, which James has covered quite a lot. I just wondered if you wanted to drill down on what you think could happen after the Covid winter grant scheme ends in March to support those most vulnerable families. James, you mentioned a preventive agenda. Do you want to expand on that a little?

Councillor Jamieson: We have to recognise that the winter grant scheme was partially for food in schools during the holidays. In effect, that has been taken over to some extent by the HAF. We are not going to see the same model. Local welfare funding would allow us, first, to provide direct support and, secondly, to do more work with families to address the issues and help them, whether it is to help them get into employment or to address their financial issues.

When you talk to families, a number of them are in tough times financially. There are other impacts, such as financial management. Have they taken out payday loans or the equivalent thereof? Why do they have high housing costs? Are they accessing the right benefits? There is a whole raft of things. That local welfare funding allows you to address that. Sometimes it allows you to give that starter bit of money to address the fact that maybe their fridge has broken down or they need their car to get to work but their car has broken down. It is a much more complex situation, and that is why really flexible local welfare funding is a really good way of addressing this. It helps to stop these people getting into a downward spiral.

One of the issues I see is the lack of resilience in some families who are just coping, if something goes wrong: a car breaks down; they have a leak in their house; their neighbour cannot help with childminding. One thing can just end up in a spiral and go completely the wrong way. Having some intervention that can prevent that is really important.

Rosie Duffield: As someone who has been on benefits, it is really nice to hear that, because it is a total understanding of what the situation actually is when you are in that situation. It can just take one thing to make everything spiral out of control. It is really refreshing to hear someone on the panel totally understanding that. Thank you very much.

Q24 Barry Gardiner: I wholeheartedly support what Rosie has just said. James, I do not know whether it is you as a Tory or me as a Labour politician, but to find us in such agreement is a damn good thing. I do not know which one of us is going soft, but there we are.

Anna, Compass, which owns Chartwells, recently apologised for the appalling quality of that £15 food parcel. Should it continue to benefit from the contract? Should it be able to continue to bid for Government contracts? As a general question, would it be better if everyone was part of a voucher scheme with the flexibility that was recommended by this



Committee last year to shop wherever was most convenient locally?

Anna Taylor: With respect to Chartwells, the images of food parcels were really shocking. Thankfully, we have seen a lot of great images of food parcels that have been going out, so we must not taint everybody with the same brush, but recognise that there has been a lot of great work going on as well. It certainly makes sense to monitor the situation with Chartwells very carefully. These contracts were set up at multiple levels in local authorities or by schools individually, so it is difficult to make a blanket rule in these situations. Those judgments have to be made contract by contract.

To your bigger point about vouchers, there are merits in keeping a degree of flexibility. Some families have really appreciated it when caterers have gone the extra mile and come up with food parcels and support for those households, where not just the child but other people in the family can benefit. There has been an opportunity for teachers to keep in touch with those households, which has brought other co-benefits.

It has also sometimes allowed support to local suppliers, which you do not necessarily get with a supermarket voucher. There are some benefits to a mixed-model approach, but I fully appreciate that for many people a voucher is simply the easiest thing. They are doing a shop for their household. They know what they need and they need the resources to be able to put food on the table. That is a very simple solution for many households, which many have opted for. My instinct is to try to maintain a hybrid approach, making sure that it is led by families and that they can opt for the things that work best for them.

Q25 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, so give the flexibility to the family to choose which model they want. Both Anna and James spoke of affordability being a key issue. James, you said earlier that this is about money; I entirely agree. If we are looking at this holistically—as you rightly pointed out, it is not just an issue of food poverty but of poverty in general—should we not be looking at why it is that a third of the people on universal credit are in work? We should not just be saying, “We will raise universal credit”; we should be asking, “Why is it that people who are in work are not being paid enough by their employers to be able to afford to live properly?”

Does this not have a much wider ambit around minimum wage levels and living wage levels, with businesses, industry and employers recognising that they are part of the solution and not leaving it to either the welfare sector of the state or charity? I have to say that some of the most wonderful provision in my own constituency in Brent North is from local community groups, religious groups and non-religious groups coming together to prepare literally thousands of food parcels. We have had queues along Ealing Road that have gone on for about three-quarters of a mile in the past couple of weeks. Your heart bleeds.

If we think of it simply as welfare, as charity, we have got this absolutely



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wrong. We have to broaden it out and talk to employers about the levels of wages that are being provided.

Chair: James, do you want to answer? It is quite a political point that Barry is making. It is a good one, but it is very political.

Councillor Jamieson: Bear in mind that I am a Conservative but, actually, I am supposed to be politically neutral as the chair of the Local Government Association. I would go back to your other point about why we both agree across the spectrum. Most people I know who are elected are elected because they care about residents and people. We may have different views on what the best solution is, but fundamentally we care.

Going to your point on universal credit, there is not a perfect credit system that can cover every possible facet, just like every job will not enable every person to earn enough. If you look at housing costs, I personally had an issue with housing benefit because it was a very cliff-edge benefit and it reduced the incentive or opportunity to work. We need to recognise that universal credit was designed to enable people who were on benefits to take up work. That is admirable, whereas I found housing benefit, for instance, a barrier to some people having work.

It is quite clear that someone who is living in central London and is not fortunate enough to have social housing will be paying very high rent on their property. Is it possible for somebody with a large family to earn enough in an unskilled job? I would question that. There are going to be many situations where somebody may need support in order to have enough income for their family. I would far rather have a benefits system that helps that.

You are absolutely right that this is a bigger issue. Yes, we would like everybody to earn more money; we would like to upskill more people; we would like to have better paid jobs. I would not criticise the universal credit system, because there are people working who are still receiving benefits. In some respects, enabling people on benefits to access work is really important.

This is the point I was trying to make. When we talk about free school meals and food poverty, we need to look at the broader aspects around universal credit. For the same amount of money, increasing universal credit is probably a better solution than extending free school meals.

Q26 **Mrs Murray:** Emma, I have a question for you, because it is in relation to food banks. What impact are the current lockdown and the new coronavirus variants having on food banks? Could you address my second question at the same time? In my constituency, I have seen a massive amount of voluntary organisations providing food in community halls, providing parcels and providing Christmas hampers. Has that had a positive impact on the food bank inasmuch as you saw use reduced in certain circumstances as well?



Emma Revie: It has been a challenging year for our food banks, which have done an extraordinary job at adapting. We have been supporting them as new guidance and regulations have come out to allow them to provide food safely.

In the first lockdown, it required many to shut down and move to delivery models. At the first opportunity in the summer, many of our food banks opened up again because that face-to-face contact is so essential for supporting people. Our preference is to be in that situation. As we came to the end of the year, we have tended to go more for a hybrid model. In some instances, food banks can keep their centres open and keep face-to-face going for advice services particularly, but they are also complementing that with delivery services.

At the start of the pandemic, over 100,000 people stepped forward to offer to volunteer in food banks, which was extraordinary. We have seen the general public step forward in incredible ways, not just in terms of volunteering but donating food. Despite a 47% increase in demand this year, our food supplies have been able to keep pace as we have come through the summer and into the end of the year, which is extraordinary. It is not sustainable long term, and nor should it be, but during this period we have felt very supported by the general public in particular, which has been incredible.

We have also seen extraordinary numbers of people saying, “Not on my watch will people go hungry. Let me see what I can do off my doorstep or from my community hall”. That is really laudable, and it speaks to what we are seeing more generally in public attitude surveys et cetera: a shift in people’s recognition that there is a real issue of severe food insecurity and we should not let anyone go without food. More and more people are asking, “How do we move to a situation where we do not have food aid but a system where people are not required to depend on emergency food aid?”

I struggle to imagine what the last year would have been like had other food provision not stepped forward. It is not a sustainable model to see this level of increase continuing and to hope the voluntary sector will be able to catch everyone. We will not have caught everyone; people will have slipped through the net. It has definitely been a help during this period.

Mrs Murray: It might interest you, Emma, to know—I am only speaking for myself—that we issue vouchers. We have been sending emails from my office. The call has reduced considerably during the lockdown period. That is why I asked you the question, really. Perhaps that need has been taken up by other people, although, as you say, it is on an ad hoc basis and it may not continue.

Q27 Dr Hudson: Thank you to our witnesses for today. It has been really helpful. This is really a question to you, Fazilet, please. You answered this to a degree with my colleague Ian. Our report in July made



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recommendations on adjustments for folk accessing food, in that the Government should consult retailers and charities. You have kind of answered this before, but it is a chance to emphasise it on record. Do you feel that Government and retailers have done enough to make reasonable adjustments so disabled folk can access food at this time?

Fazilet Hadi: No, I do not. As a preamble to that, I have been quite shocked at the statistics that Anna and Emma have provided on disabled people's food insecurity, the high usage of food banks and disabled people being much more at risk of not having the food they need. I would link that to the fact that 2.2 million disabled people have not had the £20 uplift because they have been on employment and support allowance and other benefits.

Coming to your accessibility point, 25 years after the Disability Discrimination Act, the Equality and Human Rights Commission would not have produced something last September if they had thought retailers were properly taking into account their legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments for disabled customers. As we have seen play out through the winter months, the big issues, as I said, have been online delivery charges and minimum basket spend. You could be clinically extremely vulnerable, told to stay at home and having to pay up to £7 in delivery charges for getting a supermarket delivery.

The Government rightly exempted countless disabled people—I praise the Government for this—from having to wear face coverings, where wearing one was not possible for a disability-related reason, such as a learning disability, a breathing disability or a mental health condition. We have seen some major retailers turn staff and customers away without face coverings, totally breaching the Equalities Act and the regulations. They are just left to take individual cases.

I come back to my point that, while we have regulation in the energy industry and the banking industry, we do not seem to have the same regulation around food retailers, yet they are providing an essential service. They would say they are providing reasonable adjustments, but the evidence from disabled customers and older people with disabilities is that they are being treated quite shockingly by some retailers.

Dr Hudson: Thank you for putting that on record for us.

Chair: Can I thank the members for their questions and the panel for some really excellent answers? It has given us a great deal to put in our report and some food for thought as to questions to ask the minister. You have all debated the whole thing very well. James, you have been put through some highly political questions this afternoon. Thank you very much for fielding those. I also thank Emma, Fazilet and Anna for really bringing us down to earth on what is happening out there. We have had an interesting panel today, and your evidence has been excellent.

I will thank you all. If you have anything else you want to add, send it to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

us in writing, please. We appreciate the extra time you have stayed with us, because you have been a very good panel.