

# Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Covid-19 and Food Supply, HC 263

Friday 15 May 2020

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Dave Doogan; Rosie Duffield; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Derek Thomas.

Questions 50 to 94

### Witnesses

**I:** Lindsay Boswell, Chief Executive Officer, FareShare; and Emma Revie, Chief Executive, Trussell Trust.

**II:** Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK; and Fazilet Hadi, Policy Manager, Disability Rights UK.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [FareShare](#)
- [Disability Rights UK](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lindsay Boswell and Emma Revie.

Q50 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to the Select Committee meeting this morning. We are looking into food and the availability of food to those who are poorest and hardest to get food to in the country.

I very much welcome our first two witnesses, Emma and Lindsay. Would you please introduce yourselves, Emma and then Lindsay? Then we will start the evidence session straight away. Welcome also to all members of the Committee this morning. Over to you, Emma.

**Emma Revie:** Good morning and thank you very much for having me here today. I am the chief executive of the Trussell Trust. We support a network of over 1,250 food bank centres across all four nations of the United Kingdom.

**Lindsay Boswell:** My name is Lindsay Boswell, and I am the chief executive of FareShare, the national food redistribution charity.

Q51 **Chair:** Thank you both very much. First of all, can you can tell us briefly about the level of food bank usage before the pandemic and the impact the pandemic has had on usage? So can you just outline where we are in terms of the amounts that are going out. Who would like to start? Ladies first, shall we? Emma, would you like to have a go?

**Emma Revie:** Yes, sure. So, just to give a little bit of context, over the last five years food banks in the Trussell Trust network have seen a 73% increase in demand for emergency food supplies. Last year, we distributed 1.6 million three-day parcels, which constituted a 19% increase on the previous year.

In terms of who we have been distributing food to historically, we commissioned a piece of research with Herriot-Watt University into the state of hunger in the UK, and what they determined was that 94% of people who had come to a food bank had household income of £50 a week after rent at the point that they were at the food bank. So, we are very clear that the primary reason for people coming to food banks was an insufficiency of income to cover the cost of essentials. Within that, we know that, for 83% of people, their sole source of income was benefits—so, these were people who were on benefits but finding they had an insufficiency of income and therefore turning to a food bank.

As for the impact of the pandemic, it was instantaneous and profound. We analysed our data for the last two weeks of March, compared to the same period of time last year, and we identified that there was an 81% increase in demand and, quite alarmingly, a 122% increase in the number of children receiving food through our food banks. What this told us is that the number of families with children who were coming to us had doubled from its normal level, so we were definitely seeing a disproportionately high number of children.



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Again, the primary reason why people were coming was that there was an insufficiency of income to cover essentials, one of those essentials being food. Obviously, that is only one item that people were not able to access; across the board, they did not have enough money for the full range of essentials.

Q52 **Chair:** Do you think that, perhaps, the number of children increased partly because many of them were naturally not going to school and so were not getting their meals at school? Would that be the case?

**Emma Revie:** That is definitely part of the issue. Historically, we would see spikes during school holidays in food bank demand—so over the Easter holidays, summer holidays and Christmas holidays. However, we would not see this level of spike in demand. So, definitely, that issue has compounded the situation, but I think we are seeing families being more affected, and new groups of people—families with children—who have been immediately affected.

One thing to point out is that that was in the last two weeks of March, so, instantaneously, we saw people falling straight through to the point where they needed to come to food banks. The lack of a buffer to support people during that time was very stark. We saw a 12% increase in the first two weeks of March, compared with the same period in the previous year, and an 81% increase in the last two weeks of March, so people instantly were finding themselves facing the kind of destitution that drives people to food banks.

Q53 **Chair:** I will ask you the supplementary question as well, Emma, and then I'll bring Lindsay in. Can food banks meet the increase in demand, and have you been meeting it?

**Emma Revie:** I would love to pay tribute to the incredible work of food banks across the United Kingdom, both Trussell Trust food banks and independent food banks, which have seen a comparable increase in demand. I have been astounded at their ability to weather a number of obstacles.

Obviously, first and foremost, an increase in demand on that level—an unprecedented level—is hard to respond to in normal circumstances, but we have also had issues with a high percentage of our volunteers and project managers in food banks being of retirement age and therefore themselves potentially having to shield and being unable to come into food banks, yet our food banks have kept going, have remained open. We have seen a tremendous level of support from the general public—people stepping forward to volunteer and to support, both financially and in terms of food donations, efforts to meet the increased demand we have seen in our services.

We have also had to change our model. Over half our food banks now deliver food to people's homes, where, previously, people would have been welcomed into a food bank, had a cup of tea and been provided with food, so food banks have had to adapt their operational models. Those who have kept the centres open to have people coming in have had to do

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that in a socially distanced way, to keep volunteers and members of the public who are coming in safe. They have overcome, largely, those operational challenges with tremendous support from the general public and also from corporate partners. Supermarkets and British Gas have been supporting us in unprecedented ways to get food to people who are in crisis.

It would be false for me to say that we can continue indefinitely to meet an unspecified level of increased demand. We are focusing then on the wrong problem. The problem is people falling into financial hardship. The answer to financial hardship is not food. We are treating one symptom of an underlying problem. Although we are used to stepping in and trying to provide crisis support, in these circumstances all our food banks and the independent food banks that we work closely with would be of one mind in thinking that the issue we must focus on is reducing the flow of people into food banks, rather than increasing the level of support we are able to provide within those food banks.

Q54 **Chair:** Thank you very much: that outlines the situation very well. We pay tribute to all those who are running food banks and to the public for stepping up to both help and contribute. All of us and, indeed, all MPs, from all parties, would be very supportive of what everybody is doing, so we thank everybody for that. I will bring Lindsay in now, and then we will move on to the next **question**.

**Lindsay Boswell:** I completely and utterly support and agree with all that Emma just said, but particularly the last point. In FareShare's perspective and context, we exist because there are large volumes of surplus food that otherwise would go to waste within the United Kingdom. Where there is an opportunity to deliver social value and social capital out of that food by getting it to frontline charities and community groups, that is our core mission, although we, like the food banks, have had to adapt our service.

Quite often, parliamentarians will use the phrase "food bank" to mean any charity that is handling or redistributing food. I would like to make the point that the 11,000 frontline charities and community groups that FareShare supports include, pre the pandemic, many, many organisations that provide services that are much broader than that, including on such things as domestic violence, homelessness, mental health, breakfast clubs and so on.

Specifically around your question, we have seen a big drop in the number of organisations, because the services that they were providing are not relevant in a lockdown scenario. An elderly lunch club, for example, is not appropriate in these times. However, we have seen a dramatic increase—in excess of 1,200—in the number of additional organisations that have adapted their services because of the demands that they are finding in their local communities. We have seen a net increase from 11,000 to 12,200 organisations that we are currently supplying and supporting.

**Chair:** We will deal with quite a lot of that in question 3 as well, so thank you very much for that. It is good to have you both here and to take this

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evidence this morning to see what is happening on the ground, so we appreciate that. Our second question comes from Sheryll Murray. Over to you Sheryll, down in Cornwall.

**Q55 Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much, Neil. I am Sheryll Murray, MP for South East Cornwall. My question is specifically to Emma, but, Lindsay, if you have something that you want to come in with, please feel free to do so.

First of all, David at the Liskeard food bank is absolutely phenomenal. He has always worked very closely with my office and gone above and beyond, so I do want to recognise that. We had a bit of a problem at the beginning of the epidemic with the issue of school closures and food vouchers for pupils on free school meals. Once that system got better, did you notice any difference in the use of food banks? As the system of vouchers improved, was there a reduction in the number of children using the food banks?

**Emma Revie:** Thank you very much for the question. We will be releasing, in the first week of June, our April data, which will definitely allow us to give more context to that question. Anecdotally, from our food banks, we are not hearing of a drop-off in demand, but as your question relates to the constitution of who is coming, we will know that more clearly at the beginning of June.

I have spoken to a number of our food banks, and two of them have information that is pertinent to this. One of our food banks is reporting an ongoing increase of 50% of additional parcels being provided to families with children. They are directly providing food parcels to their local school, because the school is reporting that between 20% and 40% of their pupils have been unable to access food vouchers through their—*[Inaudible]*—portal. Another food bank articulated those same problems.

I absolutely recognise that when you are setting up a system of this scale and size as quickly as has had to be done, there will be issues. I would very much hope that those issues are resolving and getting better. I think the reality is that, similar to the increase in numbers coming to food banks that we saw straight away when the crisis hit, when the systems do not work, families with children are without food. The increased pressure—the income shock—that that has meant for the household income budget, where, potentially, children who have received food through breakfast clubs and free school meals are at home and requiring food, is such that families are falling through our safety nets and arriving at food banks.

I will certainly be able to provide information to the Committee at the beginning of June that will be able to track the increase in families with children, compared with the previous month, which will give more granularity to that question.

**Q56 Mrs Murray:** The other thing that you mentioned when you responded to the Chairman was the provision of deliveries to people who were shielding—those in the very high-risk group. Clearly, the list grew as that system progressed.



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Did you see any change in the amount of deliveries that you had to make to these households as that system bedded in and as a lot of people who were perhaps not on the original list suddenly were on the list? Did you work with local authorities? I know some local authorities were given extra food to fill the gap for those that were not included in the national roll-out. Did you work with local authorities to ensure that their supply of food or parcels got delivered to the people who perhaps did not receive them from the national scheme originally?

**Emma Revie:** Again, that is an incredibly helpful question because it allows me to clarify some of the differences between vulnerable groups and how we interact with them.

The Trussell Trust model is based on referral. Statutory and non-statutory frontline organisations work with people who refer into our process. During this crisis we have rolled out an e-referral process to enable people to still be referred in. We have also established a national helpline with Citizens Advice. If people's local referral organisations are closed, they can contact that number, and, again, be referred in. People who are referred to food banks have been identified as being financially unable to afford food, so it is not necessarily about access.

Where people who are self-shielding and are in the medically vulnerable group, or who are self-isolating because they are unwell, have been unable to get out to a supermarket and access food, the local authorities and local food resilience forums have been working to support those groups of people. We have remained focused on the group of people that we have historically supported: the people who are unable to afford food.

The deliveries to people's homes were less about particularly targeting the shielded group or the people who were self-isolating, but about preventing people from having to leave their homes to potentially use public transport to access a food bank centre, and about taking away that additional potential danger to them by delivering food to people's houses.

So the impact of food parcels getting to the medically shielded and to the people with access issues has less of an impact on the numbers of people coming to food banks, because the numbers of people coming to food banks are based on those who are unable to afford access to food.

Q57 **Mrs Murray:** Finally, did you do anything about relaxing the rule whereby a specific family or person can only receive a number—I think it is three—in one year? Did you relax the rules at all to ensure that they have a supply?

**Emma Revie:** Again, these are fantastic questions and really helpful in allowing me to explain a little bit more about our models.

What we have in place is a guideline that is not for those people coming to food banks, but is for the people referring to food banks, which says to our referral partners, "If somebody has been referred more than three times in a six-month period, our question to you as the frontline agency supporting those people is: what are you doing to tackle the underlying

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issue that is leaving somebody without enough money to be able to afford essentials?"

At that point, a conversation will take place between the food bank and the referral agency about what additional support can be put in for that person, rather than saying, "If somebody is without the means to afford food, it is not about their access to, or exclusion from, being able to receive a food parcel; it is about tackling the underlying issues."

One thing that has become clear during the crisis is that if somebody is unable to work and is on benefits and in receipt of their full entitlement but is still not able to cover the essentials, then there are very limited alternatives and other avenues to explore on behalf of those families and people affected to see their income increase.

In those situations, absolutely, our focus will be on meeting that critical need for food, but also on continuing as much as possible to work with our referral partners around signposting additional support. We are engaging with Government centrally on local welfare assistance in this situation because we recognise that we are moving from an acute phase into a potential new normal over a period of time, with people not being able to get back to work necessarily or having to stay on benefits for a longer period of time.

So what additional support can be put in place to ensure that people are caught and do not find themselves becoming dependent on emergency food? We have written to the Chancellor and to Secretaries of State together with a number of other anti-poverty charities and the Independent Food Aid Network to request a temporary coronavirus income support scheme that identifies those groups of people, with a particular focus on families with children, for whom there is just not quite enough money that keeps them away from having to access the services of food banks.

Looking at local welfare assistance, hardship funds and other work that we can do together, alongside the Government, to identify key temporary interventions that can be put in place to stop people coming to food banks and to reduce that flow of people in, rather than expanding the amount of food supply to catch people, is really our focus.

Q58 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much, Chairman. Thank you very much, Emma. I do not know whether Lindsay wants to come in and add anything to that. I think one of my colleagues on the Committee wants to ask a supplementary.

**Chair:** Lindsay, would you like to say something?

**Lindsay Boswell:** I just wanted to pick up on the question around the relationship with local authorities. One of the many big changes in the way that we have had to work is that every single one of our 24 regional operations has been working incredibly closely with their local authorities and has been overwhelmed by the demand from those local authorities for

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additional food to be able to supplement, particularly in the early days, the clinically vulnerable parcels, as that system bedded in.

We have seen a 134% increase in the volume of food that has been flowing through our system. Quite large volumes of that have been going to those local authorities, partly for the clinically vulnerable in the early stages, but also because those local authorities, being closer to the ground, have been able to identify the next tranche of individuals who they have not perhaps understood why they were not part of that scheme as well.

**Chair:** Can I say to Emma that, at the end of this meeting, when we are in private, or in the next meeting, we will take evidence on what you talk about going to the Chancellor for a support scheme for food? We will see if the Select Committee can also support that. I cannot make the decision as Chair. It will be very much for the whole Committee to make that decision, but I will put it to them.

Ian, I think you would now like to have a supplementary, so over to you in Liverpool.

Q59 **Ian Byrne:** Nice to meet you, Emma and Lindsay. Thanks very much for all the work you are doing in Liverpool. Certainly, from a north Liverpool food bank perspective, it has been invaluable. As a local MP who has used the e-voucher scheme, it has been fantastic for my constituents to have that ability, so thanks very much for all the work that your organisations are doing.

I would like to revisit the free school meal issue, if I may. As someone who is a school governor and still a councillor in one of the most economically deprived areas of the country, I find some of the figures coming through about food bank usage by children and about the half a million children who have not actually accessed the voucher system, due to various issues, absolutely terrifying.

I would like to talk about the actual voucher system and the company, Edenred, that has been asked to allocate the vouchers. We have had numerous reports about meltdowns from schools who have not been able to tap into the system and from parents who are saying the same. We have had heads reporting that the system is in total meltdown. Obviously, this must have contributed to usage—children and families having to access food banks—over the period we are talking about. Would the money the Government allocated to this company have been better spent on a community-led approach to distributing the vouchers more effectively, so more children and families are able to access them?

**Lindsay Boswell:** Ian, we are two steps removed from that voucher scheme. What I do know is that we currently have more than 2,000 schools on our books who are supplementing that project and that work by using either parents, volunteers or, in many cases, teachers to deliver food parcels, but in terms of the effectiveness of that particular business and the mechanics of the scheme, I am afraid that that is above my pay grade.

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Q60 **Chair:** Emma, do you want to have a shot at this one?

**Emma Revie:** Similarly, we do operate within the voucher scheme, so we can only identify the surge in demand that we have seen in our food banks. I would say, however, that in a similar way to the fact that a food bank is not actually an appropriate response to people being in financial hardship, there are issues with food vouchers being the best response to families experiencing an income shock.

In an ideal world, families would receive cash in order for them to determine what is in the best interests of their families. As a mum who has had two children unwell during the virus, I know that that access to Calpol and access to the food that they wanted to eat when they had a temperature was really important.

Families are the best judges of what their families need and of what their children will eat, so I would always advocate a "cash first" approach. If we are to tackle financial hardship and are identifying families who are experiencing financial hardship, the more straightforward and most dignified response to that is to provide them with the cash. That would always be my preferred option.

There is definitely an issue at the moment. Food distribution, particularly in the initial few weeks of this crisis, was very difficult. When children were no longer coming to schools and no longer able to access free school meals, putting in place a voucher for supermarkets was always going to be problematic, because we knew ourselves that the supply of certain food types in supermarkets was hard to get hold of. I know, as a parent, that I had to be quite innovative as to where I went and what I bought. These are potentially some of the things for us to reflect on as we come through the crisis—if we are recognising financial hardship, what is the best first response in that situation?

**Chair:** Thank you very much, and thank you, Ian and Sheryll, for the questions.

We now move to Scotland for the next question, from Dave Doogan in Angus.

Q61 **Dave Doogan:** Thank you very much, Chair. Good morning to you both, Emma and Lindsay; I am very grateful for your evidence this morning.

Lindsay, how have you reacted to the fall in availability of surplus food and the disruptions to the broader supply chain, not only to maintain your service but to ramp it up?

**Lindsay Boswell:** Our experience has been game of two halves. Initially, with the dramatic increase in consumer demand and the clearing of the shelves and stockpiling that went on, our supply chain was cut off at the knees. Although they reacted incredibly quickly, the supermarkets had to divert all their attention and focus into just trying to find whatever supply they could. We have about 7,500 charities that collect food from the back of supermarket stores on a daily basis, as well as the other 5,500 that are supplied through a wholesale model. We saw a dramatic drop.

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~~(However), as soon as the food service and food hospitality sector was closed down, we saw an immediate surge in very large volumes of high-quality fresh produce that was imminently destined to go from the distribution centres to those pubs, restaurants, schools and other outlets, and that has been the predominant driver in us seeing, between March and April, a 100% increase in the volume of food that we have handled. So, although there has been incredibly bad news for that sector, we have managed to divert a lot of that food and make a massive difference in those frontline organisations.~~

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Q62 **Dave Doogan:** Thank you. That is an interesting juxtaposition of the fortunes that have come into play. That is helpful, but let us go over and above that. I ask this next question in the context that it would clearly be better if we were in a situation where your services were not required, but in so far as they are, how do we ensure an ongoing service without future interventions from either retailers or the Government—sorry, Governments, plural, because I know you work right across the United Kingdom?

**Lindsay Boswell:** Yes, and we currently benefit both in Scotland and from the Welsh Government and now the Westminster Government in terms of a short-term intervention, which is the purchasing of food. That is an area that we normally have not touched and would not want to get into, because there is 2.25 million tonnes of good-quality food in the British food system that is fit for human consumption and goes to waste.

We have just completed with DEFRA a £1.9 million trial, which concluded on 31 March, on neutralising the cost for British farmers and growers to redistribute surplus food. That trial is now being evaluated within DEFRA. From our perspective, it has been a howling success. We have seen an 85% increase in the amount of fresh produce—fruit and vegetables—that we are able to get to frontline community groups.

However, that trial has now ended. It would cost a relatively small amount of money—less than £5 million a year—to double the volume of food that we are able to redistribute. That would still be only 1%—20,000 tonnes—of the WRAP-published figure for the amount of food that is wasted at the farm gate. There is a very simple, elegant and environmentally friendly solution that could be put in place to divert dramatic increases in surplus food, ironically at a time when we are going into what farmers and growers tell me is a once-in-a-lifetime perfect growing season for the British produce sector.

Q63 **Chair:** Is this food coming directly from the farms? How is it getting to you?

**Lindsay Boswell:** Correct: it is coming directly from farmers. If a farmer has a crop that they cannot find an economic outlet for—that should be the priority; they should always try to sell their produce, but, for a range of different reasons, there may be a surplus—at the moment they have a range of disposal options, the most expensive of which is to feed people in need.



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This fund has only been used to neutralise the difference between getting it to us and other forms of disposal. It is not creating perverse incentives for over-production and therefore greater surpluses. It covers things like harvesting, packaging and transport. Those are the three main areas and components.

**Chair:** Good. We will take that up with the DEFRA Secretary.

Q64 **Dave Doogan:** Let me get back to your experience right across the various countries in the United Kingdom. This question is equally for Emma, if she has something to contribute too. Not sticking with the issue of finance and financial support, but referencing that if it is important, how do you try to read across what is happening and working really well—just as you set out there, Lindsay, with the farmgate issues—to ensure that all areas of the United Kingdom are benefiting from best practice?

**Lindsay Boswell:** One of the advantages that we have, as you pointed out, is being a UK-wide organisation. We are incredibly local, but we are also national across the four nations. I have a team that specifically is charged with taking best practice and sharing and exchanging that, so on my side that works incredibly effectively and efficiently.

I think it is fair to say that we could always do with more joined-up government, specifically within the Westminster Administration. I am, perhaps, talking about what I do not necessarily understand, but I do not really understand why it is a DEFRA responsibility to take the lead on feeding the vulnerable as opposed to, say, a Cabinet Office responsibility.

Things like the frustrations that my colleagues in the rest of the voluntary sector feel around the arguments on the financial side, as well as the other practical interventions, could be articulated and solved in a more joined-up way—those strands could be drawn together—so that the points that Emma made could be listened to, as well as other programmes and interventions. I have no visibility, knowledge or experience of the degree of communication and knowledge sharing between the various devolved Administrations, but we work very closely with each of them.

**Chair:** Anything more, Dave?

Q65 **Dave Doogan:** Just if Emma has anything to add on that last point.

**Emma Revie:** Particularly on the reducing of flow, and picking up on some of the information that Lindsay gave, it is important to delineate the different problems, and to be able—I will quote Lindsay Boswell here—to squeeze the social good out of every piece of food that we have. That is what FareShare specialises in: identifying where there is surplus food and ensuring that the best social good is squeezed from it. That is really important, from an environmental point of view and from a whole-system perspective. We have to recognise that that fits there but, alongside that, we need to identify how we solve the issues around financial hardship.

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Again, from a departmental point of view, I have greatly appreciated the engagement of DEFRA with us as an organisation. The constant contact throughout this crisis has been very much appreciated.

Similarly, we very much welcome the Government's announcements on the job retention scheme and the self-employed income support scheme. That scale of intervention has most definitively held some people—many, many people—from falling into financial hardship. We now need to identify the difference between groups of people, where access to food and good use of food would be helpful, and those people who at the moment are not caught by those job retention and income support schemes and for whom food cannot be the answer to those issues.

Your first question was, I think: how do we learn from this and see a reduction going forward? That reduction will definitely be about working together, cross-departmentally and with organisations like the Trussell Trust and other anti-poverty charities, to identify where those gaps still exist and where the incredible schemes that have been put in place are not quite catching everybody. Then, the issues of demand meeting supply no longer apply in that situation, because we have reduced demand. That has to be our focus.

My constant concern is the inadequacy of food to respond to the needs of the people who are being referred to food banks. It is only one part of the problem.

**Chair:** Geraint from Wales has a supplementary, and then Neil Hudson wants to ask one as well. Could you keep them fairly short, please?

Q66 **Geraint Davies:** It would be helpful if Lindsay and Emma could provide an extra note on this, in particular on the pilot scheme going on. My point is that it is the case that we could be in this for some time and, as we relax measures, there might be a double peak, so we need a sustainable system.

The retailers do not seem to have a financial interest in distribution directly from the farm gate to communities in poverty. Will our witnesses comment on that, and on what sort of sustainable situation they would want to put forward? Is that more advanced in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland or England, as far as they know?

**Lindsay Boswell:** The pilot that we ran was a huge success. Back to Mr Doogan's point, it was an England-only pilot so, frustratingly, we were not allowed to send any of that fresh produce north of the border—nor indeed west of the border. The vast majority of those growers and suppliers were identified for us by the retailers, which facilitated those relationships being created incredibly quickly.

Mr Davies, you are absolutely right, in that this is not the retailers' core area of interest and business. However, thanks to the environmental pressure that this maintains, all the retailers have a very clear focus on being able to manage and record not just their own food waste but that created further back in the supply chain. I think the retailers do take

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responsibility for what happens further back with the organisations with which they work. However, the fact still is that 2 million tonnes of food is wasted, and just 20,000 tonnes of that enables us to provide a million meals every single week.

Q67 **Geraint Davies:** Can you put some recommendations to us? That would be very helpful.

**Lindsay Boswell:** Absolutely.

Q68 **Chair:** I agree, Geraint; that's a very good idea. Emma, do you want to comment?

**Emma Revie:** I want to pay credit, actually, to the retailers who have stood alongside us during this time in a way that has put community before profit. They have stepped forward and stepped in, and without the support of those major retailers the last eight weeks would have been almost impossible for our food banks to meet demand. But I think the point is well made that that is unsustainable and it is not necessarily in the best interests of those retailers, longer term, to continue to provide food for free to food banks to distribute.

I think what is helpful in this conversation is to identify that this is a crisis now. We saw instantaneously an 81% increase in demand at food banks. Our sense is that level of demand is consistent throughout April and may continue for some time. It is complex and time consuming to put more food in and find the mechanisms to bring more food into that supply chain—I know that Lindsay and FareShare have been working tirelessly for years on unlocking supply chains and that flow of food—so it will not necessarily meet the demands now. It is about what alternatives we need to consider, particularly in the short term.

**Chair:** Thank you. To go back to Geraint, it just shows that we need to try to ensure that the DEFRA scheme for buying up fresh food straight from the farms can go out across the other nations as well. From this inquiry we can make sure we get that through to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Q69 **Dr Hudson:** Following up what Geraint said, Lindsay said that the pilot scheme was a howling success, and I think you can see that we are all latching on to that. We can then take the advice forward to DEFRA. You talked about the cost incurred in taking this forward, which would probably be offset. Could you reiterate that figure? Might that be offset in the money saved, and environmental savings, through the food not being disposed of? Yes, there would be a cost, but I am sure that would be offset by the lack of wastage in general. Do you have any comments on that?

**Lindsay Boswell:** Absolutely. Thank you very much for the opportunity to shine a spotlight on that. In broad general terms, the trial shows that on average it has cost £200 a tonne to divert food in that way. Therefore, £4 million a year would generate 1% of the farmgate surplus—20,000 tonnes.



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That is equivalent to what FareShare was doing before the pandemic and therefore is the equivalent of the following numbers.

First, there is a saving to frontline charities of between £32 million and £35 million every year, because they do not have to buy the food. Given the collapse in much of their fundraising, that is quite a sizeable grant. Secondly, independent research by an economic think-tank has measured that that level of savings to the state in getting good quality fresh produce to some of the most unhealthy and vulnerable people in our society is worth £68 million every single year.

A run rate of £4 million enables that to double. So £8 million would enable us to do a further 1% or 20,000 tonnes. The demand is out there. We have more than doubled the volume of food that we are dealing with during the pandemic, and we absolutely cannot keep up. We are incredibly worried about the longer term. Once the donated food that is being used as a short-term sticking plaster—absolutely vital though it is, it is only short term; it is a 12-week programme in England—has run out, we have a longer-term **problem**.

Q70 **Dr Hudson:** Do you have any feel for how much it would save, in terms of the cost of physically disposing of the food—not diverting it, but actually getting rid of it? Do you have any figure for the environmental **savings**?

**Lindsay Boswell:** This area is slightly more complicated, and I suspect that the amazing organisation WRAP might well have some information. It depends whether it goes to animal feed or anaerobic digestion.

**Chair:** What we would like from you both is a bit more written evidence on this. This is something that we can really take up with DEFRA. If you are taking the food straight from the farms, you are actually cutting the cost immediately. It is not going through the retailers; it is not going through as much transport.

It seems, as far as I can see, to tick all the boxes. We are looking at a new agriculture and food policy for the future, and surely this is something we can incorporate in it. For all their faults with many systems, the Americans' food and farming Bill includes getting food out to poorer people and people who really need it. There is no reason why we can't do something similar, so let us look at this very seriously. I really appreciate that. If you could give us some more written evidence on this, Lindsay and Emma, we would really appreciate it.

Q71 **Ian Byrne:** When is the current increase in demand for food aid likely to subside after the lockdown is **alleviated**?

**Emma Revie:** What is clear to us is that the increase in demand that we are seeing is not about the lockdown, as much as it is about economic downturn and people's individual economic circumstances. We are seeing increased numbers of people who are out of work and have had to move on to universal credit. We are seeing increased numbers of people who have been self-employed and are not able to work during this period of

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time, and increased numbers of people on statutory sick pay. It is less about the lockdown and people being unable to leave their home, and more about the economic ramifications of that.

Obviously, as we come out of lockdown, and that has a positive impact on the economy, that will start to have an impact on the number of people coming to food banks. We are all quite clear that that is going to be over a much longer period of time. There is no guarantee that the people who have lost jobs so far will be able to get new jobs the minute lockdown is lifted and they are able to return to work.

We are very much preparing for a period in which more people find themselves in economic hardship. We are looking to work alongside the Government on what that support package will need to be to help them during that period of time. We very much welcome the extension of the job retention scheme so that people do not face a cliff edge in the next couple of months. That extraordinary measure will definitely keep a large number of people from having to rely on emergency food aid.

As we look at this period of time in which people, despite those policies, are still finding themselves in financial hardship, we need to look past lockdown being eased during this period of time, when those people do not have sufficient income. We should potentially look at short-term interventions, such as local welfare assistance schemes, which, particularly in England, have seen a substantial reduction in funding over the last 10 years. One in seven local authorities does not have a local welfare assistance hardship fund that people can draw on, so we need to look with urgency at local welfare assistance schemes and at how they can be scaled up to support people during this period of time.

Also, what are those medium-term interventions that will tide people over during this period of time while they are trying to get back to work, or as the economy reinvigorates itself and creates jobs for those people to move into? I think we need to be looking at what that temporary income support scheme looks like for those people.

**Q72 Ian Byrne:** Just to follow up on that, I am extremely proud of Liverpool. I have got one of the best emergency welfare schemes in place. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says ultimately, if people's incomes are the barrier to them accessing sufficient healthy food, the best way to address this is through raising incomes, so I am really interested in what you said earlier about the joint approach with the other agencies. Can you just expand a little bit more on that, please, with your ask for Government?

**Emma Revie:** Yes, absolutely. So, our partnership was with Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Child Poverty Action Group, StepChange, Turn2us, Independent Food Aid Network and the Children's Society. Together we identified what would be the key interventions, recognising that there are operational challenges, particularly within the Department for Work and Pensions, which has had to see such a significant increase in applicants moving on to universal credit, and has done a sterling job responding to that increased level of application, but what are the interventions—what





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are the levers that can be pulled—to create that income support scheme for people who are currently falling through?

The scheme works on three principles. One is acting with urgency. Second is treating each and every one of us with dignity and compassion, so what is the most dignified response we can make? Thirdly, leaving no one behind—so identifying those groups of people that are falling through. It is particularly focused on increasing income levels for families with children, so what are the policy interventions, whether that is through uprating the child element of universal credit or lifting the benefit cap, potentially addressing the two-child limit? What are the interventions that we could look at on a temporary basis that would allow those people who are finding they are in most need of that additional cash boost to access it?

Also, looking at reducing costs—because I think we know that with income and expenditure it is on both levels, so we very much welcome the Government's decision to temporarily suspend clawing back debt repayments from benefits. Still, however, at the moment we are reclaiming advance payments. So, as people come on to universal credit and wait for five weeks, their choice is to take a loan or to wait out that five weeks. We are asking for a temporary suspension of the claiming back of the deductions for taking that loan over this period of time, because that would get a little bit of extra cash to people at this time.

Then, I think, particularly looking at local welfare systems and how that applies to groups of people who are currently sitting outside the social security system—so particularly those people with no recourse to public funds and how they are in a situation where they potentially can't work. How are they able to access finances?

So, a significant investment, at speed, into local welfare assistance schemes, particularly in England—even to bring it within parity with the devolved nations; there is a significant disparity in terms of per capita spend on local welfare assistance in England compared to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. So, pre-covid, the expenditure was 73p per capita in England compared to £6.48 in Scotland, £7.31 in Northern Ireland and £3.37 in Wales. So, there is a significant disparity in terms of spend and within the devolved Administrations we have seen, during covid, a significant increase in investment in local hardship funds. Again, that makes that gap between the per capita spend in England and the devolved nations even wider.

So, looking at what could be done to get that cash to people in hardship with immediacy through our local authorities will be a key intervention, we believe, and we have articulated that within our proposals—proposals around what a temporary income support scheme would look like, but also recognising the complexity of it and being very willing to stand ready to work as part of a taskforce with partners from these organisations, with Government, to identify those groups of people most in need of support.

**Chair:** Ian, have you any more questions? One more, if you like. We are getting close to time now.



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**Ian Byrne:** No, that was comprehensive—unless Lindsay wants to add anything.

**Lindsay Boswell:** Only to say I completely agree with everything Emma said in the last five minutes.

**Chair:** Then we will finish your particular part of the panel—the evidence today—in a united fashion. Thank you very much for the evidence. It has been very good at showing us how the most vulnerable are getting their food and how the charities are working. Emma, if you would like to give us a little more detail on the type of funds you think you need and the ask of the Chancellor.

We have also shown that, across the piece, more joined-up government—both here in Westminster and across the devolved nations—is necessary. The DEFRA scheme has a real future for getting food from the farms to the foodbanks and to people who really need it. Perhaps we can try to roll it out across the devolved nations as well by working with them. It has been a really good evidence session, so I thank you both very much, Emma and Lindsay. You are now going to disappear off our screens—hopefully not disappear completely.

Thank you again, and if you can supply us with the written evidence that we have asked for, we would be delighted. Lindsay, written evidence on the DEFRA scheme—the good parts of it, and perhaps where there might be some places we could do a little better—would be useful as well. Thank you, Emma and Lindsay. We will now go on to the next panel. Thank you very much.



## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Caroline Abrahams and Fazilet Hadi.

Q73 **Chair:** Thank you both for joining us. We are hearing evidence on the availability of food for the poorest in society and for those for whom it is most difficult to get the food. Caroline and Fazilet, if you would like to introduce yourselves, please. Then we will carry on with the questions.

**Caroline Abrahams:** I am Caroline Abrahams. I am the charity director of Age UK. Age UK is the biggest charity for older people in the country. It comprises the national charity that I work for—we are a family of organisations—and 130 local Age UKs, hopefully many in your constituencies. We all work together as a group; we are a family.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I am Fazilet Hadi and I am the lead for policy at Disability Rights UK, which is what it says on the tin: it's a pan-disability charity. We are led by disabled people, which means that the people on our board and the people who work for the organisation are primarily disabled people. We want to work with decision makers to create a more equal society for disabled people, bringing their experiences to the forefront.

**Chair:** You are both very welcome. Could Members please introduce yourselves as you come in to ask questions, so that both our witnesses can follow exactly who is asking the questions? I will chip in as we go through, because I have not been allocated a question for this session. I will pass over now to Rosie for question No. 5.

Q74 **Rosie Duffield:** Good morning to our witnesses. I am Rosie Duffield, the MP for Canterbury, Whitstable and the villages. My question is to both of you. How effective is the support out there for people who are not deemed to be clinically extremely vulnerable but are still struggling to buy food because of their health or their physical restrictions?

**Fazilet Hadi:** The coronavirus crisis has turned into a food crisis for disabled people and people with long-term or serious health conditions. It has swept away the careful arrangements that disabled people and others had made for getting their food. As you will appreciate, if you live with a disability, you sometimes have to work around how other people do things, so that you develop something that suits you. However, seemingly overnight, things were swept away.

For people who used to shop online—because they did not have the physical mobility or were not able or chose not to go into the supermarket because they found it difficult to see the goods—suddenly those online slots disappeared. All those people who had previously gone into stores and received either in-store support or who had a guide with them, and who understood store layouts and could just about cope standing for the periods of time required, found themselves completely without the ability to shop in the usual way. It hit millions of people.

The Government moved to provide food for a priority group—the clinically vulnerable—which was a great thing to do, but it caused problems in



knocking other disabled people or those with health conditions out of what they previously had. It was good, but because it was partial, it resulted in knock-on effects for others. It has been a pretty terrible eight weeks for people with mental health impairments, sight impairments, learning disabilities and physical mobility problems. We have seen charity helplines flooded with calls from disabled people and people with serious health conditions not knowing where to turn.

**Q75 Rosie Duffield:** Thank you. Before Caroline comes in, do you have any specific ideas on how that could have been improved? Obviously, do not outline them all now. Has your organisation put those to the Government already, or will it be doing so?

**Fazilet Hadi:** It is very hard to be critical, because they were unprecedented circumstances, which is a bit of a cliché now, I know. Without any sense of being critical, maybe if the Government had talked a bit earlier to groups that know about the needs of disabled people and people with serious health conditions, we would have seen a more joined-up response. They were acting very quickly, but we could have acted quickly as well. The fact that we were not at any table until a bit later on in the crisis resulted in many more problems than there needed to be.

I also feel that, somehow, the thinking was about medical vulnerabilities as to coronavirus, not the effect it was having on large numbers of disabled people and people who felt that their health was at risk, even if it was not seen to be at risk by the NHS. It is always easy to look back, but I think more joined-up planning— I certainly feel that we can learn from those lessons of the last eight weeks, which was a point made by your earlier contributors, because this is not going away, so we actually need to learn and plan for the medium term.

**Chair:** Thank you. I will bring Caroline in now.

**Caroline Abrahams:** Many of the things that Fazilet said about disabled people also apply to older people. There are some nuances and differences, though. The first is that, on the whole, particularly as you go up the age range, fewer older people are online. Obviously, many older people are online, but once you get to the age of 70, 42% are not, and by 75 it's a majority. Although some people would have previously relied on online shopping slots, there are probably fewer of them than compared with the disabled population as a whole.

It has absolutely been just as difficult for older people, but some of the issues are slightly different. The group that we have been and continue to be most worried about are people who are over 70—sometimes a little younger as well—who have been confused by the Government guidance and are terrified that they are going to catch this virus, but who, under normal circumstances, manage perfectly well. They are very independent. You will recognise this sort of person, I am sure.

These people run their own lives perfectly well, but they do it offline. They will typically go shopping perhaps every day or every other day. They use cash a lot—they don't necessarily use plastic at all—and they have their



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own strategies for living their lives. The problem with this pandemic is that it has sort of cut all that out. There are big problems accessing cash and people are too frightened to go out.

People are not on anybody's list as being vulnerable because in normal circumstances they manage perfectly well. Having said that, some of these people probably have early dementia or other sorts of cognitive and physical health problem. They may be alone completely, or they may have a partner, but they don't have family and friends and are not tied in with local neighbours and communities. That is the group that worries us the most. We know they exist and what we have been asking for from the Government is a Government-backed outreach scheme to try to help us to identify and reach those people.

Every now and then, our local Age UKs encounter them. There was a case a few days ago. An old man in east London had collapsed on the street and was found to be malnourished. He and his wife had been too frightened to come out. They had been existing on the food that was left in the house, which wasn't very much. Finally, they were so desperate, they had decided he should venture out. He had gone out, but he was so weak he had collapsed. When people went back to the house, his wife was in at least as bad a state.

This is a very strange group in a way. They are not visible to us. One way to get at them sometimes is through a well-organised GPs, who may be able to identify some of them from their list. Where there are advanced primary care networks—something you are probably aware of in your constituencies, which is a new idea of joining up GPs—there has sometimes been the possibility of doing that, but it is very patchy.

Above all, what we think is needed is an offline scheme for reaching some of these people, because they are not going to necessarily ask for help themselves.

**Rosie Duffield:** That was really helpful; thank you to both of you.

**Chair:** It really brings home how vulnerable some people are, and not the people we would normally consider vulnerable. Thank you, Rosie. We are moving on to question 6 now. Over to you, Derek, down in the toe of Cornwall.

Q76 **Derek Thomas:** Fazilet and Caroline, thank you ever so much. I want to take you a bit further on that.

In Cornwall—I am sure it is true elsewhere in the country as well—we have seen this incredible effort by corner shops and farm shops and all sorts of groups that already existed, which found a way very early on, as older people and vulnerable people were being asked to shield, before the lockdown happened, and just responded quickly and picked up many of the gaps that you have described. But certainly, my office and other offices have found that there were people who just couldn't get through to supermarkets and, as you say, couldn't go online.



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Has that changed? As we have learned to respond to the lockdown and this new way of life, however long it lasts, are older people and disabled people beginning to get the priority they deserve? Are they beginning to get online delivery slots? Are they able to use the phone line to place orders and are they getting what is needed? We have heard already about all sorts of things that are available, but this is quite clear, as you described. I employ a chap who is partially sighted, and I have seen at first hand how his life has changed completely, from doing daily exercise and working to being at home completely on his own now.

I just wonder if you think that we have learned quickly and that some of those things have been and are being resolved satisfactorily. Shall we start with Caroline?

**Caroline Abrahams:** Yes, I think things have got better. You are quite right that there has been a fantastic local effort everywhere. All sorts of different people have come together. We got some figures from Age UK just yesterday that said in the two weeks to the end of April, we delivered about 50,000 food deliveries to older people right across the country. Obviously, we weren't doing that on our own; we were often in partnership with many other organisations. Certainly, we are starting to see now some freeing up of some more online delivery slots. They are not quite secured yet, but they are on the way to being secured.

As you will all know, the supermarkets are now trying to recognise that there are people who are not necessarily online and are operating volunteer schemes, schemes for carers and, in some cases, schemes for our volunteers to be able to, for example, jump the queue if they are doing shopping for several older people and things like that. It has taken time to come on stream, but it is better now.

Actually, however, none of that helps the group that I am talking about—the ones who still worry us—who are the hidden, behind closed doors, who will not necessarily ask for help. They are our concern. For other people, however, things have definitely improved.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I agree with what Caroline has said. There has been an improvement. When surveys were done in early to mid-April, they showed about 60% of disabled people struggling to access food. That is now down, in recent surveys, to about 45%, so it is improving, but it is still a real issue for people. As you say, people have used their own ingenuity and they have used friends, volunteers, family, corner shops and smaller retailers, but the situation will go on for a long time with people not getting the online slots and the support they need in store.

I would like to see us sit round the table with supermarkets, the Government and the third sector. As Caroline said, let us start with the people who are not with the systems and really look at what we can put together that makes sense to reach everyone, as opposed to coming up with partial solutions because we are in an emergency. There are things to learn, but it has not gone away.

Q77 **Derek Thomas:** Do you think, both of you, that the Government are still

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putting an enormous effort into the idea that online delivery is the solution, or are they recognising that there has to be a broader approach? I mean, 45% is a colossal number of people who are not getting the food they need.

**Fazilet Hadi:** For me, it has to be a menu of choices. We are all so different, whether we are older, have a disability or have a serious health condition, and different things will suit different people. There are definitely not enough online slots still.

We create a new system that some people will access and then, no doubt, other people do not hear about it, because we do things in a very complicated way. I sometimes think, as a disabled person, you almost need a degree to find out what you can access and who you need to go to. On a very simple level, I just want to go to the person I want to buy food from, and I want them to tell me how that can be done.

Supermarkets need to think more about what reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act they now need to make for disabled people. Perhaps they are different from previously. What do they need to do to help us to shop? For some of the older people Caroline is talking about, what adjustments need to be put in place to allow that shopping to happen? I do think that online is not for all. I totally agree that we need a menu of options.

I would also say that the social care system has a role to play. It worries me that some local authorities see support with shopping—cutting it from care packages—as something that is not essential. For me, that would be a terrible road to go down, if we saw more local authorities saying, “No, it is low priority for us to help you with your shopping.” We need to be alert to that possibility. Social care definitely has a role to play.

**Caroline Abrahams:** The additional point that I would make is that overall, across Government, there has been a hope that doing things online would solve lots of those problems. There has also often been—this is true not just of DEFRA—a bit of confusion about what the Government’s role is in this. Is it to sort it out? Is it to bring people together? Is there any money? All that seems to have taken a long time to resolve.

To be frank, it is not resolved yet as far as Age UK is concerned, and if someone had known right from the start that the Government’s role was simply to broker solutions between other parties across our society, that might have made life a bit easier—or, indeed, if it was not. It has not been clear, probably because they have not been clear. That is not necessarily their fault, but it has held things up and it has meant a lot of going around in circles, which has taken a lot of good people’s time but without necessarily creating a good outcome.

Q78 **Chair:** Caroline, may I just ask you about the situation with cash? A lot of older people just use cash. They are not online; they use cash and they may not even have any cards as such. How are they managing? Lots of shops have been saying, “Just card, no cash.” How are you finding

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that?

**Caroline Abrahams:** It is a very real problem—no doubt about that; we sent an open letter to the FCA about it last week. Some of the banks have been very helpful and are trying to put in place other schemes. There is a whole list of alternative schemes, and I can certainly write to you after this session with full details.

The truth is, like the other things we have talked about, it is better than it was, but it is by no means yet resolved. The problem is that older people who had some cash to start with then find it is running out. They are feeling high and dry and are not sure what to do about it.

Q79 **Chair:** I have a 95-year-old mother; she does not go out shopping, but she is always desperately sure that she is going to run out of cash. For that generation, it is a feeling they have. Thank you. If you can give us a bit more written evidence on that, it would be useful.

**Caroline Abrahams:** Will do.

Q80 **Dr Hudson:** Hi there, Fazilet and Caroline. Thank you very much for being with us today. My name is Neil Hudson and I'm the MP for Penrith and The Border.

We touched on this a little bit early on, but I wanted to come back to the more centralised deliveries of food parcels to the shielded, and get your thoughts on whether that system of getting those parcels out to the shielded has worked and, specifically, whether those parcels contain what people need. There will be various different folk who have differing needs, and it is quite hard in terms of centralising and drawing something up, isn't it? So has it worked, and do they contain what people need for their individual needs?

**Fazilet Hadi:** When NHS England said, "This 1.5 million people are clinically vulnerable," they came up with the six categories—things such as organ transplants, respiratory problems, pregnant women and people taking immunosuppressants. They came up with very specific things. There were a lot of other people who said, "I can't see myself on that list, yet I can't go out because I'm at risk," and then there was another group of people who said, "Well, I'm not on that list. I'm not ill, but I'm going to really struggle in terms of lockdown, social distancing and the new world out there. I am going to really struggle to physically do my shopping."

As I said earlier, it partially tried to solve one problem, but created a whole heap of other knock-on consequences. What we have heard about the actual scheme is that the criteria were narrow, so that upset a lot of people. I know then other health professionals could add names to the scheme, and I think it has gone from 1.5 million people to 2 million. It is obviously positive in some ways that new people have been found, but there are issues with the criteria and with communications.

As Caroline was saying earlier, you could go online or you could use an automated telephone service to give your NHS number. These are not the

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most easy ways of communication for some of the people we are talking about with disabilities, and who are older.

The boxes have been, I suppose, like an emergency box. You would expect things not to be very luxurious. Tins of pork and UHT milk may be okay for an emergency period, but if this is going to carry on, then not meeting any dietary or cultural needs—I accept that you cannot have complete personalisation, but maybe the Government need to think about those boxes and how useful they are to people, and maybe do some work on checking that they are sending people what they want.

Finally, we had issues about sharing personal data. We were not really clear whether the Government were making it clear that people's data might be shared with supermarkets and whether the people delivering the food had proper criminal checks being done. We had some unanswered questions that we did ask, but we did not get answers to.

**Caroline Abrahams:** From our point of view, the problem has probably been that this centralised scheme is a rather blunt instrument. We know that some people in the shielding group have not actually had any problems at all with getting food because they have good family support, or there are neighbours or friends who have been able to do their shopping for them.

Being shielded did not necessarily equate with having problems accessing food. We have certainly heard of a few cases of older people being delivered food parcels and being slightly embarrassed by it, and saying, "We don't need it, thank you. Could you give it to someone else who might need it more than we do?"

I think that this shows that, as much as you can, it is better to do these things locally because you probably end up with a more targeted approach. I have heard less, I have to say, about whether the goods within the boxes were appropriate or not. Like others, I have read stories in the newspapers about people sometimes not getting the right things, but I agree with Fazilet about this: if this is going to go on, the more that we can move to a more personalised approach, the better. I think the answer is probably more local approaches and fewer central ones.

Q81 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful, thank you. You make the point about it being a broad, centralised system, and tailoring it to the local needs is perhaps important. These, perhaps, are the lessons learned as we move forward. Do you have any feel about whether people had any success with that sort of local tailoring—whether people had special dietary needs, allergies or things like that?

We have certainly had people contact the local resilience forum, as you say, Caroline, to come off the list, saying, "We don't actually physically need these packages." Have you had any feedback from your charities on whether people have had success in tailoring it as we have gone through the crisis?

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**Caroline Abrahams:** No, I haven't actually, but certainly where local Age UKs have been organising food deliveries that is the sort of thing that they are able to do.

Of course, the other thing that they are able to do is take the food into somebody's home. That is one issue that we had with the centralised scheme and the NHS responder scheme: volunteers within that scheme are not able to take shopping into people's homes. That is for reasons that one understands, but of course shopping is too heavy for some older people to lift.

There is also the fact that people from a local Age UK are better able, in that very short encounter, and albeit being masked up and everything, to have a bit of a sense of whether someone really is okay or whether there might be other problems that they have not actually disclosed. Again, it argues for the local wherever possible.

**Fazilet Hadi:** I agree with Caroline. I really think that the local approach for these issues works a lot better. Only through listening to the media, I have heard that some local authorities do supplement the boxes, but for a lot of people I think that getting on to that list unlocked online delivery. That is almost a reason for wanting to be on that list: for that priority online delivery slot.

Certainly, for quite a few weeks supermarkets have been giving priority slots to people who are on the Government list, which means people want to get on that list. How long can that go on for? As I say, if they are in the know, some people know how to get on that list and get an online slot when it comes onstream, but there will be lots of people that aren't in that loop and do not benefit from that route to online delivery.

Q82 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you. That leads me to my final supplementary question. Fazilet, you talked about unlocking the supermarket slots. Do you, Fazilet and Caroline, feel that the folk you are working with have been turning to other providers, in terms of online delivery—be that take away, Deliveroo or anything like that? Do you feel that people have been accessing that? Has there been a role to play for such organisations and companies?

**Fazilet Hadi:** DEFRA has helpfully put together a list of different providers of food that are not supermarkets, but some of the methods are quite costly. They might be an emergency solution for a lot of disabled and older people, for a couple weeks, but they are not a long-term solution. Obviously, I am making a huge generalisation—for some people they will be perfect.

We have heard feedback that some of the supermarket boxes are less cost-effective than if you go into the supermarket, which doesn't feel quite right. There are lots of suppliers, as you say, doing frozen meals and specialist foods, but they have a price tag.

**Dr Hudson:** Thank you.

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Q83 **Chair:** Caroline, would you like to comment?

**Caroline Abrahams:** I agree with Fazilet. I think that is absolutely right.

**Chair:** Excellent. Thank you, Neil. Are your questions finished?

**Dr Hudson:** Yes. Thank you, Neil.

**Chair:** Right then, over to Robbie now for question 8. There you are up there, Robbie. Off you go.

Q84 **Robbie Moore:** Thank you, Chair. Hi, I am Robbie Moore, the MP for Keighley and Ilkley, up in west Yorkshire.

My question is focused on the physical arrangements that supermarkets are implementing in store. We have talked a lot about online access, but I am acutely conscious that over the last few weeks supermarkets have had to adjust the arrangements that they are implementing in store. I am interested to understand your opinion on how well those physical arrangements are supporting the people you represent. Caroline, may I come to you first?

**Caroline Abrahams:** Firstly, we know about older people who are still too worried to use the dedicated slots and feel that it wouldn't be safe. The lack of confidence is probably the biggest barrier for the group of older people I have been talking about.

Another issue that we know has arisen sometimes is the capacity for people to have someone with them—a carer, or somebody to give them confidence or to just help. That has been another barrier. The timing of the slots is quite early. A lot of old people take a little while to get going and the slots tend to be quite early in the day, which is another potential barrier.

The fact there were slots at all has been helpful and a welcome acknowledgment from the supermarkets of the importance of trying to help this group.

**Robbie Moore:** Thank you.

Q85 **Chair:** Fazilet?

**Fazilet Hadi:** I agree with everything Caroline said. I'm a bit shallow—I quite like shopping. I know some people hate it, but I used to like going shopping and I would go with a friend. Because I am completely blind, I would either need in-store support or to go with someone.

For people who can see a bit more or for those with learning disabilities, social distancing is difficult in a supermarket, even though they can see what's going on. Some of the floor markings and some of the new signage is very difficult for people who are partially sighted.

There are issues for people in wheelchairs needing help to reach the higher shelves, and for people who can't stand for long periods and who now have to queue outside and at the till. I am sure that people with



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hearing problems are having difficulties being heard through the perspex and masks. They are not able to lip-read because people have masks on.

There is a whole array of problems. I would like the supermarkets to think about their duties under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, and to work with Disability Rights UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Business Disability Forum—whoever they trust—to think through what a reasonable adjustment will look like under the Equality Act.

In the end, I feel that my relationship with a disabled customer is with the supermarket. Yes, it is great that the Government and local government have a safety net and can step in, but I want life to go back to some sort of new normal and I want to relate to shops and retailers. I don't want an intermediary; I don't think a lot of disabled or older people want an intermediary. For those that do, they must have that.

It is time for the supermarkets to sit around the table and think about what they need to put in place going into the next few months and next year that will allow disabled and older people to shop safely and independently: "What can we do to make a difference?" They should promote that in their stores and online, so that we don't have to read a tome of guidance; it should be made easy for us as customers. I feel that there is an industry being created about us accessing food, but we just want to have that direct relationship with whoever our food provider is.

**Q86 Robbie Moore:** The points that have just been made are fantastic. Obviously, everyone wants to get back to normal, but there will be a new norm in the intermediary period. As well as supermarkets getting around the table to make those positive changes, do you think Government should have a role or more influence on the supermarkets, in terms of making accessibility easier in stores?

**Fazilet Hadi:** It goes back to what Caroline was saying earlier on. Maybe Government would be seen as the convenor. In the end, my bank has known for a long time that I am visually impaired, so they give me a braille bank statement. I am looking for supermarkets to ask what the equivalent reasonable adjustments are, for disabled people of whatever age, that they now have to make.

Government can support the process of thinking that through, as can other bodies, but it is the supermarkets' responsibility under the law. Everyone is willing to give them that support, and everyone recognises that they have done a fab job, their staff have been amazing and they have stepped up in the crisis, but it would be great now to think about and plan for the next few months.

**Q87 Chair:** What about the smaller shops? Are they able to cope and help with people with disabilities? Do you know what is happening there?

**Fazilet Hadi:** Often, when you are disabled—or older—you build up personal relationships with people you know. Whatever the law says, it is often about human kindness and that local, personal response. If the

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supermarkets could lead the way on reasonable adjustments, it would be helpful. The vast majority of us do our food shopping in supermarkets. The smaller stores have been able to be more personal and sensitive to individuals, but that won't work on a large scale.

Q88 **Robbie Moore:** Unless Caroline has anything to add to those points, that is it from me.

**Caroline Abrahams:** The only other thing I was going to add was that we know that quite a lot of older people go to supermarkets for the social contact. In the normal course of events, a lot of older people go to talk to somebody on the checkout. They are good users of cafes, and they are very reliant on there being a loo, because otherwise they may not have the confidence to go at all. This is quite a worry, because over the next few months all those things may well not be there and it may invalidate the opportunities for older people to visit supermarkets, so they may be more reliant for longer on other forms of being able to get their shopping.

Q89 **Geraint Davies:** It is Geraint Davies, Swansea West, here. I had a couple of questions; one is about the short to medium term, and then moving forward. The first is about the centralised supermarket system and online provision. We heard from the previous witnesses from the Trussell Trust and FareShare that we could move towards a system where we get cheaper, more nutritious food that is going to waste from the farm gate being delivered to charitable organisations.

I was wondering whether you thought, if that did move forward, there was scope for a voluntary system—perhaps operated by local authorities—to link up with the people who you represent, particularly people who are not necessarily clinically shielded but are older, vulnerable and may have disabilities. Do you think there is a move forward there that could be both localised and good value?

**Caroline Abrahams:** That sounds very sensible to me. That might be very helpful, because although your first two witnesses were obviously talking predominantly about people on low incomes and the problems they face in accessing food, money is mostly not the primary issue for the older people I am talking about. It is more about confidence and mental capacity, but there are sometimes income issues as well. On the whole, the group I am talking about are certainly not well off; if they were well off, they would have other strategies for dealing with it.

Anything like that would be good, but again, it would need to be sensitive to local needs. We know that in some parts of the country, local authorities have not wanted or felt able to take a lead over these sorts of issues, and have been very happy to work in partnership with the voluntary sector, which is doing it instead. There are other areas where there are very strong resilience forums that work in a different way, so subject to there being that sort of local variation, I think that would be very helpful.

Q90 **Geraint Davies:** Before calling in Fazilet on the same question, can I ask whether you think it would be a good idea for local authorities to try and

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put together databases, so we know where all these people are and can identify people who do want support? Some, as you have implied, do not. What do you feel about the data management?

**Caroline Abrahams:** The data is important; if it worked bottom up, it would be fine. I suspect that if you went to most areas and talked to all the voluntary organisations, some of the GPs and the faith communities and put all that together bottom-up, you would end up with a pretty good list, rather than asking or expecting local authorities to go into some big bureaucratic exercise starting from scratch. As long as it was very light-touch, I think that might be helpful. Of course, people will be moving in and out of vulnerability all the time, so it will only be a snapshot, but it is probably better than nothing.

**Fazilet Hadi:** For me, the big priority is to find solutions so that people can independently shop again—by “independently”, I mean with the right support. Before the middle of March, the majority of older or disabled people were shopping, and I would like to work out ways to help the majority go back to do that again, with the right support in place. Then, of course, we need to think locally about the safety net that is needed for those who cannot do that, for whatever reason: because they are very ill, or because they need care and support.

I would not like to go back to finding partial solutions for particular groups without us thinking about the whole picture. I worry that we will tick off one group and then find we are left with lots of people we are not serving. I still feel that the majority do want a relationship with their shop or their supermarket, and for those that cannot, for whatever reason, yes, we must be as creative as we can to get the support to them in the most personal, local way we can.

Q91 **Geraint Davies:** I will pursue this, if I may, because I was going to ask you about that, in fact. It seems to me that it might be a good idea to have farm gate produce going via charities and volunteers to groups in need when there is still significant risk. My understanding is that where people have opened up successfully and gone back to the new normal—in particular, I am thinking of China and South Korea—people in shops are required to wear masks and there is screening of people behind tills, but there are of course issues about cash, issues about disinfectant, issues about testing people in a very rapid way and screening people as they come into stores, etc.

Do you feel that those sort of measures, which would hopefully increase safety but also confidence, are important things to get in place so that people who are less confident—whether they are older or they have some type of disability or whatever—can go back to shopping with a new confidence, as opposed to thinking they are taking a risk?

**Fazilet Hadi:** I think you are right that we cannot shop in the same way, unfortunately, that we shopped on 15 March, or whenever it was, and we do need to explore those ideas. But I also come back to the fact that we do have an Equality Act in this country, and there might be things we have to do to adjust things so disabled people of all ages get some sort of





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additional support so they can shop, and we just need to think those things through to keep people safe.

Of course, there are lots of issues for disabled people—with social distancing, with not being able to lip read, with people with mental health problems having anxieties. Something that, in a funny way, all impairments are united on is that we need to find different ways of being in the new normal. I think the measures you mentioned are important, but I think there are other more people-centric measures that we also need to think about, because that would not enable me to very easily shop. Even if you put all those things in place, I would still find it impossible to walk into a store without any support. For eight weeks I have not done so, but I really do not want to do that for eight months.

I think there are just some questions that—with the help of the brains across the third sector, disabled people, older people, Governments, retailers—we need to think through in relation to what that looks like for disabled people, because I do not want to be under house arrest for an unlimited period just because I cannot social distance or because I cannot have some support. I think these are really tricky questions that need to be worked through.

**Q92 Geraint Davies:** If I could come to Caroline, again my central thought is that people who are a bit more vulnerable and who, if they do pick up coronavirus, are at more risk do need to be liberated, as has been said, but also need to be protected. I was wondering what Caroline felt about whether we have to have certain safety measures in place in stores to make it easier to go back to the new normal—whether it is masks, tests, disinfectant or whatever.

**Caroline Abrahams:** As you say, the new normal does not sound very normal, does it?

**Geraint Davies:** No.

**Caroline Abrahams:** It is something we all have to get used to, even now. I think it is pretty obvious really, just from what you have read in the papers, that the older population is not a homogenous whole on these issues. There are very mixed views across the 12 million older people in this country. There is a group that is very clear that it does not wish to be locked down any second longer than is necessary, and you have seen quite a lot of that. Probably, the greater majority are just very frightened, actually, and are going to need a lot of persuasion to come out at all, and it may be that putting some more of those measures in place might help.

The other thing we do not know yet of course is whether, as the lockdown starts to be relaxed in various ways, there still may be slightly different advice for older people, given that it is clear that age is an independent factor in predisposing someone to become severely ill if they contract coronavirus. It is not the biggest factor necessarily, but it is a factor.

People are going to have to make their own decisions about this. If the Government decide not to impose an age-related lockdown—it has been



our advice not to—people will be making their own calculations about risk. The more that the supermarkets and small food retailers can do to make themselves feel as safe as possible, that will help, but I suspect that a lot of older people will still be erring on the side of caution for a while, and you cannot blame them for that.

**Q93 Geraint Davies:** Can I ask you something about prices? I have had localised cases of people living in poor communities with only small shops, perhaps without proper bus services or they have not got their own car—bus services have been reduced because of the current crisis—and one way or another they are facing much higher prices in local shops.

Some feel that they are being exploited, and the big retailers are not sure they always want to deliver small amounts of food, if people do manage to shop online. They are living on their own and they do not want to buy £100-worth of food. They have not got the money and they do not want a crate of wine or anything. Are those problems coming up and do you have any suggestions about that? I am thinking back to the Trussell Trust, FareShare and linking up with volunteers, personally. Do you have any experience of that, and do you have any suggestions?

**Caroline Abrahams:** I have not heard any examples of that, actually, but that does not mean they do not exist. I am sure they do. People who are stuck now with a much more restricted range of shopping options where they can only go to the expensive local shop—that is sustainable for a short period for most people, but as time goes on it becomes much less so and arguably it is not fair to expect people to have to do that. That is the sort of thing where local Age UK branches can definitely help with shopping at a bigger store some miles away and being able to get the food there, as can other local voluntary organisations as well.

**Fazilet Hadi:** We have heard of people saying that for an emergency couple of weeks they will pay a bit more, but it is not sustainable for them. They may not be in the category of people who need food banks, but a lot of disabled and older people are living on very limited incomes. Money does matter. As I said earlier, some supermarket boxes seem more expensive. Some have got standard boxes and they see that the goods seem to be more expensive.

I wonder—this would need talking through with supermarkets—whether there are new ways of telephone ordering or working with local authorities to develop slightly different schemes that will help us move forward. I do think that having choice over your food is important. I didn't get the Government box—I was not on that list—but I think for most of us in lockdown, food has been quite an issue.

Looking forward to the next meal has probably helped us a little bit. It is about giving more choice to disabled and older people over the food they have and giving them more routes to getting that food at a reasonable price, so that they have a sense of control and choice over what they are choosing. We need to get back to that as soon as possible.

**Geraint Davies:** That is very helpful.



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Q94 **Chair:** How are you finding the communication with DEFRA and the Government over your concerns? Are they listening to you? Are you getting through? Be quite open and frank with us: that is the whole idea of a Select Committee.

**Caroline Abrahams:** DEFRA is not a Department that Age UK routinely works with. The curiosity of this whole situation for us is that we do not normally think about food at all. We think about millions of other things, but we never think about food. However, this crisis has brought food to the top of the agenda. So we have not had existing strong relationships in place with officials, or indeed with Ministers.

We have found DEFRA open—it certainly approached us rather than the other way around. I think we have found the communications difficult sometimes in the sense of getting to a clear, agreed decision—that is what has taken time. We started talking to DEFRA on 9 April, and we still have not really got conclusive answers on some of the issues that we have been talking about this morning.

I am sure that DEFRA is under the same difficulties as all of us, with working from home, and I think everyone has been redeployed to jobs that they do not normally do. I am not unsympathetic to their position, which is very similar to ours, but I think that the time it has taken to reach decisions has been the biggest problem, particularly where money is concerned. I think there is some confusion across Government about funding for the voluntary sector and, frankly, I am sure there is not enough to go around, full stop.

**Chair:** If you would like to let us have in writing those things for which you are awaiting answers from DEFRA in particular, we will make sure that we send them on from this Committee and that you get those answers, if we can.

**Caroline Abrahams:** Thank you very much.

**Fazilet Hadi:** For the first few weeks, there was silence. Disability Rights UK wrote at the end of March and in early April. As Caroline said—although I do not know if it was 9 April; from my point of view it was mid-April time—the MS society produced an open letter, that many of us signed, about food and the problems that disabled people were having. Then, we began to talk to DEFRA officials. Everyone is very well motivated. The issue for me is that we are talking about very detailed issues such as how we can get more online shopping slots. We are not sitting down with DEFRA and the supermarkets and talking about a big plan that asks: “Who are the groups that are really affected and who are struggling to access food because of the coronavirus situation; what is our strategy; and what role is each of us playing?”

There is discussion but it is maybe more on micro-topics as opposed to how we are going to work together across local and central Government and with retailers and the third sector to really make the step change that we need to make to help people to access food. Like Caroline, I have



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never really spoken to DEFRA. Everyone is very nice and positive but we need that big thinking and planning now, because we have done the emergency stuff and have learned that all us have probably done some things wrong, and we now just need to reflect on what has happened and move forward.

**Chair:** Thank you both very much for a good evidence session. You have emphasised to us all that the fundamentals of life, such as food, are so important, as is getting it to the most vulnerable. Fazilet, you reinforced the fact that people with disabilities like to have as much independence as possible and, at the moment, that is more difficult—we get that.

Caroline, you emphasised, too, that some of the elderly people who are not normally seen as vulnerable are vulnerable in this particular crisis, because of the private way they run their lives, and because they are very cash-orientated. We would be very interested to get some further evidence from you on that. If there is anything you think of, when we have finished the session, that you would have liked to say to us, please let us have it in writing or verbally—that would be lovely.

Also, I say to all our members that we are meeting again next Tuesday. We will put together some ideas of where we want to pass this information on, and write to Ministers and the like—to DEFRA and perhaps even the Chancellor—and we will put that to you, and then we can make the decision on Tuesday. It is not a decision that I can make on my own—I would like your support.

I think we have had two very good panels this morning; it has been a very good session. We are very concerned about making sure that people get food across the whole of society. We are delighted with the number of charities and those in society who have helped as well, and we pay tribute to them. Government cannot fix everything and the lesson also seems to be that where we can do it local, let's do it local. It is about how we can work not only across Government, but across local authorities and with charities.

We get your message. We will try to make it better if we can. The Government have done pretty well in many places but there are gaps and lessons we can learn, and we as Select Committees are here to take that evidence and send it on. Thank you to all the Members, and thank you both, Caroline and Fazilet, for your evidence.

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