

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: COVID-19 and food supply, HC 263

Friday 5 June 2020

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

Questions 127 - 179

Witnesses

I: Andrew Opie, Director of Food and Sustainability, British Retail Consortium;
James Lowman, Chief Executive, Association of Convenience Stores.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Opie and James Lowman.

Q127 **Chair:** Welcome to the EFRA Select Committee. We are taking evidence on food, food supply and food delivery to the public and to all those who are in need of food. I very much welcome both Andrew Opie and James Lowman this morning. Andrew, as you know, I sat in and asked a question on the Trade Committee, so I heard your evidence then. Naturally some of it will be repeated this morning, but that is absolutely fine. I am delighted to have both you and James on today to give evidence. If you would like to introduce yourselves, please, then I will go into the first question.

Andrew Opie: Good morning, all. My name is Andrew Opie. I am the director of food and sustainability of the British Retail Consortium. We are the representative organisation for all the major supermarkets, with the exception of Tesco.

James Lowman: Hello, I am James Lowman. I am chief executive of the Association of Convenience Stores. There are 46,000 convenience stores in the UK and we represent them to Government and Parliament.

Q128 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Andrew, you tempted me into this supplementary question. Why is Tesco not part of your group? I am just interested.

Andrew Opie: That is a choice of theirs. We are a voluntary membership organisation like every other trade association and they have chosen not to be members. That is entirely their choice.

Q129 **Chair:** Thank you both for joining us. Before March, did the Government seem aware that there could be food supply disruptions and possibly panic buying?

Andrew Opie: I think they were aware. We had conversations with Defra and other Government Departments from about early February onwards, and scheduled meetings with Defra, including its food chain emergency liaison group, which was set up in the first week of March, if I remember rightly. We also reminded the Cabinet Office and Defra of the work that had been done in preparation for the 2009 swine flu outbreak, which members might be aware of. A lot of work was done by the Cabinet Office in 2008 with industry, including supermarkets, which gave us good insight into the kind of regulations we might need relaxed during an incident such as COVID. We reminded Government of that and made our members aware of the type of issues we were likely to raise with Government from February onwards.

Q130 **Chair:** From listening to the previous session with you, when there was some panic buying I think you said that the supermarkets, big retailers and all suppliers had to deal with a Christmas-like demand. I think you would suggest that you largely met that demand. Is that right?



Andrew Opie: Yes. The real test for us was the one we set ourselves right from the start: would the country and every consumer get access to all the food they needed? We absolutely met that task. That is really a testament to the robustness of the supply chain. Despite what some commentators have said, it showed the supply chain to be incredibly robust, because, as you said, Chair, we experienced demand that exceeded Christmas by a substantial amount and for a much longer period. The first excessive buying started towards the end of February and went right through to the third week of March.

In that period, we only had about six weeks to prepare, whereas for Christmas, the traditional period where we see an increase in demand, we have four or five months to plan for that, bring extra staff in, work with suppliers, make sure that manufactured goods are in the supply chain. The response of the supply chain, particularly retail workers, who have rightly been held out to be heroes in this incident, supported really brilliantly by British producers and overseas producers, has ensured that Britain got the food it needed, which was exactly what we said when we first started commenting on the incident in early February.

The issue I raised about the relaxation of regulation was really key to this. I would commend Defra in particular for its speed of reaction to the requests we made in early March for relaxation of regulation. The two particularly key areas were relaxing drivers' hours for truck drivers and online deliveries, and relaxing curfew delivery hours, which allowed supermarkets to make deliveries right through the day, 24/7.

That completely changed the ballgame. It upped the logistics and the capacity, because this was really a question of moving food as quickly as possible through the supply chain and keeping it on the shelves of the stores as much as it was manufacturing or bringing in food. I am sure you will ask me about it later, but we did not actually see a problem with the food supply chain itself. The problem was a logistical issue, which retailers, their suppliers and Government solved jointly.

Q131 **Chair:** The issue with panic buying is that the more people see empty shelves, the more they want the panic buy, do they not? Therefore, it is a psychological effect. With you being able to get those shelves gradually supplied, that calmed people down to a degree, didn't it? I do not know whether you would agree with that.

Andrew Opie: I would absolutely agree with that. Again, I have to pay testament to retail workers, who came in during the most difficult times of the COVID incident and really went beyond the pale in what they did. They made sure every consumer got the food they did. It was an incredible achievement and it made me incredibly proud to work with the sector, which really came to the fore at that time. The point about panic or excessive buying is well made. One of the real difficulties in this incident was that, very early on, hand sanitisers and other hygiene products were bought quite excessively. Supermarkets do not hold huge



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stocks of those products, so they were depleted quite quickly in our stores.

The other problem for consumers is that, quite rightly, they had concerns. They did not know how long they might be locked down for in the early stages. People were making decisions, potentially, on being kept in their homes for a longer period than they would anticipate. As the incident went through and supermarkets were able to replenish the stores and stay open, consumers realised, "Actually, this is not something where I have to buy food for 10 or 14 days. I will be able to get access to my supermarket". In those days of late February and early March, that was not clear to consumers. I understand the concerns and how they were exercising their buying habits around that time in March.

Q132 Chair: With the benefit of hindsight, the message from Government wants to be nuanced, to say that, "Yes, you will be locked down, but you will have access to the supermarkets and food". Everybody to a degree was flying in a completely new world and that was the problem. To bring in James, and not to give you too loaded a question, did the convenience stores get enough food in the first instance? Without putting you and Andrew at each other's throats, did the big retailers take all the food and the convenience stores not get any?

James Lowman: Just to reflect on that time and the dynamics of that in respect of our sector, we experienced stockpiling, panic buying or however we want finesse that phrasing, but slightly after the big stores. From a consumer point of view, if you want to buy a lot of products, you are probably going to go to a big store to do it. When people started to go to the big stores, they found shortages on the shelf and it probably was not a particularly pleasant experience at all times, because of that panic-buying behaviour. It was then that people started to move across and look for other sources of supply, and that included the convenience store sector.

From our point of view, interestingly, that has sustained our sector. We have continued to see the number of customers coming to the store relatively level, relatively flat, maybe slightly increased. The amount they are spending when they come into the store is still way ahead of what it would be in normal times, in many cases probably double the basket size of what people are buying, which you understand, because people are not going to the shop as often. People are not popping in to get a chocolate bar and soft drinks on their own. They might buy those products but as part of a broader basket of products, because they are ultimately feeding their families and their household from that shop. There is a change in that mission to some extent.

You asked the question, "Did we get enough food during that time?" We are still not getting full availability of the orders we are making into convenience stores. It is worth remembering that in the main convenience stores are serviced through a third-party wholesale industry as well. The products come into wholesale and then are distributed. The



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retailer selects products from that wholesaler. The supply into those wholesalers, and then consequently the supply into convenience stores, has been really challenged. It still is. The situation has improved, but back in those very early times a number of factors came into play.

First, there was just unprecedented demand. As Andrew alluded to there, the challenge around that time was demand-led and due to extraordinary buying behaviour. It was not due to weaknesses and challenges in the supply chain, which, as Andrew said, held up incredibly well. Product has continued to come through the supply chain extremely effectively. That disrupted our availability in store because the shelves were being stripped as soon as they were replenished, so to replenish those stores was more challenging.

There are then some built-in challenges we have as a sector. Convenience stores will typically receive two to three deliveries a week. They will typically have very limited storage space. Many stores have no storage space. The product literally comes in the front of the store, goes on to the shelf, and there is not any storage in the store. You have fewer ways of mitigating, either through waiting for the next delivery or through storing up that product.

There were particular challenges with the allocation of supply into the convenience store sector. Some of those were very legitimate systems issues. For example, and we may come on to talk about this a bit more, the range that was produced by major manufacturers got smaller, rightly, because that was the way they could maximise production and the product coming through. For example, rather than producing a normal tin of product and a price-marked product, where the price is shown on the package, they just went to producing their main tin without a price on it.

In that example, in the convenience sector, we sell a lot of those price-marked products. That is a bigger feature in our sector than it would be in major supermarkets. But the sales history that those manufacturers would be looking at would show much lower sales of the standard pack, because we are taking other product, therefore suggesting that we did not need a great deal of product. Similarly, they may have been mainly producing four-tin packs, whereas convenience stores are more likely to take more single tins. Again, in the allocation of that particular, specific SKU or product, we would show a weak sales history, which will be reflected in the allocation. We worked with the Food and Drink Federation, the Federation of Wholesale Distributors and others to try to address that. I think we made some progress.

Finally, there were market forces in play. If you are a manufacturer and you have some supermarkets that are very big customers, completely legitimately, where you have shortages and you cannot fulfil all the orders that are being made into your business, you are likely to prioritise those businesses. I understand that, but it has significant impacts on our sector and on consumers, who were, particularly as this developed into



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April, increasingly choosing local convenience shops as a sustained change in their shopping habits.

For us, that stage was almost the peak of challenges with supply, because all those allocation issues were feeding through into weaker supply into our sector. Yet demand was sustained in our sector, possibly for longer in comparative terms than in the supermarket sector.

Q133 **Chair:** A lot of milk, eggs and all sorts of things were going into the restaurant sector and that had to be re-diverted into retail. How quickly were the processors able to get that back into the marketplace in a form that you could buy?

James Lowman: From our point of view, that took some time and probably still has not fully resolved. If you think about convenience stores, people are generally buying in smaller packs. Catering packs that go into food service, hospitality and so on are not retail-friendly, and certainly not convenience-friendly, packs. From our point of view, that probably never happened once the product was produced. I cannot speak to the manufacturing issues, in terms of repurposing that raw product into different packaging and sizes.

I can say that, at a local level, a lot of our members did amazing work with local suppliers that have mainly serviced that hospitality sector, and they were able to get in touch. It was individual phone calls with people running those businesses, saying, "I know you normally supply this hotel group or these pubs locally. I know that business has disappeared overnight. How can we work to repurpose that and take some of that product into our stores?" In a very localised, small-scale way, but with many examples, that happened quite a lot in our sector.

Q134 **Chair:** Before I leave this question, should the Government have anticipated the panic buying? Should the Government have seen this coming more than they did?

James Lowman: Possibly, and I am sure there is a lot of hindsight going on from everyone on this. The one thing I would have asked them to do, with hindsight and looking back, if this was to happen again, which it might, is to think about common messaging. One of the challenges we had at the time was that, around 20 March, the Government started to develop plans for common messaging, to only buy what you really need. We were all braced to introduce that in stores. There is an advantage to having common messaging because consumers get used to seeing that same messaging.

That did not get into stores until a week or 10 days later, by which time everyone had developed their own messaging anyway. It is certainly better in that situation to have a quick response, which is maybe not optimal because it is different across different groups. It is better to have that than to be waiting. The retailers of all kinds did the right thing by



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doing that. It would be worth thinking about how we can get some of those resources on the stocks to activate more quickly.

Chair: Andrew, would you echo that?

Andrew Opie: From our perspective, in some ways, it was entirely predictable, because many of our members run stores in Europe, which saw the impact of COVID before it reached the UK. We were feeding that back to Government. European retailers were reporting back the levels of excessive buying, which the UK mirrored, pretty much, when we went into it. We had Ireland, which was a week ahead and was a real trigger point for us. From mid-February onwards, everybody knew that excessive buying was on the way. To be honest, there is not a great deal that the Government could have done about that. We put a lot of messaging into that and it is right that the industry does that, rather than Government. I am not sure the Government saying "don't panic" is always the best message, to be quite honest. We were really frank with consumers where there were shortages but they were going to be replenished.

Unfortunately, it is a difficult media situation. I lost count of the number of media interviews I did where I knew, hand on heart, that product was either in the system or on the shelves. When I got back to look at the video of that interview, I was shown with empty shelves behind me. There was a lot of that going on, even when I was absolutely confident. In every interview I did, I said, "The country will get the food it needs". I knew that was the case. I was talking to retailers and the supply chain every day, but you cannot always get cut-through. It was predictable.

The one point that was particularly challenging for all retailers, in terms of the preparations, was the speed at which things changed. If you look back to March in particular, you can see real trigger points when consumers really went into massive buying peaks. One was when school closures were announced; the other was the period around 21 and 22 March, when it was clear all shops, other than supermarkets, were going to be locked down, which was then announced on the 23rd. We knew from Ireland that, as soon as stores were closed, that was a massive trigger point for consumers there and we assumed exactly the same would happen here. Sure enough, a week later when we shut our schools, or announced it, we saw that. The problem for the retailers was that, for those real excessive peaks, they did not have sufficient notice to cope with those for a few hours until they replenished the stores.

I am not saying the Government could have done anything about it. It was a fast-moving situation and they had to make decisions based on the health and science. But that was an added complication to the trend of excessive buying that we had already seen. There were some real noticeable peaks, which quickly followed on from Government announcements, which are really difficult to manage.

Just to finish on the communication piece, supermarkets did everything they could do, and James's point is well made, to make people



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understand there was enough food in the system and it would be available to them. "Go to the supermarket; do not rely on online". I am sure we can talk about the capacity of online later. Uniquely—I cannot remember this in my 15 years at the BRC—in mid-March, they collaborated to put adverts in all the major newspapers, from all the companies, making that point explicitly clear. I do not think anybody could have done any more. You just have to accept that there will be periods of excessive buying, but the notice we have and the preparations we can make will make a difference.

Chair: I would like to echo, as you previously said, our thanks to all those who have been supplying and working in the shops, and working through the whole of this to keep the food chain going and to keep food out there for people. Largely, you and everybody have done a pretty good job. There are always bound to be glitches somewhere, but largely we are impressed with how it has held up, and our thanks go to them.

I am sorry, Sheryll; I pinched a bit of your supplementary question. I am sure you will have others to ask.

Q135 **Mrs Murray:** I would like to turn to the relationship with suppliers and expand a little more on it. Are retailers continuing to uphold the Groceries Supply Code of Practice?

Andrew Opie: That is probably more for me than for James, because I do not think many of his members would be covered by the groceries code.

Mrs Murray: Yes, it is to you, please, Andrew.

Andrew Opie: One of the real plus points from this has been the level of collaboration between the suppliers and the retailers through the period. It would not have been possible to do what we did through the period of March into April without that strong collaboration with suppliers. That is something we are going to see more of going forward, particularly in terms of data exchanges through the system, replaying consumer demand into production at food factories.

Q136 **Mrs Murray:** Could you just expand on that? Why did some think it was necessary to relax elements of the code, for example, around de-listing?

Andrew Opie: The point we raised with the Groceries Code Adjudicator through the Government was really to stop any inadvertent problems with the code. James alluded to it earlier. What we know happens in these kinds of situations, and we have rehearsed it with the food supply chain and Government, is that manufacturers start to shrink their ranges and maximise the production of those that are most in demand, so we get the factories more efficient than they would be normally. The only point we were raising with the Groceries Code Adjudicator was the test of reasonableness in a retailer changing the specification and demand for products from the supplier, which then keep pace and are in accordance with the code in reasonableness.



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We were really pleased that, on 9 April, the Groceries Code Adjudicator wrote to all the retailers covered by the code to confirm her views on reasonableness and that she had not heard from any suppliers, certainly at that stage, of any problems in the relationship with the retailers and their suppliers, and to remind suppliers that, if there were any problems, she was still available to hear them and would welcome them being raised at the moment. We are confident that there was a very strong relationship between the retailers and the suppliers, and it was just something to stop an inadvertent breach of the code.

Q137 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much for that, Andrew. So that you do not feel left out, James, this question is primarily to you. Have suppliers been prioritising large retailers over the smaller stores?

James Lowman: That is a good question. It is a question our members have been asking a lot, and I probably do not have a definitive answer to it. There are reasons, some of which I outlined earlier, why there may have been, through systems issues, disproportionate allocation to large stores and we missed out disproportionately. I think that did happen. There are also market forces. If you have to let down one of your customers, do you let down your biggest customer or your 10th biggest customer? Those things have come into play.

I should also say that, at the start of this, the call I was taking most from our members was about whether Government are sanctioning a system by which large stores are prioritised. I am satisfied that the answer to that is no. It was never the case that that was happening. I have to say that, since then, the Government, working through Defra to address these issues for small retailers and their supply chain, and the Food and Drink Federation, representing the larger manufacturers, did really constructive work, trying to address some of these systems issues.

Has that solved this? No. Our members are still struggling to get the supply that they need, over a period where they have sustained increased demand. They still feel that there is an element of priority being given to larger stores, because they go into those stores and see the shelves full in products that they maybe cannot get themselves. I would not want to suggest this problem has been solved, but I am confident in saying it is a problem the Government and the manufacturers tried to address with us. When we can step back a bit, with this inquiry being part of that, it needs a bit of analysis of what really happened there and whether there were systems issues, assumptions or other problems we can look to address going forward.

Q138 **Mrs Murray:** Just coming back as a supplementary, have your members seen any increased use because of queuing systems at the larger supermarkets, meaning people have been using the smaller stores more frequently than they perhaps would have done?

James Lowman: Yes, absolutely. We have seen sustained increases in sales, not so much driven by additional footfall or additional shoppers. It



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is a mixed picture on that, but it has been more about the average basket size going up for the exact reasons you talk about. Also, we have been encouraged not to travel any more than we need to. For many people the supermarket is a little drive away and the convenience store is around the corner. That feels like a safer and more logical thing to do for many people, so they might do that.

The stores I am referring to in that picture are particularly the neighbourhood stores. Most of our stores operate in villages, housing estate, secondary high streets, close to where people live. Everyone can recognise it because everyone has one close to where they live. But there are stores that operate in different locations, such as major city centres, transport hubs, bus and train stations and petrol forecourts, which are a large chunk of our sector. Most of them have seen a very different picture because they rely on footfall generated by people moving about, doing other things, shopping and travelling. That has not been happening for the past few months and may start to develop in the coming weeks. They have seen a very different set of dynamics, with significant declines in trading, if anything more akin to what we have seen in the hospitality sector. It is not just one picture in our sector, but most of our stores operating as neighbourhood locations have seen those increases in sales.

Chair: Andrew, before we leave this one, I am always keen that retailing and processing works in this country, because we have a fiercely competitive world out there. I can understand the relaxation of the code in this epidemic, but I am a little worried that you are all going to get too cosy again and, dare I say it, start stitching things up, not that you ever would, of course. Can we have the assurance that when this is over business will go back to usual?

Andrew Opie: To a certain extent, businesses is back to usual, in terms of competition between the supermarkets, as probably most consumers can see, which is to the benefit of a great market. To be clear, nothing has actually been relaxed on the code. It was simply a statement by the adjudicator about her assessment of what would be reasonable in terms of decisions, including decisions taken between retailers and suppliers. As you can imagine, that is a clause that is interpreted. If, as you say, we return to whatever that new normal looks like, that definition and interpretation of reasonableness is going to be very different to what it was in the middle of March.

Q139 **Dave Doogan:** Many households will have seen the cost of their shopping increase in price. I wonder if you can help us better understand what that is. Is that an increase in consumption, an increase that reflects operation costs, or how much of that feeds into an increase in profit?

Andrew Opie: I am happy to answer that first, because we prepare probably the most accurate sales and pricing figures in the country. They are taken directly from major supermarkets, anonymised independently, and then published. Actually, prices have not gone up as much as people might anticipate. If I just give you our food inflation figures from March,



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April and May, the figure is 1.1% for March, 1.8% for April and 1.5% for May. It is just starting to come down again. We are not looking at large inflation figures.

The trend of food price inflation over the last 12 months, which is also supported by the official figures from the ONS, is about 1.5%. While consumers may have seen slightly fewer promotions, which was a step the retailers quite sensibly took to try to manage the stocks they had in the system to enable everybody to get access to them, we have not seen this huge rise in food prices that seems to have been reported elsewhere. In fact, consumers have continued to get amazing value from British supermarkets and food retailers right through the COVID incident.

James Lowman: In our sector, I would echo Andrew's point about promotions, but probably for slightly different reasons. From mid-March to mid-May, we saw retailers running fewer promotions, but that would have been largely because of the operational challenges of delivering and executing a promotion in store, such as assembling points of sale, putting dump bins in the middle of aisles and putting out more points of sale. To some extent it is the case now, but certainly back then all the focus was on getting the product on the shelf, making sure customers can shop safely and making sure colleagues can work safely.

All that activity got prioritised out very quickly. There was a bit of a change there in the number of promotions run. Promotions are very important in our sector, in maintaining value for the customer. There are also some challenges to us in supply costs coming through, not so much prices increasing from suppliers or wholesalers, but more so retailers having to find additional or supplementary sources of supply. Whereas before they may have got most of their product through one wholesaler and had some other suppliers on their roster of suppliers, they then found that they were not able to provide everything they wanted, so they had to find other local suppliers, different wholesalers, sometimes travelling quite a long way to pick up product.

There were a lot of WhatsApp groups buzzing over this time with information about the supply of hand sanitiser, toilet roll or some other product. That probably led to some changes in pricing, because the prices that the retailers were paying, for all sorts of reasons, were higher than they were paying before. That squeeze on supply pushed through some of those prices to retailers, which in most cases are being passed on. Sometimes, retailers, including some that had never done this before, displayed their buying price as well as the selling price to communicate that as a message to explain that that is where that price change may have come from.

As Andrew said, overall, I do not think we see a trend in terms of prices. It is certainly true that prices were more up and down over that period than they would over a normal six-week or two-month period because it was an extraordinary time.



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Q140 **Dave Doogan:** Further to that, there have been calls from the Competition and Markets Authority and others for legislation to deal with unfair pricing and price gouging. Do you support those calls, or did you, or are we past that stage now? What is your market-led, professional insight into that particular dynamic?

Andrew Opie: We have no problem if the CMA wants to investigate that. We believe in a transparent market and a market that works for consumers. If there were people out there trying to exploit consumers, we have no problem if the CMA wants to look into that. Our companies offer very transparent pricing; everything is available to the CMA. We have nothing to worry about. If it reassures consumers that the CMA carries out an official investigation into that, we would not have a problem.

James Lowman: From our point of view, we have been working with the Competition and Markets Authority from near enough the beginning of this episode, because we were aware, and this is the nature of communications now, that some customers saw prices in shops and they were then posted on social media. They were relatively few incidents, but some got quite high profile at the time, particularly around the products I mentioned, hand sanitiser, toilet roll and things like that. There was noise around that and a number of complaints were made to the Competition and Markets Authority.

We have worked with the CMA to run a campaign, to really encourage retailers to report that activity when they see it, because other operators do not like to see that activity, for two reasons. First, it affects the image of our sector, but secondly that retailer could be building up a war chest through their margins at that time, which they might be able to use competing with the other retailer locally into the future. Other retailers are very sensitive to that going on as well. That was a good campaign that got a lot of take-up, in terms of all the communications metrics, the views and the amount that seemed to cut through to people.

I am not saying that this is a direct cause and effect, but since we launched that campaign we have not seen those stories, incidents and reports on social media at all, never mind to the same extent. We fully welcome the CMA process for taking in complaints, dedicating significant resource to looking at those complaints and then investigating them, because then we can focus on what the issues actually are and whether that is about specific operators or specific activity. From there, we can think about what other measures might be appropriate, if that is legislation or more advice, whatever it might be, working through local authorities. We can then inform that a little better, whereas at the moment we do not have that.

I am not denying that there were complaints made against convenience stores and retailers, but when we have spoken to the CMA, the Department for Business and so on the focus has been on other sectors, such as travel and online marketplaces. It seems that that is where some



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of the most egregious consumer protection issues have been. We will work with the CMA. We have already and we continue to work with them if they deem that appropriate.

Q141 Dave Doogan: Very quickly, I will go back to Andrew and those helpful figures he gave us for in-month inflation, which if I wrote them down correctly were 1.1% in March, 1.8% in April and 1.5% in May. Is it appropriate to take those cumulatively, across that three-month period? At the height of the pandemic, prices would have gone up in the region of 4.5%.

Andrew Opie: No, those figures are a comparison year on year, so that would be the inflation over the period. It is not right to do that.

Dave Doogan: It is not cumulative at all.

Andrew Opie: No.

Q142 Chair: To add to David's point, I think the Office for National Statistics worked out that there has been something like a 4.4% increase in the products that people most buy: perhaps eggs, milk and all the things they really need the most. What is your answer to that, Andrew? We expect prices to go up to a degree but we also expect them to come back down again, don't we? Are you going to see that happen? Putting my farming hat on, I probably want to see the milk prices maintained, but with a retailer's hat on we will expect them to balance themselves out. Are you expecting that to happen?

Andrew Opie: Yes, we are already seeing prices come down. The inflation figures I gave earlier are based on a basket of hundreds of items spread across all different stores and online. This is representative of what your typical weekly shop would be if you go into a supermarket. Frankly, certain products within that basket will always go up and down a little more, particularly fresh, which is susceptible to weather, for example. You get those variations, but overall it is quite clear for British consumers that not only are food prices continuing to be kept low, but they are likely to fall again and you will have seen many promotions.

To your point on farming, in the last month or so, one of the great promotions that I am sure you have all seen in British supermarkets has been for steak. That came out of the hospitality sector and they could not find a home for it, so many retailers have picked up the slack. We have all had the benefit, certainly for the last six to eight weeks, of being able to buy brilliant, affordable British steak in our supermarkets. We are always looking to pick up British produce where we can and promote it to consumers at a great price. I think you are going to see more of that until we see hospitality really get back.

The thing we have not talked about is how, before the start of the COVID crisis, about 30% of our calories were being eaten outside the home. That whole trade almost stopped overnight. We still have to eat, as consumers, so much of that has been absorbed by our members and



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James's members, in the sales we have been making. That has been fantastic value for consumers

Chair: I appreciate that. You can imagine I am a man who likes steak, so I very much like the promotions of British steak in your supermarkets and retailers, and across convenience stores where possible.

Q143 **Geraint Davies:** The Office for National Statistics states quite clearly that the prices have gone up by 4.4% since the lockdown. We know that promotions in Asda are down 40%, in Tesco 34% and in Sainsbury's 28%. Does that 4.4% price hike include the impact of taking out the promotions?

Andrew Opie: I am not sure I agree with the 4.4% figure. I think the latest ONS inflation figure was about 2%, which would not be very different to ours.

Q144 **Geraint Davies:** These are figures that we have been advised, as the Select Committee, by the ONS.

Andrew Opie: That point aside, there has definitely been a drop in promotions, particularly on those popular products, in that period. That was partly to ensure consumers got equal access to all the products. Having said that, it is worth remembering that promotions in general have been falling in British supermarkets for some time. There has been a drive towards the everyday low pricing model, where prices are kept pretty constant for consumers as they go into stores. While promotion has had an impact, it is not as big an impact as it would have been two or three years ago, when promotion was much more widely used.

Q145 **Geraint Davies:** You may not know what the ONS does, but I was wondering whether the promotions factor was already built into the price rise. If there was 4.4% plus cutting promotions—obviously, promotions are price promotions—that would mean the price hike was much higher than 4.4%. In your figures, do you include the promotional aspect of pricing in the pricing figures you just quoted? They happened to add up to 4.4%, incidentally.

Andrew Opie: I am still not sure about the 4.4%. That aside, yes, we build in those prices. We have hundreds of food items that we are monitoring every week across thousands of sale points. By that, I mean different stores as well as online. You will capture that through that. There is no doubt there have been less promotions. Consumers will have noticed that in stores, I think. That will be reflected for people. I come back to my overall point that food inflation figures, as they are running at the moment, of about 1.5% are pretty much what we have seen for the last year. It is wrong to assume that consumers have been hit by substantially higher prices. It has not been the case.

The cost of selling food has risen quite sharply during that period. We did a calculation quite quickly after our members installed social distancing in the tens of thousands of supermarkets across Great Britain. I am sure



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James has done the same with his members. We quickly came to a calculation that about £150 million had been spent by that stage, at the end of March, simply to carry on trading. That is not employing extra staff in warehousing or delivery drivers to make sure the food goes through the system. I am talking about Perspex screens, extra people in staff, more cleaning, obviously, and more precautions set up to administer the queues going into stores. All those were extra costs that were built into the supermarket model from day one of social distancing being installed.

Q146 Geraint Davies: You contest the analysis of the Office for National Statistics that says food prices are currently 4.4% higher since lockdown. You have suggested that the supply chains did recover in a flexible way and therefore it appears that, if the supply and demand are equalising, the prices should be reasonably stable. Otherwise, people would accuse retailers of taking advantage of panic buying when they need not panic buy, but the prices were put up. Then people stocked up and ended up spending a lot more than they would have. Is that the case?

Andrew Opie: I come back to my point that prices are falling in the shops. Our figures for May showed that the inflation figure had dropped back to 1.5%, so we are seeing prices fall. We have also seen very variable sales figures for retailers through the period. We saw very large volumes being bought right up to that lockdown period around the 21 and 22 March weekend. Then sales really dropped off in the first couple of weeks of April because many of us had bought lots of products and did not need to return to our supermarkets to buy.

Q147 Geraint Davies: I have one very small thing to ask James. If it is the case that the big retailers are taking a lot of the supply and it puts pressure on small shops to put up prices in often poor areas, do we end up with a situation where those with the least, who do not have big Volvos to go to Sainsbury's, end up paying much more for the little food they can afford?

James Lowman: I do not think the causality you outlined at the start of your question is what has happened. There have been challenges in supply coming through to our sector and to supermarkets, we feel probably slightly more into our sector, but there is no correlation between that and prices. That has not affected retailers' pricing decisions. There may be a slight impact where they had to source from elsewhere and the prices have come through there. This is one of the things that happen when you have supply problems. The costs that accrue in supply chains, given the extra challenges, end up being passed to consumers in most cases. Certainly, our members have not changed their pricing approach over this time. That is all I can say.

The convenience sector was growing steadily—I am certainly not suggesting at a massive rate—before this and has continued to grow. In those neighbourhood stores, there has been significant sales growth, but there has been no change to pricing strategies over that time.



Q148 Derek Thomas: Four pints of milk in one of my supermarkets here in Penzance costs 80p. That is as low as I have ever seen it and probably a worry, I would have thought, for farmers. It is not right across the board that prices are going up.

So far, this session has been relatively positive and I want to applaud all those who have made sure that food gets to supermarkets and convenience stores. One area of perceived failure, and I mean perceived, is the expectation versus the reality of online shopping. In my constituency we saw, and it may still be the case, that significant numbers of people who were being encouraged to shield and stay at home tried to get an online delivery and could not. They could not find a way through. We found that with pretty much every supermarket.

The question is what advice retailers gave to Government. Government helped to increase the expectation around home deliveries. What advice did retailers give to Government regarding the limitations of online deliveries and the need for community solutions? I do not know what kind of discussion took place before we created this unfair expectation for an awful lot of people. I do not know who wants to tackle that one.

Andrew Opie: I guess it is probably more relevant to me. It is a really great question. One of the points where I would say communication flow between us and Government has not been as strong, particularly at the start, was around the capacity of online. Very quickly, we spoke to Government Ministers as well as officials. At that stage, I think online capacity was about 7.5% of all sales. Of all grocery sales, just under a 12th were available online. The vast majority of sales are still made in store. We made it clear to Government that online capacity was not going to increase so quickly to be able to absorb all those who might want to.

The messaging needed to be to measure the expectation of online capacity and encourage people to shop in store. Where that was particularly difficult, we suggested community solutions, maybe to use the 750,000 NHS volunteers to shop on behalf of those who might need to shield and were not able to get online delivery. The supermarkets even quickly went to the stage of setting up payment systems that would allow volunteers to pay on behalf of those who were shielded.

We were told probably in about the first or second week of March that the Government's preference would be for online retailers to prioritise those on the shielded list. These were the people, I think around 2 million, who were written to towards the end of March, or early April, to say, "You need to shield because you have certain health conditions". The supermarkets did that and prioritised 400,000 consumers who were on that 2 million list. We had to wait for the data to come from Government. We had to sign protocols so we could accept the data. Once that was available, in the first week of April, those 400,000 then took the priority over other vulnerable consumers.



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You are right to spotlight online capacity. It has been a problem. I think there was a misunderstanding of how big that capacity was, despite us raising that a number of times. Frankly, it has led to some disappointment, around not just vulnerable consumers but many other customers who might have expected to get online deliveries.

Q149 Derek Thomas: That completely feeds into our experience here on the ground. My office has done a huge amount to connect people with community solutions because they could not get through to the online shopping route. Thank you very much for that.

We are quite some weeks now since that became a real critical problem. Do you have any indication, other than the 400,000 you referred to, of how many there are among that shielded group and vulnerable people where online shopping is meeting their need? Are people still having to revert to local solutions or alternatives? Is there data available for that?

Andrew Opie: Unfortunately, I do not have the data because that is commercial data between the supermarkets and their customers. I know for a fact that, before that shielded list even came out, where supermarkets were aware that they had vulnerable customers already on their existing list, they were prioritising them anyway. Since the 400,000 were prioritised through existing customers, where customers have been able to be identified and the capacity is available, of course they have been prioritised. Unfortunately, I do not have the numbers for it.

It is not always easy for a supermarket to be able to know who to prioritise. There are a small number of people who, regardless of their own situations, believe they are a priority customer, for example, and will push a supermarket to make them a priority customer, despite them not actually having any needs. We have continued to push the line that people should shop in store where it is available every day and leave that capacity for vulnerable consumers. That gives us more capacity.

As you will probably have seen, many of the supermarkets made statements around that in early April: "If you can shop, shop in our stores. They are fully stocked". That then frees up more capacity for those who need to shield. I do not have the figures because they are kept commercially, I am afraid.

Q150 Derek Thomas: That is fine. There will be lessons to learn, even if we hopefully will never need to use them. Finally, you referred to this earlier and I would be interested if you could expand a bit further. Data protection is a really important issue in the UK. People are very concerned about how their data is used. At the same time, we are saying to people, "We need to give supermarkets and retailers data about you in order for you to get what you need". Do you think there has been a real concern about that, or have customers, generally speaking, been quite relaxed about how that data is accessed and used?

Andrew Opie: I think for that very specific group it was fine. We are talking about the 400,000 here of those who absolutely needed to shield.



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The Government went through all the legal processes before they spoke to the supermarkets. There was quite an extensive protocol that the supermarkets themselves had to understand and sign up to, which went back to the Department of Health and Social Care, before they could then get the data. Only once the lawyers in Government were happy that the supermarkets were obliging with the exchange of data could the data then be exchanged to the supermarkets, to allow them to match who was on the vulnerable shielded list and who was already known to them as a customer, so they could prioritise that customer.

We are confident that the Government took all the steps they needed to. We also believe that those who are in that vulnerable group would have appreciated supermarkets moving as quickly as possible to prioritise them, so there was value in that. That was one of the issues that caused the delays. Although we were talking to the Government probably from mid-March onwards about prioritising that particular group, it was not until about the first or second week of April that the list of the 400,000 started to go to the supermarkets to allow them to prioritise.

James Lowman: There is another part of this equation. Andrew has outlined perfectly, from the supermarkets' point of view, what they experienced. We have seen an extraordinary change in the operation of convenience stores in respect of delivery. We conduct a survey every year and we ask, "Do you have a local grocery delivery service?" The answer is that 12% of convenience stores are offering this in normal times. We now estimate that figure to be somewhere between a half and two-thirds of retailers offering those services. At a conservative estimate, during this time there have been 600,000 deliveries from convenience stores every week. That figure would have been very low before this, so that has pretty much come from nothing, but with some quite different dynamics there.

Often, that has been working with local volunteers. We have had members say they turned up to open the shop in the morning and there were five local volunteers saying, "Can we help with deliveries today?" It is incredible. That linking with the local community has been fantastic, often carried out by the retailer themselves or some colleagues there. We produced guidance for retailers on conducting home deliveries, so things like health and safety, food hygiene and insurance issues. We had to work our way round using your own car, for example. We have seen that come up from nowhere.

There have been a couple of limitations in the way the Government have dealt with this. First, I understand you rightly raised the point about data. It is incredibly important that data security is respected. Where we have some members that already have loyalty systems and a customer database in their local area, which is not most of our sector, but there are some that have that, they found it very difficult. They were not able to access that list under any terms. They did not want to just get the list. They wanted to access it so they could cross check, as the supermarkets



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have done, which customers they should give priority to. They were not able to do that for the smaller retailers. That needed to be able to happen, particularly as this was coming into effect.

To try to join this all up, we ended up producing a checklist for retailers to essentially signal to the local authority and their helplines to say, "We are offering these services", which may well include delivery. It may include card-not-present transactions, which Andrew alluded to there, so volunteers being able to pay on behalf of people they are shopping for. The local authority becomes aware of those services and therefore, where vulnerable people, or those who are isolating, need help and cannot get supply, hopefully the local authority can then link them up with a store that can deliver to them.

It is a pretty analogue and cumbersome system. We are pleased we have done it, but it would be wrong to say we have solved that problem and ticked that box. We clearly have not. This is something that, again, now knowing what we know, deserves more consideration into the future. We are astonished by and incredibly proud of the job our members have done in developing a large-scale delivery system through lots of local shops in a very small space of time.

Derek Thomas: You are absolutely right, James. I represent a very rural part of west Cornwall, right at the very tip. Even before the lockdown started, I saw, as you say, these smaller shops, farm shops and convenience stores, responding in an amazing way, with all the challenges you have described in terms of data. It has been an extraordinary effort. My office quite quickly got hold of a list of all those shops that were able to offer that and connected people. It has been a great success because, as we have said right throughout this session, people have got the food they needed, by hook or by crook, so thank you very much.

Q151 **Chair:** Before we leave this one, I think overall online and delivery has gone up from 7% to 11%. Do you see that continuing? What is your view on that after the outbreak? Will it drop back or continue?

Andrew Opie: It has been phenomenal growth. We have probably seen five or six years' growth of online in about seven or eight weeks, which is a phenomenal effort. I think that will be one of the trends we see continuing into the future. It will be interesting to see what the impact on shopping is as households return to normal. We know for example that quite a lot of young people are currently at home with their parents. There are some larger baskets being spent, as James said. There is probably more of an issue for online. Online has given every customer a chance to see what it is and maybe try it out for the first time. Once people try it, they may like it and stick with it. I do not see us reversing the trend in online going forward.

James Lowman: We will see consumer demand. Andrew outlined some of the issues there well. There is an enormous issue for our members in



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servicing that demand. Previously, there were two types of home delivery happening from convenience stores. There were particularly vulnerable people, to whom they might do deliveries once a week on a reasonably informal basis, prior to this. Then there would be people ordering, and mainly impulse items, often late at night, where it was quite heavily premium priced.

Now we see a product being delivered at normal, standard pricing, either with a small delivery charge or often with none. The question retailers now face is, if you want to do this in the long term, how to sustain that. Do you have a sustainable and viable model for doing that? We have been using volunteers, as I have said, in some cases. That is not going to sustain into the future forever.

There are demand issues, whether consumers are going to want that delivery and from their local shop. Probably to some extent they will, but the challenge is then how you service that in a viable way. That is a very live debate in our sector

Chair: Especially in rural areas, you might have to travel quite a distance as well. I pay tribute, like Derek does, to everybody who has got that food out, convenience stores, farm shops, everything. The rural areas have done well, as well as the cities. It has been a remarkable effort, so thank you for that.

Q152 **Robbie Moore:** My question is a slight change of topic but it is to do with physical access to stores. We took evidence over the last couple of sessions from the likes of Age UK and Disability Rights UK. I would be interested to know, from both of your perspectives, how shops will ensure they implement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while fulfilling their duties under the Equality Act, for example ensuring reasonable adjustments are made for customers with disabilities.

Andrew Opie: I am happy to answer that very good question. Obviously social distancing was a challenge for stores when it was introduced. It was introduced really quickly. I remember having a conversation with a group of retailers on the evening of the 23rd when the Prime Minister made that statement. There was no guidance up until that stage on how you should social distance. They have done a brilliant job across all of food to get that in place. There is no doubt that it presents more difficulties for vulnerable and disabled consumers.

We were very conscious of that from the start. Retailers talked to their staff and I think that was the key thing. For example, with the greeters in the store who manage the queues, if there is somebody there they should be able to spot them, help them into the store and maybe prioritise their entry. Similarly, for some reason there seemed to be some concerns that carers would not be allowed into stores with the customers themselves. That is absolutely not the position. Interestingly, with Age UK and 24 other charities, we had a lengthy call with Defra two or three weeks ago to go through all the measures we have taken, make sure they were



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happy and listen to them, in terms of how they communicate to their customers who come into our stores.

One of the other issues is the designs of the stores: one-way systems, maybe changing it. We have to think how we manage social distancing in a way that keeps it accessible for every customer. That could be everybody, from somebody who is blind or partially sighted through to somebody who is autistic and therefore finds change more difficult to manage than one of our normal, regular customers who comes into the store.

We are working through some of these issues. We think the steps we have put in place, particularly the training of all colleagues, to look out for not only those who might be disabled but those who have hidden disabilities, has really helped with that process. We are continuing the conversation with those groups. I think Defra is setting up another call with the major retailers and that large group of charities, just to check in with where we are.

To finish, I would say that it is probably less of a challenge now in the stores than four or five weeks ago. There is no doubt that consumers have settled down in their shopping. We are seeing people maybe spacing out when they come during the day more. As a consequence, we are seeing less queuing at certain times of the day than we saw before. That is helping the process, plus the fact that most consumers, including disabled and vulnerable consumers, are becoming more aware of what those changes are and how to accommodate them.

We have a lot of responsibilities. We are looking at making sure that our signage is clear and that the advice we give through our websites and customer care lines reflects the concerns of charities. We are pretty confident we have done a really good job since the social distancing came in. We are now tweaking that communication and messaging, working with those charities.

Q153 Robbie Moore: Before we go to James, and maybe James can comment on this as well, I have had one or two constituents contact me who have visual impairments. I was wondering if you might comment specifically on that, what your organisation is doing and how you are communicating better training for staff to aid that process.

Andrew Opie: That is one of our biggest challenges. The communication was done very early on and is a reminder to all store colleagues to look out for people who might have a visual impairment. They will approach them and ask them if they want help. We have seen that in stores, where maybe somebody without a carer going into the store has had a colleague take them round the store and show them where things are.

We have also been reflecting on the signage that is around the store before you come into it. There is some really good practice. As you can imagine, stores started from zero with the signage here. They have been



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sharing best practice across the stores about what works well, particularly for those who are partially sighted, so they can see in the store as well as the notice before they come into the store.

As I said, it is a constant process. RNIB and various other charities that represent those with visual impairments are on those calls with Defra. They are sharing communications with our members, which is really helping them translate what it means for somebody with visual impairment as a customer to their colleagues, so they can look out for them. Not everybody wants the help when they are approached by colleagues in store, and that is fine as well, but everybody is reminded of the need to serve every customer when they come into our stores.

James Lowman: We produced some guidance at the beginning of the year, not related to COVID, but it has probably become more relevant since then, working particularly with the Alzheimer's Society. We have a campaign this year to try to create 25,000 dementia friends from people working in our sector. As part of that, we updated the guidance we have on welcoming vulnerable customers to stores. Some of that is about physical changes and thinking about layout and design of stores. Andrew is absolutely right: a lot of it is about training, the personal interactions in store and how you help. There are millions of different examples we could think of. The reasonable adjustment might be a physical change to the store, but it is usually about interaction, awareness and helping people to access the services in a way that is possible for them.

It is particularly a challenge in our sector because we are generally small stores. Over half of independent convenience stores are under 1,000 square feet, so really small. You throw into that one-way systems and social distancing. When you go to convenience stores now, you see loads of tape on the floor signalling two metres and so on. That is relying on customers seeing that and being able to interpret and work with it. It is mainly about that work with colleagues in store.

There are 407,000 people working in convenience stores. I am not going to sit here and say, "Yes, those are all perfectly trained and know exactly what to do", but it goes with working in a convenience store, in a local shop, that you are going to be pretty attuned to the needs of local people. Most people will deal with people with all sorts of vulnerabilities and disabilities all the time in stores. It is a normal part of the job. It is not a COVID-specific thing, but it is more acute at this time.

Finally, I would pick up on Andrew's point about carers. It is incredibly important. Maybe this has been a somewhat neglected area in the past. It is something we need to really focus on. Next week is national Carers Week and we will be trying to use that as a hook to speak more about these challenges with our colleagues at the Alzheimer's Society, Carers UK and others, to grow that awareness. There is not a simple answer I can give you to reassure you there will never be any problems, but I can



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absolutely reassure you that this was front of mind before the COVID crisis and it is certainly front of mind for all our members at the moment.

Q154 **Dr Hudson:** I want to change tack slightly again and move on to the safety and welfare of key workers and shop workers specifically. First, I would like to echo previous comments to pay tribute to the key workers, shop workers and everyone through the whole food distribution, processing and food production side of things. This COVID crisis has put food security into sharp relief and I want to say thanks and pay tribute to everyone who has kept us fed.

Over to both of you, Andrew and James, how do you feel shop workers are being kept safe from coronavirus during this? Is this something that has been looked at on association level or more locally, in individual shops?

Andrew Opie: I mentioned earlier the conversation about social distancing. One of the key aspects of that, for every employer, was the health and welfare of their staff, as well as consumers coming into the stores. For example, you will have seen that Perspex screens at the tills appeared very quickly.

There is PPE of a sort, not PPE that you would have in a medical situation. We were very conscious not in any way to take away supplies that were going to the NHS, but we realised that many of our colleagues would be rightly very concerned about coming into work. PPE of a sort, which might be masks or plastic visors, as well as gloves, has been offered to everybody who wants it in a major supermarket. It has never been a problem. They have been available and have been offered to people. Not every colleague chooses to use them. That is a choice, but they are available there and a reminder that they are.

We have discussed it at association level because many of our members are likely to be resuming trade in the next couple of weeks, the non-food retailers, which is great for them and their workers. We have been learning lessons all along about what works best in communication with workers and making sure they understood. I think we have got that right. The reason I think we have got it right is reflected in the absence rates. Retailers are very conscious that, if they did not get this right, people would not come into work. That would be absolutely the right approach for those workers if they did not feel safe.

Absence rates in stores have come down quite markedly through the period, and I think that is testament to the work the retailers have done, working with USDAW and others. You may have seen that we published joint guidance for the social distancing in stores and the measures that supermarkets and other retailers should take. That was co-branded with USDAW, as representatives of store workers, because we wanted them to also be sure that what we were doing was correct. All the way through, we have had workers' health and welfare at the forefront. We would not have been able to achieve this without the workers. I know you and



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others have reflected that here. Making them feel as comfortable as we could was top of mind. Otherwise, we would not have got enough workers in and we would not have been able to feed the nation.

James Lowman: As Andrew said, what concerned our association most, on 20 March or around that period, was that we would see a spike in absences that would mean our stores could not operate effectively. That did not happen, across the sector. That is due to the commitment and hard work of people working in our stores. It has been astonishing.

I do not want to just repeat everything Andrew has said. The only point I would make, particularly for independent retailers, is that they are there in the stores themselves. They are working behind the tills, going out, sourcing products, sourcing PPE and sticking the tape on the floor. They are the ones physically doing that. Some of them have made a very conscious decision that they want to be visible in store so their colleagues can see that and can see there is a commitment from them. They are not expecting their colleagues to do something they would not themselves.

Very sadly, there has been a cost in our sector, with a number of people being ill. We have had members of ours who died with coronavirus. It is a very personal and visceral thing for our sector because people working in our sector are extremely aware of the risks and motivated to do everything they can to minimise and mitigate those risks. As I say, sadly, that has not always been possible for some of our members.

In the survey we have done about the different measures that have been installed, there are very high rates of installation of things like plastic screens and often visors rather than face masks. That has been a bit more operable for people in our sector. I am very conscious of the advice that a medical professional will wear masks and treat that in a very different way to how you or I might—not you, but how I might—as a non-medical professional. The visors were seen as a really effective measure, and more wearable and usable. Yes, all the evidence we have is that members invested significantly, in time and equipment, to make their colleagues and themselves as safe as they could.

Q155 **Dr Hudson:** Those comments really reaffirm the deep personal tragedy in this COVID crisis for many people. As a follow-up to that, we talked there about the health of your staff. Have you been aware of any situations where your staff have not been treated well by customers, anxious customers, distressed customers or whatever, and that has led to a reduction in their welfare? What can be done to help your staff along those lines to protect them from that?

James Lowman: I am afraid the answer is yes. We are aware of examples of that. Every incident is different, but there are lines drawing through those. Customers generally have a higher level of anxiety and frustration than they would have normally. The vast majority of customers are trying their very best to comply with regulations, adapt and help each other. That is mainly what has been happening. The



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biggest thing I am hearing from members has been them having to referee arguments between customers in store and trying to deal with those sorts of issues. That is a very difficult thing to do, particularly if you are trying to socially distance and you have people literally trying to challenge each other physically.

There is another factor we have seen. We know that the biggest single trigger for violence and abuse in stores—this is in normal times—is shop theft. We have seen an increase in shop theft in some stores, probably less so in those neighbourhood stores. Social distancing and maybe even more staff will probably reduce the incidence of theft in those neighbourhood stores. Where you have homeless people and others with addiction problems who would usually fund that addiction through theft from and acquisitive crime against a number of businesses, all those businesses are shut now. They are not stealing from non-food and homewares retailers. The only store that is available is that convenience store in the city centre, so all that crime is funnelled in.

We are seeing not just stock loss, which is secondary, but how brazen and violent those people can be at that time. That is probably not surprising, because these are people with very serious problems who are in an extremely heightened state at that point. In those particular stores, we have seen real incidents of horrible violence committed towards colleagues and retailers. That includes spitting and coughing.

We are pleased that the Government sent a very clear message about that being unacceptable and that it will be treated as assault. We would like to see prosecutions brought as appropriate against those committing those crimes. It is part of the equation about trying to keep people coming to work and confidence in work. We have a role to play as employers, as do the authorities—generally, the police have been very supportive and helpful, I should say—in creating that safe environment against customers who commit particularly violent and awful acts.

Q156 Dr Hudson: Andrew, before you come in, can I add a supplementary question along those lines that you could add your comments to? James, you have touched on the Government and police advice that helped you. Andrew, could you also address how useful you have felt the Government advice has been? Has it been useful? Has it been timely as well? James has given us an example there. Has that been helpful to you and has it worked for you in terms of interpreting it to keep shop workers safe?

Andrew Opie: Yes, generally it has. If I am honest, there has been a bit of misunderstanding around the issue of face masks and face coverings, both for consumers and for shop workers at times. I realise it is really difficult, but that would be the area of communication that has been the most complicated—let us put it that way—and given us the most problems. Would they become mandatory? You have a devolved issue here as well. Different devolved countries are perhaps saying different things about whether face coverings are necessary.



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I want to add to James's comments, which I absolutely endorse. One of the two periods where we found we had the most issues with consumers was the real run-up to the lockdown, so that week before. We saw some elements of consumers losing control a bit in stores, which was a little disappointing. Our colleagues are not there to referee, as James rightly says. The second period was about management of queues. A very small number of people were not prepared to queue, regardless, at the start. It took a little time for them to understand that they need to treat everybody with respect.

As a final point, to reflect on that, it has been really good to hear the endorsement from the Committee today for shop workers. We really hope that is now carried through into the more normal situation. Unfortunately, shop workers have not always been a priority for intervention by the police over the years. They have been exposed at times to unnecessary and completely unwarranted violence in stores. We would really welcome Parliament and the police getting together and making shop workers a priority to avoid these kinds of problems, as one of the consequences of the COVID incident. It has been great to get police support. All our CEOs raised this with the Secretary of State quite early in the incident. He liaised with the Home Office and made sure police prioritised stores, particularly when we had queues. We really hope that shops will continue to be a priority for the police into the future.

Dr Hudson: They were very thought-provoking answers with some important take-home messages for us as a Committee.

Chair: Yes. Andrew, I would emphasise what Neil Hudson has said there. That is a well-made point and we will put it in a letter to the Secretary of State on the evidence session we have had today, so thank you for that. I will ask everybody to keep questions and answers a little shorter because we are beginning to get shorter of time.

Q157 **Ian Byrne:** I would like to echo Neil's excellent comments on the two excellent answers. They were really good. This is just a quick one. It has been covered really by Andrew, but this one is to James. It is more about what interaction the sector has had with trade unions to ensure the safety of retail and sales staff. I think the ONS put a report out last month saying that sales and retail assistants are twice as likely to die from COVID. You have already touched very well on it, James, as has Andrew. I would like to know what interaction you have had with the trade unions.

James Lowman: The short answer is that we are always in touch with USDAW, particularly, very closely. We continue to be in touch with them through this, addressing these issues and others. Yes, we have had a number of calls with USDAW, the union we work with.

Q158 **Ian Byrne:** This is a quick one to both Andrew and James. Would it be possible to ensure that all employees are fully aware of their rights through the health and safety legislation, certainly to PPE? Sometimes



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employees are not aware of what is out there. I know there has been some brilliant collaboration between employees and employers on this, but it is hugely important that everyone knows their rights at work, certainly as the lockdown eases. I would really appreciate a commitment from you both on that.

Andrew Opie: You have our commitment. Our companies will continue to liaise with their workers. It is that point of making sure they understand what is available to them. If they have concerns, raise them immediately. Absolutely, I totally endorse that.

James Lowman: Yes, absolutely, exactly the same.

Q159 **Geraint Davies:** On the ONS figures, I know Ian just said you are twice as likely to die if you are a shop-worker. I am not sure whether that is separated out by the food sector, because most shop workers are not working at all. We know that taxi drivers, for instance, are seven times as likely to die. Postal workers even are twice as likely to die. Bus drivers are four times as likely to die. I was wondering whether Andrew knew what proportion of deaths were in fact people in the food retail sales sector, versus the proportion of people in employment in the non-food retail sector. I appreciate you may not know.

Andrew Opie: I do not. Would the Committee like me to come back to you?

Geraint Davies: If you would not mind, I think that would be very helpful.

Chair: We can have that in writing, please, yes.

Q160 **Geraint Davies:** Andrew, you mentioned the issue of masks. Yesterday, the Government announced that masks should be compulsory in public transport. You will know in various countries, in China, parts of Europe and elsewhere, masks are compulsory in food stores because people assemble. I was wondering what you felt about that. I certainly think masks should be compulsory. The argument has been put about that we do not have enough masks, but we could buy millions of a rudimentary kind from abroad.

Secondly, do you feel that hand sanitiser should be compulsorily provided at the point of entry so people can wash their hands when they are touching all the products and they do not cross contaminate other customers? Finally, is there a case for temperature testing? People might think this is a bit over the top, but that is what they do in China and that is why they are out of lockdown. What do you think about mass sanitisers and temperature testing?

Andrew Opie: We are led by the guidance, I have to say. We will be led by what the Government believe. The only thing I would say about masks is that we are talking about face coverings rather than face masks. It is quite important to make that distinction so we do not divert from the NHS. Some of our members have taken that approach. You made a point



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about hand sanitisers and hygiene facilities. They are available in most supermarkets already. That is something we would recommend, plus washing your hands before you come to the store, the normal guidance that is available.

Q161 **Geraint Davies:** On the masks, I understand that this line has been given now for the last few months: we do not have enough masks and therefore we have to give them to the NHS. In my understanding, the production of these at great scale is possible. I appreciate this is a Government issue, not for you. If they were available, given that they do not cost very much, would you be prepared to provide them free at point of entry to your big stores?

Andrew Opie: I am not sure about that. I do not think Transport for London is offering them to people who are travelling on the Tube. We would have to look at that one.

Q162 **Geraint Davies:** There is a case for that as well. On the sanitiser, you said there are sanitisers. If I come into one of your stores, would there be a big sign saying, "Now squeeze some sanitiser on your hand on entry", or is it an optional extra, if I notice it? How seriously are you taking this?

Andrew Opie: We are taking it very seriously. Generally you will see it with the greeter who is at the head of the queue for the supermarket. Not only do they have sanitiser there, but they are usually involved in sanitising the baskets and trolleys at the same time as well. Have a word with the greeter when you go into your local supermarket. I am sure they will be happy to help.

Q163 **Geraint Davies:** It is not compulsory. It is advisory.

Andrew Opie: It has been available for consumers, but we found from quite early on that many consumers did not want to use it.

Geraint Davies: I suppose you could do something about that and not let them in if they did not wash their hands.

Chair: Geraint, can we keep the questions a bit faster going please?

Q164 **Geraint Davies:** In addition, I want to ask about testing. We know that your employees are particularly vulnerable. I just want to check. In my understanding now there is compulsory screening, but what about testing? How often are they tested, if at all? If they are asymptomatic they may be infecting the customers as well.

Andrew Opie: Yes, of course. They were prioritised for testing reasonably early on in the testing programme, as you are probably aware, as key workers. As I understand it, testing is now available to everybody in the country if you are exhibiting the symptoms. That would be exactly the same for supermarket workers.

Q165 **Geraint Davies:** You are not tested automatically if you do not have



symptoms. If you are asymptomatic, you are not tested. Is that the case?

Andrew Opie: That is correct.

Q166 **Geraint Davies:** That does not sound very good. James, do you have any comments about these precautionary measures, testing, masks or sanitiser? I know it is more of a problem in small stores.

James Lowman: As for masks and sanitiser, we are led by the PHE guidance and preferences of colleagues and customers. You talked about it earlier on. In the case of colleagues, it was offered and then colleagues made a choice about whether they wanted to wear a mask, a visor or whatever was available.

Testing is available for people with symptoms. As I understand it, that is the national Government policy. It is only available if you have symptoms, as I understand it. I think many of our members would quite like to have more of an ongoing testing programme for their colleagues. I think they would quite like to be able to do that, in order to manage absence, plan further ahead and have a bit more of a systemic approach. As I understand it, that is not available.

Early on in the process around testing, there was a great focus on an employer portal and an employer process to accelerate and expedite testing for key workers, which include our members and their colleagues. Frankly, that never really worked. Mostly, our members are now just referring people and saying to them, "Go and get your own test", because it is quicker to do it that way. The employer portal, in the heart of it, still relied on a manual process. Lots of employers trying to get signed on to that found it did not work. It is more effective for their colleagues to go through the normal process.

Q167 **Geraint Davies:** If there was compulsory testing, there may be people in the retail sector, retail assistants, who have symptoms but are fit to work and do not have COVID at all. They have something else like a common cold. Would you agree that greater availability of regular testing would be helpful to keep people at work, as well as keeping people safe?

James Lowman: Yes. The other end to that equation, in terms of Government's management, is not my specialist subject, but in terms of retail, yes, if someone is not well, they should not be coming to work, whether they have COVID or something else. They should be at home anyway. The period of isolation would likely be very different if you had COVID symptoms versus another illness that you would probably treat in a slightly different way. Yes, more information and testing would be very useful. That is not where we are at the moment.

Q168 **Geraint Davies:** Finally, Andrew, you mentioned devolution. You will know that the two-metre rule is a legal requirement rather than an advisory medical suggestion. Do you find anecdotally that that is giving rise to people taking the two-metre rule more seriously and abiding by it more in Wales, or do you not know?



Andrew Opie: It is a good question. I have not heard of variation across the countries because of the fact that it is more mandatory. The two-metre rule is well known by consumers and shop workers, whether it is a legal requirement or not. We are not seeing a variation across the countries in terms of people in England, for example, not observing the two-metre distancing but observing it better in Scotland. That is not our experience.

Q169 **Geraint Davies:** I am sure you agree that our priority should be to keep people safe but also make people confident so that, beyond the food retailer sector, we can open up the hospitality sector et cetera. I know you are not in Government, but is your instinct that more masks will be encouraged to give greater confidence, as we have now seen on transport?

Andrew Opie: We are starting to see elements of the hospitality sector. We have many food-to-go members who operate takeaways and deliveries, for example. They have learned from the supermarkets in terms of their workers. They have been very precautionary. They have spoken to their colleagues in store. They have made masks and visors available to them. Again, it is not always mandatory for those store colleagues. It is voluntary, but it is offered. You will have seen, with drive-throughs that are reopening, that it is possible to operate those stores within social distancing, provided the employers have worked with their workers to make sure it is possible to work it and still serve consumers. I think we will see more of that.

As James has said, that is a Government debate, in terms of mandatory wearing of various PPE. For us, the issue is making sure, whether those colleagues are in food-to-go or supermarkets, that they are confident to come into work and serve customers. That has to be the employer's responsibility.

Q170 **Ian Byrne:** We have recently seen figures about the rise in use of foodbanks, which is something that should terrify us all. I am sure everyone in this Committee would agree. It leads to many questions about how we are dealing with the epidemic of food poverty as a society. I would like to ask how much food retailers have donated to foodbanks and food aid organisations during the pandemic above what would be donated normally.

Andrew Opie: Unfortunately, I do not have that figure to hand. As you will probably have seen, various retailers have made statements about cash donations alongside the physical donations of product that they continue to be able to make. There is no doubt that there was a slowdown in donations, both from the supply chain, when it was at its peak, and from customers in store. As you are probably aware, lots of customers donate through the stores themselves, which goes into food redistribution.



I would point out that Government responded reasonably quickly to this issue when we identified it with them, as did the food redistribution charities. They set up a group between the retailers, the major manufacturers, which supply a lot of the food that goes into foodbanks, and FareShare, which is the key overarching distributor of food, back in mid to late March to look at the situation. In my understanding, it has recovered really well since then, in terms of getting enough product into the system and FareShare and its partners being able to redistribute it. There is no doubt that it was a massive challenge in the early days of COVID, but it has improved. I would put that down to the co-ordination of the food redistribution charities in the room, or virtually in the room, with the retailers and the suppliers.

Q171 **Chair:** Can we have some figures in writing afterwards, Andrew, please?

Andrew Opie: Sure, I will see what I can get you.

James Lowman: I do not have a lot to add, I am afraid. Certainly the shape of what Andrew has described is what we have experienced. Food donations from customers buying in stores and from stores themselves went down significantly because there was not much food available in the store. There were a number of cash donations from larger retailers, some of our members, but mainly from the large supermarkets. It has picked up since then and foodbank donations are going back a bit closer to where they were before.

Q172 **Ian Byrne:** I have a quick follow-up question, because I know we are short of time. Moving forward, we are going to go into post-COVID. Whether that brings economic issues, I am sure foodbanks are still going to be important, unfortunately. Are there any new arrangements that could be made logistically to ensure food organisations, such as the Trussell Trust and FareShare, can move forward with both of your organisations in bringing something together that ensures we do not have food waste? Is this something you give any thought to?

James Lowman: Yes. There has been a lot of work on trying to minimise food waste. You mentioned some of the organisations there. The Company Shop would be another one, which has extended its remit to serve more people over this time. It has been an ongoing debate in the past, partly in terms of food poverty but more generally about food waste and trying to address that as well. It is certainly something we would be keen to have more conversations about.

Andrew Opie: Yes, absolutely. We already had those conversations through WRAP. As you are probably aware, WRAP is the organisation that is trying to deliver the Government's commitments on reduction of food waste. Part of that is food redistribution. We are working through WRAP with FareShare, Trussell Trust, other distribution charities and the manufacturers exactly on that point. Ironically, the best result would be for those consumers to have enough money to come and buy in the stores, but we recognise that will not be the case. Eradicating food



poverty is about eradicating poverty, not food poverty necessarily. We will do everything we can do in the meantime. We were having those discussions pre-COVID anyway, so they will definitely continue.

Ian Byrne: Those were excellent answers.

Q173 **Chair:** The point is that food waste is morally wrong. If we can cut a lot of that out and get it to the people who most need it, that would also be good. I think you both take that on board. Those were very good answers.

My question is on the school meals voucher scheme. You could only use those vouchers in very few stores. I think the scheme has been widened, but does it need to be widened further? I will bring in Andrew first and then I do not know how many convenience stores are able to accept vouchers.

Andrew Opie: This has probably been one of the biggest disappointing issues of the whole COVID incident and the food supply chain. You are absolutely right. When DfE started it, it used a provider that was working with a number of the major retailers, which was great, but there were some notable absences where families using school vouchers probably would shop. I am talking about the likes of Aldi, Lidl and Co-op. Co-op in particular is a store that often serves remote communities where there is not another store to go to.

The biggest disappointment of the whole thing has been the lack of willingness from both DfE and its providers to work with the retailers to find workable solutions. I know from speaking to all three of those companies that they very quickly contacted DfE at a very senior level, as well as the provider of the voucher scheme, to say, "We have systems. We just need to work with you and implement them". This then went on for weeks and months. I am aware that two of those companies are still not members of that.

Q174 **Chair:** Which companies are those?

Andrew Opie: In my understanding, the only one that has joined it is Aldi. It joined it very late, towards the end of April.

Q175 **Chair:** Co-op is not there.

Andrew Opie: Yes. Co-op, for example, in the end had to do its own system with schools locally, which you can have reimbursed in stores. The problem is that those schools may be penalised because they are using a system outside the DfE's preferred system. I have to say that it has not been a very good performance by DfE. These are stores that were very willing to help those customers. They have gone out of their way to try to find a workable solution that would be acceptable to Government as well as preventing fraud and helping those customers to shop in those stores, which, I should point out, they would probably be



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shopping in anyway. They have been denied access to those stores. It has been a very poor performance.

James Lowman: I am trying to think if there is anything to add to that. If I say anything, it will probably be more inflammatory. It has been a very poor performance through this. A number of our members that want to offer these services are perfectly placed to offer those services. We are generally seeing people using convenience stores more, pretty much still week on week, so it is clearly relevant to those people's shopping preferences, yet they are not in a position to offer this.

There were some issues around having to be able to offer in every single store operating under that brand. That presents some challenges where you have the symbol groups and arrangements, which are not command-and-control multiple retailers in quite the same way. There were particular challenges with them. Even those that are integrated multiple retailers could not all get on to the system. I think there are some issues with how this challenge was initially thought about. I think there were some assumptions made about where people would want to access food that were wrong.

In terms of the speed of trying to remedy those problems, that was very slow and problematic. We ended up with a system whereby, as Andrew said, schools can support their families who use the schools in issuing vouchers, but at a cost to the school, so that is not an ideal outcome at all. This needs to be rethought quite quickly. One point I would throw into that would be to think about using the Healthy Start system. That is a system that is more open-sourced that many retailers can use. Independent, multiple, large and small retailers can use it. That would seem to me like a better framework for building additional school meal provision where it is needed in circumstances like this. It has been a very disappointing episode.

Q176 **Chair:** We take both of your answers very seriously. We are the EFRA Committee. We are not the Education Committee, but we will make our representations to the Secretary of State for Education. The trouble with Governments—I do not think it is just our Government, but all Governments—is that they work very departmentally. Defra is for food and the DfE is not necessarily, but of course there has to be a crossover and we have to work much more quickly. We will make sure the evidence you have given today goes through to the Department for Education.

We need to learn lessons from this to get these vouchers out. It needs to be common sense. People are not all going to shop in the high end of the marketplace, are they? Those particular people want value for money if they are getting their vouchers as well. The whole thing needs to be looked at very quickly and thoroughly to make sure we can get it right. On school milk and other things, there could be some real benefits in the long term for it anyway. We will make sure that gets through the system.

Q177 **Ian Byrne:** I am absolutely delighted to hear the comments you have



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just made. The feedback I got from head teachers in Liverpool and people on the ground was about how shambolic it was. It was really good to hear Andrew and James. It is hugely important that issue is tackled by us as well, because it really has been a shambles.

What lessons does this pandemic teach us about the resilience of our food supply chain?

James Lowman: First, it has told us we have incredible people working in the supply chain at all levels. Particularly the people working on the front line deserve the most credit. That has been very encouraging, in thinking about resilience of the supply chain. The fact is that the system has held up. We talked about some of the issues and the challenges but it has held up. The nation has been fed over this time. We talked about that very clear criterion at the start. That has been met.

We have learned, very particularly, that a strength of the food supply chain that we need to emphasise more and do more to support is its diversity: diversity of supply points, diversity of supply chain and routes to the market and diversity of the retail outlets themselves. Had the market only been large stores, there would have been significant challenges. Back in March and early April, there were huge challenges faced by those stores, which they were working very hard to address, but people then went to smaller stores, different types of outlets, whether it is a convenience store, a farm shop or whatever it might have been, to get the product they needed.

That diversity of retail outlets and diversity of manufacturing and supply has been shown to be incredibly important. If we are thinking about how we make the supply chain resilient into the future, maintaining that diversity and plurality is going to be incredibly important.

Andrew Opie: To build on what James said, because I agree with that, it shone a focus on that supply-retail relationship. We talked about it right from the start. It showed how important it is to have a resilient and strong relationship. I think we will see more data exchanges. There is a lot of work going on about data. The unpredictability in the excessive buying at the end of February and in March was something everybody found a challenge. I think we will see more work on that.

Secondly, when Government react quickly, they can make a big difference. If I come back to that relaxation of regulation, that was crucial to us getting this right. I have to pay testament to the Secretary of State. He was brilliant for us. We raised issues with him. He talked to his departmental colleagues in places like MHCLG or DfT and got those changes made. They made a big difference.

The third thing I wanted to say is probably a warning for the Committee more than anything. If we thought this was a problem, we should start looking forward to a disorderly Brexit in January. If we get a disorderly Brexit, we potentially face a bigger challenge than the food supply chain



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faced in COVID. The reason I say that is that we had no problem getting food to this country at any time because the borders were flowing. In fact, Italy increased its pasta production during its worst time and sent more to us. If we see the borders disrupted in January from a disorderly Brexit, we have a big problem. Then we do not have the food in the country to move around, which is the bit we did really well in this crisis.

We need an orderly Brexit that allows food to flow, particularly across the channel straits, where I think 90% of our lettuces, 80% of our tomatoes and 70% of our soft fruit comes from in January. Otherwise, we will not have the food to move to our stores. While we are incredibly resilient and we have a brilliant workforce in this country, we cannot do anything if we cannot get the food into the country. Therefore, the focus of retailers now is 100% on what is going to happen on 1 January. I did a blog the other day that said, "Let us not go out of the frying pan into the fire". That is exactly my warning to the Committee. We need to focus on having a proper Brexit decision made in advance of January. Otherwise, we have potentially a bigger problem than we had in COVID.

Chair: Okay, well made.

Q178 **Ian Byrne:** Thanks, Andrew, for that very well-made point. I hope that resonates right across the Government and the country. I have a follow-up. Do you agree with criticisms that the Government had no plan other than relying on retailers to sort it when disruptions occurred?

Andrew Opie: No, I do not agree with that. Although the food supply chain is primarily in private hands, from farmers through processors to retailers, that system worked incredibly well. The role of the Government is to keep their eye on the supply chain and make sure it does. It is also to make sure it has the data to make decisions, which, again, it does. We have been supplying data on availability to the Government before the COVID happened and afterwards, so they can intervene if they need to, in terms of regulation.

I do not agree with this point that the Government leave it all to the private sector to work on it. They oversee what we do. We are talking about a national food plan going forward, where we will definitely be able to incorporate this. It is in everybody's interest, and it was in everybody's interest, to work together through COVID, and that is what we saw. From my 15 years at the BRC, I probably saw the strongest relationship between Defra, as a Department, and the food retail sector for that period of two months or so around COVID. The Government showed themselves to be flexible just as much as the supply chain did. I do not agree with that. I am absolutely confident. I said it back in February and we delivered it: "Everybody will get the food they need". Everybody got the food they needed.

James Lowman: Not to just repeat what Andrew has said, the challenge is that, as we come out of this, the food industry will look a bit different. There is a huge question mark over how some of that food service sector



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is going to look, the supply chain into food service, how those businesses recover and at what speed, particularly heading into the end of the year and Brexit.

We will need to remember that we have experienced an extraordinary peak in demand for the types of businesses Andrew and I represent, in terms of selling food to customers to take home and prepare or whatever. At the same time, we have seen the food service market basically stop. We have seen a lot of non-food retail basically stop, which creates a whole bunch of other challenges.

In future challenges, whether we are talking about December into January this year or further restrictions that may have to be applied—we do not know—we are unlikely to see that balance. In a way, we could be dealing with spikes in demand and issues with supply while there are not compensatory changes in other industries that take pressure off the supply chain and create capacity. Government need to be very aware of that as they think about planning into the future, quite short term, in terms of how we respond to something like this happening again, but also in terms of the food strategy led by Henry Dimbleby, which is more relevant than ever now.

Q179 Geraint Davies: I have a question to Andrew. You just mentioned that, in your judgment, the food supply resilience will be a bigger challenge than COVID if we have a disorderly Brexit. Given that we have had COVID and it was not anticipated when the transition period was defined, and given that COVID has disrupted negotiations, do you think it is reasonable that, by the end of this month, which is the last time we can extend the transition period, the Government should move to do that, in order that we have more time and guarantee an orderly Brexit, so that food supplies can be sustained? In particular, as you say, 90% of soft fruit and other supplies are from the EU. Perhaps you could elaborate on that.

Andrew Opie: There is still time but the clock is ticking really loudly. We need to review what happens at the June Council on 18 and 19 June now, whether we will see progress in the negotiations. I want to put the warning out there because time is very short. Retailers have no idea at the moment how we might need to import food into this country. Do not forget, as we talked about the preparations for Christmas, retailers probably have headspace now up until about the end of October to work with their suppliers before they are back in Christmas to make sure we all, as consumers, get the Christmas we want. That clock is still available, but it is ticking really loudly.

Geraint Davies: So we need more time.

Chair: Thank you again to both James and Andrew. It has been a really good session. On the agreement to leave the EU, I am optimistic that, because of all this pressure through COVID, both sides, the EU and us, have hopefully learnt some lessons. We need to get an agreement in



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place because our economies are going to be weak after this. We are going to need the stimulation of trade. I am an optimist: we will get there.

I was particularly interested today when, Andrew, you talked about workers in shops being protected when they have been abused. We will take that one up loud and clearly, as we will for the school vouchers. Smaller shops have really come into their own in delivering and getting food out to people.

What we have done across the whole food chain has been remarkable. We pay tribute to all those who work not only in the shops, but also the processors, the farmers, the growers, the lorry drivers, everybody who delivers and gets this food to us. While we have lessons to learn, we have had a remarkable success in feeding our population. We will watch your prices with great interest to make sure you are not profiting from the whole exercise. From the evidence today, I give you credit that I think the retailers have acted pretty fairly. We will be watching you, I promise you.

Again, we appreciate all your evidence. We have asked for one or two bits and pieces in writing, if you will let us have that. We will make sure we go through to not only Defra but to the Education Secretary of State. As a final comment, thank you very much for your compliments towards George Eustice, the Secretary of State for Defra. We are quite prepared to take him apart in this Committee. That is part of our role as scrutineers, but we ought to give him credit when it is due. I think he has picked up the ball and run with this one. That has been very helpful in getting the relaxation on rules in order to get food to people.

Thank you very much for your evidence session. We will allow you now the rest of the day. Thank you very much and thank you to members.