



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Rt Hon George Eustice MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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COVID-19 and Food Supply – access to food for “vulnerable” people, and food aid charities

The EFRA Committee heard evidence from representatives of the Trussell Trust, FareShare, Disability Rights UK, and Age UK on Friday 15 May as part of our ongoing inquiry into COVID-19 and Food Supply. Several issues were raised that the Committee will want to explore with you further in oral evidence. However, giving the pressing challenges some people are facing in accessing food now we wanted to immediately draw the evidence to your attention. The transcript of the evidence session is enclosed.

Both the Trussell Trust and FareShare told us about the substantial increase in demand for food aid from people who are facing financial distress because of the impact of the pandemic. Emma Revie of the Trussell Trust highlighted the request that a coalition of charities have made to the Chancellor for measures that they believe would alleviate some of this distress, reducing the demand for food aid. It would not be right for the EFRA Committee to take a view on the details of that package. However, through our inquiry we will continue to be looking closely at how the pandemic is affecting the need for emergency food aid and how the Government is responding.

Lindsay Boswell of FareShare briefed us on the pilot scheme financed from DEFRA's Food Waste Fund that directly diverted surplus produce from farms to be redistributed to charities rather than be disposed of as waste. This clearly has the potential to benefit not just those in need of food aid; but also save money for the charities involved and reduce the environmental impact of waste food, all at no additional cost to the farmer. On paper this sounds like an excellent idea. The Committee would therefore welcome further information about the findings of your evaluation of the pilot.

Our second panel with Age UK and Disability Rights UK provided concerning evidence of the problems many older people and people with disabilities have faced in accessing food. For

example, prior to the pandemic many did not need support to live independently and were therefore not engaged with local services or voluntary groups. This has made it harder for them to gain the support they need now, for instance getting access to priority online shopping slots or navigating the changes shops have had to minimise the spread of Covid-19. Both witnesses suggested that further efforts will be needed to ensure that all those in need of extra support to access food are identified by local services, especially those who do not currently use the internet.

I know DEFRA has been talking to a range of NGOs and retailers about what more can be done. With restrictions on many "vulnerable" groups and social distancing measures likely to remain in place for some months the evidence we have received so far suggests that charities, retailers, and national and local government will need to work together to ensure that the steps that have been taken so far to ensure that older people and people with disabilities and health problems have access to food are put on a more sustainable basis.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Neil Parish', followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that extends to the right.

Neil Parish
Chair of the Committee