

Written evidence submitted by the British Retail Consortium (CVD0041)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The BRC is the major trade association for retailers in the UK. Our members include all the major supermarkets, with the exception of Tesco PLC, many of the convenience store chains and food to go outlets.
- 1.2 Our members have played a pivotal role in ensuring everyone in the UK received the food they needed through the outbreak, including the most vulnerable in society. Workers in food retail have rightly been saluted for their commitment and ability to adapt to an unprecedented situation.
- 1.3 We know the Committee is interested, amongst other issues, on the access to food for disabled consumers through the Covid 19 outbreak and thought it would be useful to share this contribution on behalf of our members.
- 1.4 The submission covers three issues:
 - Our liaison with Government and the major charities who represent the disabled;
 - How retailers have adapted their stores to maintain access for disabled consumers whilst observing strict social distancing protocols;
 - The role of online deliveries in supplying food to the most vulnerable.

2. Retailers role in ensuring access to food for every consumer

- 2.1 We began work with our members planning for the pandemic in earnest in February. Every major retailer implemented their contingency planning across their businesses with a common objective, ensuring every consumer in the UK would be able to get the food they needed. The primary focus initially was work within the supply chain to ensure food was available in store and online to meet expected levels of demand, which we knew would be extraordinary, but retailers were also planning what changes for social distancing would mean in terms of access for all their consumers.
- 2.2 The measures taken to ensure access are covered below. In delivering this we have liaised closely with the Government and major disabled charities.
- 2.3 From early March we were in regular liaison with Defra and other Government departments to ensure they were appraised of food availability and address the specific concerns of vulnerable consumers.
- 2.4 We were clear from the start, however, that there was insufficient capacity to supply all vulnerable consumers through online delivery and pressed Government to ensure other facilities were available, such as volunteers or carers to buy in store on behalf of those unable to leave home. Online sales accounted for less

than 8% of grocery sales in March and whilst they have increased significantly over the last 4 months there was never the capacity to cope with every request retailers faced. Our view is, initially at least, the Government could have been quicker to appreciate this and set up alternative arrangements to help vulnerable consumers.

- 2.5 The Government approached the major retailers with online delivery in early April to ask them to prioritise those consumers on the shielded list. Retailers agreed to prioritise those who requested online delivery, over 400,000 consumers, over and above other vulnerable who were approaching them directly as there was insufficient capacity to deal with every request. Retailers continued to prioritise those added to the shielded list but there was insufficient capacity to meet requests from other vulnerable consumers.
- 2.6 We knew that stores would be the main source of food for all consumers and that social distancing could prove difficult for disabled and vulnerable people, so have liaised closely with Government and the major charities since it was introduced at the end of March.
- 2.7 In April we highlighted the steps retailers had taken to accommodate disabled consumers to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, following that up with a call with the Defra Minister Victoria Prentis MP in May. In those calls we were able to explain the reasonable steps retailers had taken to accommodate disabled consumers within the constraints of social distancing protocols.
- 2.8 Our members have had regular direct liaison with the charities representing disabled charities. As a sector, there have been three calls, from the middle of May, between all major retailers and the charities. These have been a great opportunity to explain steps retailers have taken and refine communications to staff in stores and communication for disabled consumers. The feedback from the charities, including Age UK, Alzheimers Society and the RNIB has been very positive and we know they have welcomed a regular opportunity to raise issues on behalf of their members.

3. Changes online

- 3.1 As stated above, whilst retailers have prioritised disabled consumers, the capacity to do this is limited and, as directed by the Government, they have included the shielded group within this prioritised cohort. They have implemented a number of steps to accommodate the Government request including increasing capacity for home delivery and click and collect where possible.
- 3.2 Throughout the crisis, where capacity is available and it has been possible to confirm the circumstances of the consumer, retailers have continued to prioritise deliveries to the disabled and vulnerable.
- 3.3 As part of the liaison with Government and the disabled charities, retailers have shared details of how consumers can access information on websites and provided

additional telephone support lines.

- 3.4 Some retailers have produced standard boxes to increase capacity and make it easier for those ordering online for the first time.
- 3.5 Retailers, including those in the convenience sector, introduced local delivery of essential items.
- 3.6 Additional training was provided for delivery drivers to ensure they could give the greatest assistance to consumers whilst observing social distancing protocols.

4. Accommodating all consumers in store

- 4.1 We knew stores would remain the primary place for food shopping but that social distancing could present problems for vulnerable consumers. Our members thought carefully about the operation of their stores during the crisis and refined their practices in liaison with the major charities. These are the key steps they have taken.
- 4.2 Many retailers offered dedicated hours for elderly and vulnerable consumers as well as NHS staff and carers who look after them.
- 4.3 Retailers understood queueing was not appropriate for all consumers and briefed their greeters and queue marshalls to support disabled consumers, and those with non-visible disabilities.
- 4.4 From the start of social distancing, they have allowed carers to shop with vulnerable consumers, even where they were restricting numbers in accordance with the guidance of the governments of all UK nations.
- 4.5 They have been careful to ensure signage in store on social distancing is legible for all consumers.
- 4.6 Retailers were careful when redesigning stores to ensure social distancing was possible for all consumers.
- 4.7 Retailers implemented additional training for colleagues, supported by regular internal communications, to ensure all store workers were aware of the spectrum of disabilities and available to help where required.
- 4.8 We knew that payment could be an issue and all major stores accepted cash as well as card payments. Also, as we knew disabled consumers might need friends, relatives, or volunteers to shop on their behalf the retailers implemented new ways of payment, such as gift and e-cards.
- 4.9 It is important to remember that many of our members employ elderly, vulnerable and disabled colleagues and that they have statutory duties to ensure their safety when at

work. With up to 20% of their workforce being absent through sickness, isolating or shielding during this period, the operational, recruitment and training challenges have been considerable. Despite this retailers have consistently taken all reasonable steps and regularly gone above and beyond to respond at this unprecedented, dynamic and evolving crisis.

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