

**Written submission made on 28th January 2021 by the Birmingham Food Council CIC to the UK Parliament EFRA Commons Select Committee request for more evidence on Covid and food supply**

**I SUMMARY**

The UK was not prepared for the impact of Covid on food supply. As a consequence, millions of people cannot access the food they need. Moreover, the UK food system is facing more severe threats than Covid, some of which are already in evidence.

There is therefore an urgent requirement for the Government to take action to enable individuals to recover from this crisis and prepare the food supply system to withstand future shocks.

**2 Who we are, our work and its relevance to Covid-19 and food supply**

The Birmingham Food Council CIC was incorporated in March 2014 with a [Board of Directors](#) and an advisory [Panel of Experts](#). We focus on three areas of work: (a) food and the economy, (b) food safety, assurance and integrity and (c) the strategic challenges of food security.

From early spring until June 2020, all our focus was on the impact Covid had on food supplies; thus we were well-placed to respond to your earlier Call for Evidence. As your First Report illuminated, the food supply system was not prepared for the impact of a pandemic. From June onwards, we undertook a scenarios exercise exploring how the UK food supply system could be better prepared for future food system shocks, in collaboration with our network of people working across the food sector.

This network includes those with senior roles in food sector companies and organisations, either in (a) livestock farming, agricultural or horticultural production, (b) processing, packaging, storage, logistics and supply systems, (c) retail and third sector provision, (d) food inspection, sampling and testing, (e) allied professions in agri-food law, banking, investment, insurance or trade associations (f) agri-food research or (g) in public health and nutrition.

Our recent scenarios work gives us a unique perspective in answer to your third question. And this is where we start this submission: **What further actions the Government, public bodies and industry need to take.**

**3 The Government: A leadership & governance role for now and the future**

The Government stated twice in their Response to your First Report that theirs was a supportive role.<sup>1</sup> But:

**3.1 The Government has a leadership role, not merely a supportive one**

Neither any public body nor industry is equipped to respond to current stresses on the food supply system, nor to the other threats to it (see 4 below). The Government is the only player who can take on this massive task, for only they have the authority to set the parameters of engagement for all the other players.

In the midst of this pandemic crisis, only the Government has the opportunity to lead the transformational structural changes necessary so that our food supply system can feed all of us with sufficient, safe, nutritious food and, arguably even more importantly, to better prepare the food supply for future system shocks (see 4 below).

**3.2 Unprecedented circumstances**

The Government pertinently uses the word 'unprecedented' seven times in their Response to the Select Committee's First Report.<sup>2</sup> The stresses on the 21st century global food system caused by Covid-19 around the world were indeed unprecedented, and demanded unprecedented responses from all governments.

We learn from our Government Response they had warning of these stresses in January 2020. This allowed time for the Government to plan for disruption and therefore be less reactive than they have been from the first lockdown onwards.

It was, however, far too tight a timescale for the Government make the *structural* changes necessary to respond adequately to the level of disruption that has occurred (see 5 below). Regrettably, too, Exercise Cygnus did not report on the impact of a pandemic on food supplies.<sup>3</sup>

The Government now needs to prepare and implement the structural changes demanded by far more severe food security threats than those posed by Covid-19, some of which may prove to be imminent (see 4 below).

### 3.3 The governance role: novel, ambitious, ethical

#### Preparedness for future food system shocks

Having buffer contingency food stocks is the only way to be prepared for future system shocks. Both we and our scenarios participants with their significant professional experience, judge a buffer contingency stock system is **not only desirable, but essential**.

#### Changing the parameters of engagement

The Government, in loosening regulations during the first lockdown, has already changed some parameters of engagement between the players in the system. What surprised us and our scenarios participants is that the very process of setting up, and funding the capital and storages costs, of buffer contingency stocks of safe, nutritious food looks set to:

- Ensure all citizens have physical and economic access to the safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food they need in normal times as well as during crisis or emergency situations
- Give the Government, public bodies, industry, other organisations and communities key levers to curb the actions of corporations which make and promote 'food' and beverages that damage human and planetary health
- Be tangible evidence that the Government is (a) delivering on its levelling up agenda, (b) better preparing the UK for future food system shocks and (c) making good headway in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

### 3.4 A distributed buffer contingency stock system<sup>4</sup>

The scenario players recognised that a buffer contingency system is more robust when stocks are distributed. Thus a key part of their proposed system is for a new community catering supply service providing aspirational, affordable, nutritious and convenient meals for everyone.<sup>5</sup>

Their scenario buffer contingency stock system, including this new supply service, depends upon **Seven Pillars**, the first three of which require direct exercise by the Government of their new sovereign powers of governance:

- 1** The **State commits in law** for the national government to meet their responsibilities under the United Nations 1996 Rome Declaration<sup>6</sup> to ensure food security for all citizens **in perpetuity**.
- 2** A **Committee on Food Security**, an independent body, set up by statute to advise each Government how to meet these responsibilities in the light of their assessment of the risks to UK food supplies.
- 3** HM Treasury sets a **Food Resilience Levy**, similar in remit and purpose to the Climate Change Levy, and an **Excise Duty** on companies that make 'food' & beverage products carrying standard-rate VAT.<sup>7</sup>
- 4** The monies raised from the above used to **expand the currently limited capacity & capability for fresh produce production, preservation & storage facilities plus management and distribution technologies** in order for every household to have access to reserve supplies for *x*-weeks' meals within 10km.
- 5** **Buffer stocks** comprise only nutrient-dense foods; i.e. fresh produce (fruit, vegetables and animal products preserved as necessary) plus seeds, nuts, pulses and cereal products. They are acquired through donated surpluses from the retail and hospitality sectors, supplemented with wholesale purchases. **NOVA 4 products** and those carrying standard-rate VAT are **prohibited**, as would any kind of relationship with companies that make or promote any of them.<sup>8</sup>
- 6** **Distribution and logistics** planning, partnerships, networks, technologies and frequent testing to meet community, regional and national needs, supported by **annual reports on regional risk & resilience** open to public scrutiny and submitted to the **Committee on Food Security**.
- 7** **Contract and compliance wrap** for pillars (4), (5) and (6), to include due governance on food inspections, sampling and testing to ensure food safety, assurance and integrity.

### 3.5 The urgency for global action

In 2012, Ban Ki-moon declared the United Nations Zero Hunger Challenge, coining the phrase ‘food system transformation’,<sup>9</sup> to indicate the urgency then for global action. Until this Covid food system crisis, however, many words had been published about ‘food system transformation’, but little achieved.

Opportunities emerge for radical social change in crisis situations. In this Covid crisis, this Government has the opportunity to engineer and lead a ground-breaking new approach in which the UK food system is seen by the world to benefit both human and planetary health *and* will greatly increase UK robustness against future shocks.

## 4 Context: Current and future food shocks

### 4.1 The threats

There are three categories of already known threats to the UK food supply system, listed below:

<p>1 GLOBAL THREATS</p>	<p>The global competition for safe, nutritious food, already intense, will increase owing to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Climate change impacts, including extreme weather events, changes in oceanic currents, extensive wild fires</li> <li>◆ Agri-food resource depletion and degradation; i.e. of land, soils, air, water and energy</li> <li>◆ Population pressures</li> </ul> <p>The factors above are givens. Two more also look set to threaten UK food supplies: Geopolitics <i>and</i> likely unpreparedness for the next disruption to the system by other nations, if not the UK.</p>
<p>2 CHRONIC THREATS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Economic inequality in a commercial system</li> <li>● The effects of poor diet on adults, on children and on infants from conception onwards</li> <li>● Resources for adequate food inspection, sampling &amp; testing</li> <li>● The impact on human and planetary health of companies that make and promote drug-food products</li> </ul>
<p>3 CURRENT THREATS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ The stresses of Covid-19 and lockdowns on the system</li> <li>□ Brexit: The as-yet unresolved impacts of non-tariff barriers and other aspects of EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, including the Northern Ireland Protocol</li> <li>□ Both of the above through winter and spring when the UK heavily depends on imported fresh produce.</li> </ul>

Figure 1

### 4.2 Other threats: Known unknowns and blindspots

If the Figure 1 list were not enough, there are other threats which are difficult to chart or ‘see’, such as large-scale crop infestation,<sup>10,11</sup> or a big volcanic eruption,<sup>12</sup> earthquake,<sup>13</sup> or other emergency,<sup>14</sup> let alone what we can’t yet imagine. Any such event could have significant if not devastating impact on global harvest yields.

### 4.3 The consequences of these threats playing out

In summary, the number and range of severe threats on the global agri-food system mean:

- ◆ The instances of scarcities and shortages that we are already seeing in the UK will become more frequent, if not endemic. This will translate inexorably into higher prices for safe, nutritious food with sudden, possibly irreversible, price hikes.

- ◆ There is an increasing likelihood of a significant if not catastrophic failure in the UK food supply system at some time within the next few years, if not sooner.

#### 4.4 The urgent need for a preparation strategy

Crisis management is no substitute for a preparation strategy. The traditional threat matrix measures impact risk on the vertical axis and the horizontal axis tracks emergence risk. Of equal importance, if not more, is a matrix with a horizontal axis tracking the **potential severity** of the crisis, and a vertical axis measuring the **degree of preparedness**.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to recognise that, comparatively speaking, Covid was not a severe threat to our food supply. The level of disruption it caused was because the Government had not prepared for it.

**When should we begin to prepare for the next system shock?**

The pragmatic and ethical answer to that question is always **now**.

### 5 What we can learn from what's happened (and not happened) since July 2020

The Select Committee is likely to receive detailed reports about food supplies in the answers to their first two questions. Given this, and in the light of what we've written above, we judge our most useful contribution is to make observations about four aspects of Covid and food supply. Each has implications for the structural changes required to make the UK food supply system fit for purpose for the immediate situation and against future system shocks.

These observations are made in the context of an unprecedented set of circumstances. Other national governments are facing some of them, but only the UK Government is facing a potentially toxic mix of all of them: the highest Covid-related mortality rate in the world,<sup>16</sup> the growing pauperisation of young adults,<sup>17</sup> labour oversupply, low wages,<sup>18</sup> socio-economic inequalities in life expectancies and in healthy life expectancies,<sup>19</sup> high state debt,<sup>20</sup> many children not being in school and the huge social disparity in the effects of school closures,<sup>21</sup> a fracture in relations with our largest food trade partner (*see* 5.4 below) amid some speculation about the possible break-up of the United Kingdom itself — and a largely insulated professional and governing class.

#### 5.1 Economic access to sufficient food

Safe, nutritious food is inevitably more expensive than unsafe food of unknown provenance, or food containing few if any nutrients. Moreover, as stated above, the price of safe, nutritious food is inexorably going to rise, quite possibly very soon and rapidly. Thus it is not a matter of making safe, nutritious food 'more affordable', it's a matter of **every household having the income to meet all their basic physiological needs**, whether from the State or employment. If this were in place, two sets of economic and social costs of Covid would evaporate:

- The costs in setting up and running a parallel, only partially effective non-commercial food supply system, along with arguments about who should receive what foodstuffs and when,<sup>22</sup> stories about actual or imagined profiteering,<sup>23</sup> and embarrassments such as UNICEF launching emergency food relief to our children.<sup>24</sup>
- The significant obstacles many people face in following Covid restrictions; e.g. many people literally cannot afford to discover they are infected.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5.2 The health and well-being of all citizens

The economic, social and psychological costs of diet-related morbidities before Covid were huge.<sup>26</sup> Obesity and impaired metabolic health are major risk factors for severe illness and death from Covid.<sup>27</sup>

- Ensuring a healthy, well-fed population is necessary preparation for any future food system shock or disruption.
- This is a matter of providing access to safe, nutritious produce at all times whilst also curbing the actions of corporations that make and promote the so-called drug foods.<sup>28</sup>

#### 5.3 Regulations and their enforcement

Pre-Covid, there were not enough resources for food inspection, sampling and testing to ensure high standards of food safety, assurance and integrity. The current relaxation of regulations, including 'virtual' and self-reported inspections has provided opportunities for the unscrupulous and the criminal.

- The Government needs to set regular reviews for independent assessment of the impact of these relaxations, and a specific time limit for re-imposition of all regulations.
- We advise that the Government has at least an outline response/preparedness plan for a food poisoning outbreak during the pandemic or other health service crisis.

#### 5.4 Brexit: New barriers to food trade with the EU<sup>27</sup>

It's difficult to understand why the Prime Minister incorrectly stated on 24th December that the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement<sup>29</sup> meant there would be 'no non-tariff barriers'.<sup>30</sup>

The non-tariff barriers caused problems on 1st January 2021, and they are compounding. Perhaps RTE's Tony Connelly's headline best summarises the situation: "*The Brexit Effect: The squall before the storm.*"<sup>31</sup> Yet the Government is still saying these are 'teething problems'.

Professor Chris Grey has catalogued the disruptions Brexit is bringing to UK-EU trade. In his 22nd January post,<sup>32</sup> he includes reference to this statement from Road Haulage Association CEO Richard Burnett: "*These are not teething problems. These are structural problems.*"<sup>33</sup> Equally worrying is Professor Grey's judgment that Cold Chain Federation CEO Shane Brennan's "*big worry here is that 'not trading' becomes the habit*" is "*inevitable*".

The UK is facing continuing disruptions to food imports and exports, with potentially devastating consequences for our food security. We hope this assessment is wrong. Whether right or wrong:

- The case for putting in place large-scale buffer contingency stocks is even more urgent because the UK can no longer depend on previous levels of food trade with the EU.
- The EFRA Commons Select Committee should start to consider what structural changes would be desirable and feasible to put forward at the first of the five-year reviews of the EU-UK Trade Agreement, which will place in 2025.<sup>34</sup>

## 6 Concluding remark

Any government facing such dire issues on so many fronts needs help. We hope this submission aids the Select Committee to guide this Government in a better direction.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Environmental Food and Rural Affairs Committee Covid-19 and food supply: Government Response to the Committee's First Report, 9th October 2020. page 1, repeated on page 22: *The Government has a supportive role utilising well-established ways of working with the food industry.*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid page 5 (twice), page 6 (once), page 11 (once), page 21 (twice), page 26 (once).

<sup>3</sup> Public Health England Exercise Cygnus Report 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Birmingham Food Council UK preparedness for future food shocks: One Scenario Buffer contingency stocks. November 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid page 5.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Report of the World Food Summit Rome, November 1996.

<sup>7</sup> BMJ Rapid Response to a Spector & Gardner article by Cooper, Middleton & Parle: It's time to act against drug foods for the health of the population and the planet September 2020.

<sup>8</sup> For more information see Birmingham Food Council UK preparedness for future food shocks: One Scenario Buffer contingency stocks. November 2020 endnotes 21-27.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.un.org/zerohunger/content/challenge-hunger-can-be-eliminated-our-lifetimes>.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, Matthew et al Worldwide emergence of resistance to antifungal drugs challenges human health and food security. Science, Vol 360 Issue 6390 pp 739-742. May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyds of London Food System Shock: The insurance impacts of acute disruption to global food supply. Emerging Risks Report 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Volcanic eruptions: Local events, global consequences. Munich RE.

<sup>13</sup> FAO Earthquakes

<sup>14</sup> Ibid Emergency types.

<sup>15</sup> We are indebted to Prof Michael Osterholm, the epidemiologist appointed by President Biden to lead the US response to Covid-19, for this insight. see Osterholm, Michael T & Osler, Mark Deadliest enemy: Our war against killer germs. UK edition. John Murray, 2020. Chapter 4: The threat matrix, page 49

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- <sup>16</sup> Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center Mortality Analyses: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>, retrieved 28 January 2021
- <sup>17</sup> e.g. Blundell, Richard et al [Young people increasingly concentrated in low-paid occupations and young men increasingly struggling to progress](#). Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> see for example: [Cribb and Johnson 10 years on — have we recovered from the financial crisis?](#) 12 September 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> Raleigh, Veena [What's happening to life expectancy in the UK?](#) The King's Fund, 26 June 2020.
- <sup>20</sup> Milliken, David [Factbox: UK on course for highest borrowing since World War Two](#). Reuters. 25 November 2020.
- <sup>21</sup> Johnson, Paul [School closures are unpalatable for a bigger reason than paltry meals](#). The Times, replicated on the IFS website on 18th January 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> e.g. As in this 13 January 2021 Daily Mail article: [Food vouchers will return next week](#). (note: the £15 voucher for five meals/week highlights the economic challenges for a parent or carer to provide three good meals each day. At £3 each, it comes to £273 pcm.)
- <sup>23</sup> BBC News [Rashford: Free school meals firm apologies over small parcel](#). 12 January 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> Sky News [For the first time in its history, UNICEF will help feed children in the UK](#). 16 December 2020.
- <sup>25</sup> Reicher, Stephen [For psychologists, the pandemic has shown people's capacity for co-operation](#). Guardian, 2 January 2021.
- <sup>26</sup> Birmingham Food Council [What does this food sector 'balance sheet' tell us?](#) August 2019.
- <sup>27</sup> Stefan, Nobert Birkenfeld, Andreas Schulze, Matthais [Global pandemics interconnected — obesity, impaired metabolic health and Covid-19](#). Nature Reviews Endocrinology, January 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41574-020-00462-1>
- <sup>28</sup> BMJ Rapid Response to a Spector & Gardner article by Cooper, Middleton & Parle: [It's time to act against drug foods for the health of the population and the planet](#) September 2020.
- <sup>29</sup> [EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#), 24 December 2020.
- <sup>30</sup> [What Boris Johnson's mistake tells us about our future](#). Faisal Islam, BBC 24 December 2020.
- <sup>31</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/news/2021/01/15/1190108-brexite-analysis-and-comment/>
- <sup>32</sup> [Get ready for 'Long Brexit'](#). Brexit and Beyond, 22 January 2021
- <sup>33</sup> [Crisps lorry held up for two days by Northern Irish Brexit checks, MPs told](#). Lisa O'Carroll, Guardian 21 January 2021
- <sup>34</sup> FT Opinion video: [David Allen Green's guided tour of the post-Brexit EU-UK Trade Agreement](#). 8 January 2021