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**Meals on Wheels should be supported by the Government to ensure the wellbeing of older, vulnerable, and self-isolating adults during lockdown**

*We are an academic team with expertise in the evaluation of community nutrition programmes, research with older people, and physical, psychological, and emotional outcomes for older and vulnerable people. We are based in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, which has an international reputation for research excellence within the field of social policy and social work. Eighty per cent of our research was rated as 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent' in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, and the School was rated tenth overall in the country, rising to joint eighth when the number of staff submitted is considered. The Centre for Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences, which is leading this submission, was rated #1 in the UK within the field of physical activity, nutrition and health, achieving 100% world-leading 4\* impact.*

*We are submitting evidence to inform policies for further action regarding the Meals on Wheels service, based on our preliminary qualitative research findings with service providers (drivers who deliver the meals, service coordinators and managers) in the Bristol and North Somerset areas. Our work emphasises the need for both the Central and local Governments to provide ongoing financial support for the successful running of the service, to ensure*

*increased demands during the lockdown are met. Robust governmental support to the service will also ensure a wide range of benefits for the older, vulnerable, and self-isolating adults who need the service, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns.*

**Executive summary:**

- Meals on Wheels, a service offered by different local authorities, deliver meals to older, vulnerable, and housebound adults, who might otherwise not be able to acquire and prepare their own meals, particularly during lockdown
- The benefits to service users go beyond nutrition, and include welfare checks, promoting independence and identifying and addressing isolation and loneliness
- The service benefits the wider community by reducing pressure on carers and potentially decreasing healthcare expenditures and the need for residential care
- Service providers are often the first responders to an emergency and work jointly with other emergency agencies to ensure service users' wellbeing
- Meals on Wheels are facing several challenges, including outsourcing administration, funding cuts and closures, and lack of publicity to people who might need the service
- The COVID-19 pandemic brought an increase in service users, concerns with sourcing food, increased demand on human resources, and uncertainty about how the service will cope in continuous lockdowns
- During the lockdown, doorstep meal deliveries and drivers' worries around protective equipment and their own health meant less time to interact with service users and less thorough welfare checks
- It is crucial for Meals on Wheels to receive enhanced and ongoing support from local and national Governments to ensure increased demands during lockdown are met
- Public policies need to prioritise Meals on Wheels as a central emergency service to protect vulnerable adults during lockdown

**1)** In March 2020, the Government started distributing food parcels to people most vulnerable to COVID-19, estimated at 1.5 million people who were instructed to shield and were unable to access food by other means<sup>1</sup>. This introduction of food parcels was welcome to support people who were instructed to stay at home. However, informal photographic evidence suggested food provision of mixed dietary quality, with parcels containing sugared cereals, tinned meats, white bread, teabags, snacks and dilutable squash, and only occasionally fruits and vegetables<sup>1, 2</sup>. Although found to meet the nutritional requirements of most adults, these parcels might not have been appropriate to meet the nutritional needs of the clinically extremely vulnerable and did not necessarily account for individual or cultural preferences<sup>3</sup>. **Food provision should be tailored to recipients' individual needs, because a one-size-fits-all approach will be insufficient to protect the most vulnerable.**

**2)** Further, food parcels were not intended for many other adults who were also at increased risk of infection. For example, 17.7 million adults aged ≥65 years were instructed to stay at home as much as possible, but many might not have had support from carers and community resources and/or enough money to be able to access adequate and nutritious food, nor the ability to prepare meals for themselves. These challenges are commonly faced by housebound older adults<sup>4</sup>; coupled with the fact that ~ 1 in 7 adults aged ≥65 years is at medium or high risk for malnutrition<sup>5</sup>. This means **it is imperative for all vulnerable adults to be able to access nutritious meals during the pandemic.**

**3)** With support via food parcels ending in July 2020, current Government guidance advises the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' to apply for access to priority supermarket delivery slots and to ask their local authority to contact them about local support that may be available during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>6</sup>. The latter is also applicable to all people having difficulties shopping during lockdown<sup>6</sup>. In this context, Meals on Wheels, as a service offered by

different local authorities, is crucial to deliver food to housebound vulnerable adults, who might otherwise not be able to acquire and prepare their own meals. Meals on Wheels improve dietary intake, nutrient intake, and nutritional status in older adults<sup>7-9</sup>, and benefits are greater with more meals consumed<sup>10</sup>.

4) Meals on Wheels offer benefits to service users that extend beyond nutrition<sup>11</sup>. Our preliminary findings, based on interviews with service providers (drivers who deliver the meals, service coordinators and managers) in Bristol and North Somerset in September 2020, showed that drivers delivering meals encourage clients to eat, be physically active and take medications. Common components of their visits are carrying out chores for clients, welfare checks and checking for safety concerns and household hazards. Social interaction is also an important part of every meal delivery, with drivers reporting that for some clients, they are the only person they see on any given day. Part of the service is also signposting to other services that might offer support to vulnerable adults, particularly during lockdown. Overall, service providers reported how Meals on Wheels promote independence and rehabilitation following hospital discharge and reduce isolation and loneliness. **It is vital for policies aiming to support the vulnerable during lockdown to acknowledge Meals on Wheels as a service that offers a wide variety of benefits to service users to enhance their quality of life and help them stay independent.**

5) Our preliminary findings showed that Meals on Wheels also benefit the wider community. In our interviews, service providers reported how, by delivering meals to vulnerable adults, less pressure is put on their families or carers, who might not be able to provide meals for them. Another perceived benefit is the decrease in the need for residential care, by supporting individuals to remain in their own homes rather than be admitted to residential care. Drivers delivering the meals are also often the first responders to an emergency situation and work jointly with other emergency agencies and social services to ensure service users' wellbeing. **We strongly encourage a broader policy that identifies Meals on Wheels as the fourth emergency service (alongside police, fire and emergency medical services) to protect vulnerable adults, particularly during lockdown.**

6) Despite the potential for Meals on Wheels programmes to decrease institutionalisation and healthcare expenditures<sup>10, 12</sup>, home-delivered meal schemes have suffered budget cuts globally<sup>13</sup>. Service providers in Bristol and North Somerset also shared ongoing concerns regarding funding cuts and service closures. They expressed the need for the national Government to acknowledge that what is being offered is an enhanced service, not just a food delivery service, and to increase support and funding to local governments for the continuation of this service. Another pressure faced is outsourcing administrative duties to external companies due to reduced resources. For local authorities who have had to outsource parts of the service's administration, concerns include drivers feeling less supported by the new administrative teams, who often lack awareness of the local context and the needs and circumstances of service users, compared to when the service was run by local teams. Despite a significant increase in the demand for Meals on Wheels during lockdown<sup>2</sup>, service providers perceive that the service does not receive sufficient publicity and that there is lack of awareness among people who might need it. They think it is especially important that messages publicising the service emphasise its wider preventative value in providing social support and its relevance not only to older adults, but all vulnerable individuals. **We advocate for national policies to protect and enhance Meals on Wheels services; for funding, resources, and legislation to allow effective continuation of the service nationally, and; for appropriate framing of publicity messages, so that all vulnerable adults across the UK who need the service can access it.**

7) The pandemic brought an unprecedented increase in service users, with one service documenting 100 new referrals per day since the start of the social distancing measures and another a 30% increase in demand<sup>2</sup>. Service providers in Bristol and North Somerset

reported similar increases in demand throughout the lockdown. Although this was compensated to an extent by redeploying staff, hiring more vehicles and increasing orders with food suppliers, service providers reported that drivers have to increase their shifts and there are more deliveries conducted per driver, which compromises the time available to interact with service users. This time has been reduced from approximately 15 minutes pre-lockdown, to 3-4 minutes per client during the lockdown. As a result, there is an ongoing concern that this decreased interaction during lockdown impacts negatively on service users' wellbeing. There are also ongoing needs for more drivers, particularly when drivers need to self-isolate themselves. An additional pressure is sourcing sufficient food to meet demand. Service providers expressed concerns about how the service will cope with continuous lockdowns. **As lockdowns do continue, we call for the national Government to support local authorities with this increased demand in resources, so that they expand Meals on Wheels services to allow all vulnerable individuals access to nutritious food and support while self-isolating or shielding.**

8) Furthermore, we found that drivers who deliver the meals have resorted to doorstep deliveries to reduce the risk of infection spread, and, as a result, it is now difficult for them to conduct thorough welfare checks. The increased demand for Meals on Wheels during lockdown also means that drivers have increased concerns about their own mental and physical wellbeing, partly due to the ongoing anxiety about catching COVID and spreading it to their families. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was not always sufficiently available during the first lockdown, and its use further compromises the time spent on each visit (due to the time taken to change aprons, sanitise etc), and makes communication with clients challenging. **It is imperative for policies supporting vulnerable adults during lockdown to also acknowledge the need to support the workers who deliver Meals on Wheels, so that they feel safe in providing this important service to the most vulnerable.**

9) The national Government should recognise the benefits of Meals on Wheels to service users, the wider community and potentially healthcare expenditure, and acknowledge this service as a lifeline and crucial emergency service and community resource during lockdown. Policies should seek to prioritise reviving, reintroducing, and enhancing the service by supporting local authorities to meet increased demands during the pandemic. Policies should also ensure that Meals on Wheels are linked to other emergency services, and that all vulnerable adults who might need the service are aware of its existence, if they are to protect individuals who need to self-isolate or shield.

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