

# Written evidence submitted by Sustainable Food Places (COV0051)

**April 2020**

## **Executive Summary**

1. Sustainable Food Places (formerly known as Sustainable Food Cities) is a rapidly growing social movement, bringing together over 60 food partnerships from towns, cities, boroughs, districts and counties across the UK that are driving innovation and good practice on all aspects of healthy and sustainable food. SFP is a partnership programme led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain - the alliance for better food and farming.

### *Key Points in our submission*

- 2. The coronavirus pandemic has hugely exacerbated problems of food poverty and food access for the most vulnerable in our society. At the same time, the pandemic poses a threat both to the smaller scale food businesses and social enterprises across the supply chain that have stepped up to ensure continued food provision and availability for those in need, and to the voluntary and community sector organisations that are leading and coordinating critical local food-related responses to the crisis.
- 3. The 60 cross-sector food partnerships that make up the UK Sustainable Food Places (SFP) Network have been at the forefront of expedient, efficient and appropriate local responses to these issues. We believe the Government should urge all Local Authorities and Local Resilience Forums to work closely with these local food governance structures where they currently exist and to mandate - and ideally help fund - their creation where they do not.
- 4. Creating, mandating and supporting cross-sector food partnerships in every local authority area would make a huge contribution to effective coordination and delivery of short and medium term community food responses to the current crisis while at the same time ensuring that integrated local food policies and strategies are in place to build community food resilience and a more robust civil society while protecting people's health, livelihoods and the environment in a post-Covid world.

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More info on our Covid-19 work: <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/>

***Have the measures announced by the Government to mitigate the disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic been proportionate, effective and timely?***

5. In our view the pandemic has exposed the lack of resilience in our food system and the over-reliance on a small number of retailers and large players in our food system. Supermarkets cannot be expected to fulfil all the UK's food needs, as evidenced by recent shortages and limited capacity for new home deliveries.

6. Farmers, suppliers and food producers have struggled with interrupted supply chains and staff and operational challenges caused by the crisis, but in many cases local food producers, small retailers, veg box providers and local markets have been quick to adapt to fill the serious gaps in food supply. The many examples of small business resilience and generosity in our network are a testament to this. Yet government measures have disproportionately focused on large businesses, including the five major retailers and major suppliers, while many small food businesses and social enterprises have struggled to survive, not because of a lack of demand but because of a lack of support and guidance from both national and local government.

7. Likewise, community food projects, which are effectively part of local food supply chains, have been given little support and protection during the rollout of government social distancing measures. Lack of guidance meant that many have had to close, leaving vulnerable communities that rely on them further isolated. Some surplus food cafes, food banks and food growing projects have resumed operation with social distancing measures in place, especially those in areas with food partnerships supporting them. But this is not the case in every local area.

8. We would draw to the Committee's attention to the following evidence:

- *8a. Examples of action at the local level showcasing how diverse food outlets adapt quickly:*  
[https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/supporting\\_food\\_supply\\_chain\\_and\\_diverse\\_outlets/](https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/supporting_food_supply_chain_and_diverse_outlets/)
- *8b. Bristol Food Union is a network of food businesses and community organisations working together to innovate new supply chains and feed Bristol during Covid-19*  
<https://bristolfoodunion.org/>
- *8c. Sustain and SFP are supporting community gardens to keep growing to support the emergency response and prepare to support communities after lockdown is lifted:*  
[https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/apr20\\_growing\\_coronavirus/](https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/apr20_growing_coronavirus/)
- *8d. The Government clarified that food markets can stay open during the crisis. Despite this, many are shutting down in local areas, often due to landlords unaware of Government guidance, removing local access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food.*  
[https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/apr20\\_why\\_we\\_need\\_markets/](https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/apr20_why_we_need_markets/)

***Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?***

9. The government did not act fast enough to stabilise the supply chain or prevent people going hungry and did not resource or delegate response to local councils, local businesses and local organisations, causing major gaps in provision. In many cases the voluntary sector stepped in to fill these gaps, but this should be a statutory duty and not rely exclusively on a voluntary sector response. In many places the voluntary sector is well organised in this regard, but it is poorly resourced and should only ever be expected to act in support of local government and public sector bodies, who must provide the strategic leadership needed.

10. The response of the larger and multiple food retailers has been inadequate in the crisis, as evidenced by the proliferation of community-level support for people who either cannot afford food or who can afford it but cannot access shops. The billions in profits that major retailers have seen in recent weeks put into stark relief how poorly resourced local food partnerships and grassroots groups are in their vital efforts to fill the serious gaps in provision left by those retailers.

We would draw to the Committee's attention to the following evidence:

**The value of local knowledge in adequate responses**

- 11. The Government identified 1.5 million clinically vulnerable people who might have difficulty sourcing food while self-isolating. However, prior to the pandemic there were already 8.4 million people in Britain living with household food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Some local authorities and voluntary sector networks were able to identify a large number of people not among this initial 1.5 million and quickly support them. Food partnerships are filling significant gaps locally<sup>2</sup> to secure food for people on a low income, for children eligible for free school meals, and for those needing to self-isolate due to older age or medical risks.

**Funding challenges**

- 12. SFP member **Wandsworth Food Partnership** has struggled with sourcing adequate funding to resource their growing emergency food response efforts, despite having a good working relationship with the Council. Coordinator Elizabeth Prohasky shared that, despite being part of the council's referral and support pathway, they were only able to secure 25% of the funding they applied for and had to rely on community crowdfunding to cover the shortfall. A council grants committee hearing<sup>3</sup> revealed that community organisations applied for a total £937,000 from Wandsworth Council's Covid-19 Response fund, but only £100,000 of funding was available.
- 13. **Food Durham** has been supporting community projects that have quickly turned into meals on wheels services. Coordinator Hannah Murray-Leslie stresses that County Durham Community Foundation are doing great work offering support and funding, but a more accessible approach is needed. "Some frontline groups are too small and too stretched to chase funding. There's a basic principle here that if you are responding to an emergency, the idea that you have to fundraise simultaneously is preposterous."

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.endhungeruk.org/2019/02/07/uk-food-poverty-now-public-health-emergency/>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/securing\\_food\\_for\\_vulnerable\\_people/](https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/securing_food_for_vulnerable_people/)

<sup>3</sup><https://democracy.wandsworth.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=51586#mgDocuments>

- 14. Kemi Akinola of **Brixton People's Kitchen** and **Lambeth Food Partnership**, who deliver thousands of weekly hot meals and food parcels to vulnerable people in Lambeth and Wandsworth, believes that austerity measures are the very argument for a government role in funding community-led emergency food responses. "The government should be funding this work. People have been living with hunger for years. If we the people don't make them pay for it, they'll never know the true cost of hunger."

#### **Freeing up emergency response for those in need**

- 15. In Brighton & Hove alone, 90% of calls to the Council Community helpline have been about food access. Emily O'Brien of **Brighton & Hove Food Partnership** says, "we are lobbying supermarkets to step up. We need more online deliveries, and a phone service, such as Morrisons doorstep delivery. We are doing our best to ease the shopping burden so services are freed up for those who cannot pay."

**What further impacts could the current pandemic have on the food supply chain, or individual elements of it, in the short to medium-term and what steps do industry, consumers and the Government need to take to mitigate them?**

16. The pandemic and the economic recession that it has triggered will not only cause a huge increase in long term food insecurity but will also potentially decimate the small-scale independent food sector, from producers and processors to retailers and caterers.

17. We cannot rely on underfunded voluntary and community sector to plug the gaps and shortfalls in government-led emergency food provision, especially as funding sources dwindle and become more competitive. Nor is it reasonable to expect purely voluntary responses to address food insecurity in the long term. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the cracks in our social safety net as well as supply chains, which must be repaired.

18. We believe that local cross-sector coordination is a vital element of any effort to effectively tackle food insecurity in the short, medium and long term, as well as to plan and support local supply chain resilience, integration and revitalisation that can protect livelihoods and ensure access to healthy, sustainable, equitably produced food. Prioritising a well-resourced food partnership approach now will ensure local areas are more resilient against future shocks to our food system and society, including the climate, nature and health emergencies.

We would draw the Committee's attention to the following considerations:

**Adequate funding for person time in food partnerships**

- 19. Analysis of the efficacy of the members in our network reveals that a functioning food partnership requires 4 days a week of person time at a minimum. Currently the average is 2.5 days, and in many areas dependent on short term contracts which limit long term planning and policy change. Some areas are coordinated on a voluntary basis, further limiting their efficacy and impact.

**Addressing structural inequalities**

- 20. **Food Durham** Coordinator Hannah Murray-Leslie elaborated that insufficient council funding, Universal Credit and Covid-19 have created a perfect storm of a social crisis. "We have high unemployment, low house prices and a lot of council tenants. Added to this the geography of the county, it means that services cost more per head because people are more dispersed. Before Covid we had a high level of social deprivation made worse by the introduction of Universal Credit. Now these structural issues are compounded as work becomes more insecure and services are more stretched."
- 21. Emily O'Brien, **Brighton & Hove Food Partnership's** Food Poverty Action Plan lead insists, "Food Banks were never the answer – and it was really quickly clear they wouldn't be the answer in this crisis."

**How effectively has the Government worked with businesses and NGOs to share information on disruptions to the supply chain and other problems and to develop and implement solutions? How effectively have these actions been communicated to the public?**

22. The Government approach to working with businesses, local authorities and NGOs has so far fallen short. We believe there is a huge role for Government to play in implementing solutions and resourcing local responses that are effective and adequately meet local needs. This is not about one-size-fits-all solutions, but about joined up approaches. The most important step is to put food partnerships and local VCSE organisations at the heart of local authority and Local Resilience Forum responses.

23. Food partnerships are particularly well placed to support the local response in the following areas:

- Securing food for vulnerable people
- Preparing and delivering food
- Signposting to emergency food support
- Supporting the food supply chain and local businesses to minimise disruption
- Coordinating surplus food collection

We would draw to the Committee's attention to the following evidence:

**A joined-up approach**

- 24. SFP member **Good Food Greenwich** has proven to be a model of a joined-up and well-planned response. Within two weeks of lockdown, it was delivering hundreds of food boxes that were safe, nutritious and met dietary needs for vulnerable non-shielding residents. The Local Authority procured food from local businesses, supporting the local food economy and jobs that Greenwich's diverse communities rely on in the longer term. Claire Pritchard of lead organisation GCDA said, "Having the Sustainable Food Places partnership has made the biggest difference!"
- 25. Other examples of exemplary local responses can be found on the website of the SFP <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/coronavirus/>.
- 26. SFP member **Brighton & Hove Food Partnership** has benefitted from community funding support and match funding from the council to build up a network of 24 local food hubs distributing over 1400 food parcels and over 1800 cooked meals a week. The city's share of government funding to local authorities was not enough to cover Covid-19-related costs (including adult social care, housing homeless people, PPE) let alone coordinate the food response, so the council was grateful to lean on the Food Partnership to coordinate effectively. Cllr Anne Pissaridou said "I have found it immensely reassuring that our work with the Food Partnership has meant we've been able to get a programme together in a very short amount of time."

**Working in silos**

- 27. SFP member **Food Durham** is supporting a number of community projects delivering cooked meals to vulnerable communities, one producing 500 meals a day. Durham County Council's Covid Emergency Response team have not managed to link up effectively with the voluntary and community sector, although Food Durham are sympathetic that the council has had staffing and funding challenges. Nevertheless, they feel that the emergency response would be more effective and efficient if communication pathways were improved. One project said "Demand for our services is continuing to increase daily. It is a little disappointing that the Local Authority have not tapped into organisations

working at a grassroots level with a good understanding of residents and community need.”

## **Summary of recommendations**

### **On measures announced by the Government:**

*28. The Government should look to the best practice in diversifying and safeguarding local food supply chains emerging from the Sustainable Food Places Network and promote the uptake of these approaches across all local authorities.*

*29. Government measures (such as the free school meal voucher system) should be designed to benefit SMEs as well as large businesses to ensure they too survive the pandemic. This can be done by releasing funds and power to local authorities and food partnerships to manage food aid schemes such as free school meal voucher systems and shielded group food parcels.*

### **On Government and food industry supporting people to access sufficient healthy food:**

*30. The Government should release more Covid-19 emergency response funding through local authorities, ringfenced for local community organisations, to cover the evident shortfall in resource to meet the growing level of people experiencing food insecurity as a result of the pandemic. This funding should be made accessible to smaller groups that may not have capacity to meet complex reporting and organisational structure criteria. Funding should also be available for person time, as capacity to coordinate support has proved to be vital in this crisis.*

*31. Retailers should urgently release more priority online shopping slots for all vulnerable groups, including older and clinically vulnerable people, families using free school meal vouchers and people with disabilities, so as to free up community food aid services to those who cannot pay and cannot cook for themselves.*

### **On further impacts of the pandemic on the food supply chain and food access:**

*32. The Government should provide financial support to both existing and new local food partnerships, leveraging further match funding from local authorities. This funding could be disseminated through the Sustainable Food Places Network, which already provides grants and support to food partnerships but whose resources fall far short of what is needed.*

*33. We urge the Government to seriously focus on alleviating the root causes of food insecurity that predated the pandemic and address other structural inequalities putting pressure on local services. As part of this, the government must commit to measuring household food insecurity.*

*34. In the immediate term, the Government should abolish the 5 week wait for Universal Credit, make advance UC payments grants rather than loans, and remove the benefit cap so as to put money in people's pockets and alleviate the growing strain on frontline food aid projects.*

### **On Government work with businesses and NGOs to share information and implement solutions:**

*35. Government should urge Local Authorities and Local Resilience Forums to be proactive in linking up with food partnerships, food poverty action groups and emergency food networks. It is vital that these VCSE networks be effectively integrated with council emergency and resilience responses to ensure frontline organisations are adequately supported and disadvantaged communities are not left behind in this crisis.*