

Written evidence submitted by Birmingham Food Council (COV0108)

1 Birmingham Food Council CIC

1.1 Who we are

The Birmingham Food Council CIC is an independent body set up in March 2014. Its [Board of Directors](#) has an impressive collective professional expertise and experience. Our [Panel of Experts](#) is from a range of research disciplines and professional fields relevant to the food network.

1.2 What we do

We focus our limited resources on food network economics, also on food safety, integrity and assurance and on the strategic challenges of food security at a global, national and city level.^{1,2}

The work we've carried out over the last three years is of particular relevance to the current crisis. We ran a horizon scanning project in 2017-18.³ It was evident from this that the UK food system was under threat from, *inter alia*, global risks associated with climate change, resource depletion and population pressures, as [we reported here](#). As few decision-makers as well as the wider public are aware of these rapidly emerging threats, we developed a successful scenarios thinking tool, simply called *The Game*.⁴

We also run a '[Narrativium](#)' Programme, commissioning or otherwise supporting talented local artists to help us communicate the food system challenges facing all of us.

1.3 Our response to Covid-19

In early December 2019, we had begun a blogpost series on food system transformation.⁵ We were thus well set to pivot our focus and provide a [Covid-19 commentary](#) on the rapid transformation happening in real-time from early March (see also Annex below).

This commentary, as this Submission, was informed by confidential conversations with specialist informants deep within the food system, including professional service providers with their expert knowledge across the sector.

1.4 The relevance of our pre-Covid work to today's rapidly changing food supply system

Neither the commercial food industry, upon which we all depend for our survival, nor the voluntary sector and community groups are equipped to respond appropriately to the situation in which we now find ourselves. In summary, the UK food system was ill-prepared for the Covid-19 crisis.

Based on our pre-Covid work, we have identified [thirteen features of the UK food system](#) which have contributed to this lack of preparedness.

¹ Our purpose, values and three strategic aims are listed here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/what-we-do/our-strategic-plan/>

² We publish a frequently updated info-diagram summary of the activities and project we do to support our Strategic Plan on-line, the latest here: https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Summary_activities_Spring2020.pdf

³ The project involved desk research, a facilitated workshop with Professor Chris Elliott, the NFU's Helen Ferrier and Parveen Mehta, Operations Director of Minor Weir and Willis who led discussions with others from across the sector, and a project report *Back from the Future*: https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/BackFromTheFuture_HorizonScanningProjectReport_BirminghamFoodCouncil_January2018.pdf

⁴ Information about *The Game* is here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/what-we-do/the-game-nine-meals-from-anarchy/>. Several participants have been in touch since to say that what they'd experienced was now happening in front of their eyes and, as a consequence, nothing was surprising to them.

⁵ Listed here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/category/food-system-transformation/>

2 Covid-19 and food supply

2.1 The response to date

The rapidity of food system reconfiguration in the first couple of weeks of lockdown was impressive.

The food service sector closed overnight with immediate impact on its supply system and on consumer purchasing behaviours. Many workers were furloughed or laid off, and many companies, many being SMEs, were suddenly in dire financial straits.

Along with lockdown here and overseas, these changes led to, *inter alia*, significant loss in livestock value, serious and continuing issues finding seasonal workers and a worrying loss in the UK's processing, packaging and distribution capacity, as we [reported on 28th March](#), with [this updated account on 27th April](#).

Covid-19 has also resulted in [millions of UK citizens not having economic and/or physical access](#) to sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food.

There have also been significant changes in the regulatory environment, which now allow companies and individuals to carry out actions that they previously weren't allowed. The [known risks inherent in loosening regulations](#) include new opportunities for the unscrupulous and organised crime to move in. Although the changes were announced as 'temporary', there are no review or monitoring processes in place, nor a date for their re-establishment, all of which is a considerable cause for concern.

In summary, there have been admirable efforts by many companies, charities and community groups and individuals to enable people to have sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food. These efforts, however, have not been enough to enable as many as a third, or perhaps even half of UK households to have sufficient supplies of food. There has also been a huge loss in food supply capacity, some of which already has been or will be lost permanently.

2.2 What's missing from the response to date: Recovery and preparedness for the next crisis

There are some features of today's reconfigured food system that do not bode well for recovery from this crisis, which also needs planning for our preparedness for the next one.^{6,7}

*[The best time to think about how we would recover from a pandemic was before the pandemic happened. The second best time is now.](#)*⁸

3 Covid-19 and food supply: What next?

Although businesses and community organisations are beginning to plan their commercial recovery from the situation they're currently facing, they are not equipped, collectively or individually to plan or implement recovery from the current levels of food insecurity, nor make the UK better prepared to respond to future threats to our food network.

3.1 The role of Government

The UK Government is a signatory to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, pledging its commitment to ensure all UK citizens have **access to sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food**.⁹

Policy decisions determine who gets sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food and when, and whether or not that they have agency in so doing. The Government, supported by Parliament, has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to send a powerful signal to voters and future voters that they will meet this commitment.

⁶ Possibilities include a resurgence of Covid-19 or a different pandemic, scarcities and shortages of food owing to the [global risks](#) of climate change, resource depletion and population pressures or an as-yet unimagined black swan event — the unfamiliar is not the same as the improbable.

⁷ See also this from Chatham House: [Legal provision for crisis preparedness: Foresight not hindsight](#). 21st April 2020

⁸ Experts in disaster and crisis management, such as Dr Samantha Montano quoted above, will tell you that the answer to the question *When do we think about recovery and preparedness?* . . . is always 'now'.

⁹ <http://www.fao.org/3/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>

3.2 Why we need qualitatively different policy decisions

The food system has changed irrevocably over the last few weeks; there is no possible return to how it was. There is widespread agreement, too, that Covid-19 presents a unique opportunity to 'reset' the food system. Recovery from this crisis and preparedness for the next can be embedded into planning now.

3.3 What will not change

The population will always have a requirement for n -kcal and x -nutrients, thus the UK's agri-food system needs the capacity to deliver this requirement in the face of three categories of threats:

- Avoidable threats; for example, to the UK's capacity to grow, process, package and distribute food, and to the UK's access to imports.
- Unavoidable but anticipated threats; for example, climate change, another pandemic.
- Unavoidable but unforeseen threats, sometimes known as 'black swans'

3.4 The principles for decision-making

The principles upon which policy decisions could be taken now to enable a faster recovery from the current crisis, and better prepare the food system for future crises are the following:

- Focus on a "new normal" which will be continuously changing.
- Favour companies that supply healthy foods, including takeaways and composite foods (such as ready meals)
- Support existing and new SMEs, and be transparent about recognising the [aggregated] economic and social contribution they make, and their contribution to the resilience of the UK food system.
- Enable the innovative and agile in SMEs and micro-organisations (including the self-employed).
- Favour children and the disadvantaged (the newly so as well as the previously so).

3.5 The necessity to review previous plans

In the light of all the above, the Government should also instigate independent reviews of the Agriculture Bill, the National Food Strategy and food trade arrangements between the UK and the EU27, with emphasis on the resilience of UK food security and the health and wellbeing of all UK citizens.

ANNEX

The Covid-19 commentary posts as at 1st May 2020, in reverse date order of their publication on-line:

- (1) [13 features of our pre-Covid food system . . .](#)
- (2) [Millions do not have access to enough food](#)
- (3) [The shoppers' perspective as lockdown continues](#)
- (4) [The food supply into the second month of lockdown](#)
- (5) [The risks inherent in loosening regulations](#)
- (6) [Has the time come to trial a universal basic income?](#)
- (7) [Government food packages should not contain products that carry standard-rate VAT](#)
- (8) [Will there be shortages? HMG need prepare for the worst \(while hoping for the best\)](#)
- (9) [A really useful mapping of mutual aid groups](#)
- (10) [Lockdown impacts on labour and distribution of fresh produce](#)
- (11) [Do we really need crisps and cream cakes?](#)
- (12) [Lessons from Milan's approach to their food emergency](#)
- (13) [What decision-makers need to pay attention to asap](#)
- (14) [The food supply network on 20th March 2020](#)
- (15) [Food System Transformation #11: Covid-19 and its impact on the food supply network](#)