

Written evidence submission from Leeds Emergency Food Response Partners (COV0162)

Leeds Emergency Food Response partners welcome the response from the Government during Covid. However the response could have been much more timely, better coordinated and with a longer term view in mind. Leeds as a city has benefitted from the existing food insecurity infrastructure in the city, alongside research and evidence on the scale of poverty and the strength of partnership working amongst a range of organisations.

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?

Government support to FareShare has been well placed as a large organisation with significant infrastructure in place. Working alongside FareShare has facilitated a collaborative approach in Leeds which has been able to provide support at multiple from grassroots project through to large scale operations like the Emergency Food Response delivered in Leeds (Full Paper provided to the Food, Health and Poverty Select Committee and can be provided if required).

Local partnerships such as the Leeds Food Aid Network (FAN) which aims to bring different people, initiatives and institutions together who are involved in tackling food poverty in the city and the regional West Yorkshire Food Poverty Network have been able to bulk purchase food from Brakes Food, His Church and Morrison's effectively. This food would either go straight to a venue in West Yorkshire or would go to Food Revival / Rethink Food in Leeds and then be distributed out. However, there were problems with food supply when it came to purchasing in Bulk. One of the challenges with Brakes Food seemed to be that they had to furlough a number of their workers due to what appeared to be loss of substantial Revenue in light of the closure of pubs and restaurants, which Brakes would normally supply. Despite this the staff made a valiant effort but it wasn't always easy as when we were ordering stock they constantly changed key items such as Tinned meat which were often not available. We did however value Brakes telling us beforehand what would and wouldn't be offered. There were similar issues with Morrison's. The Government could play a role in encouraging Food Suppliers to keep stock high all year round which would enable food to flow when a similar crisis may hit again or if we go into another virus spike.

There were a few local issues with the national shielding food boxes in regards to the standard of contents and confusion for residents with local/national support, also difficulty/confusion accessing priority shopping slots. Furthermore the Government's definition of "vulnerable" was too restrictive with many other community groups requiring support with food access that couldn't access priority shopping slots or food parcels. In these cases a huge input from Third Sector partners has been put into place, however locally many supermarkets were unhelpful with allowing access to NHS priority hours for charities and local authority staff in adult social care.

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?

- Already mentioned above the issues with the national food box scheme and contents of food boxes and access to shopping slots for the public and support workers wider than NHS staff.
- Shop layout and basic items, the food industry and supermarkets could have done more to support access to basic food items and supported with resources for families.

- The DEFRA food funding was welcomed, however extremely limited number of organisations eligible with significant reporting which was a huge ask to busy organisations already working flat out. In Leeds we have been able to access this because we have larger food distributors such as FareShare Yorkshire who have benefitted from the scheme nationally and Food Revival who have been awarded £100,000 to help distribute food to smaller providers for Leeds and Bradford. This has proved useful in ordering fruit and vegetables which is a food type in short supply in Leeds. It's important to note that the way funding is allocated to buy food seems to discriminate against smaller providers from smaller towns and cities which may not have the infrastructure to take on £100,000 worth of funding to buy food in 10 weeks worth of food. It's through using bigger distributors and having a visible network (Leeds Food Aid Network (FAN) and the Leeds Food Partnership) that we find it easier for smaller projects to benefit and cope with the levels of monitoring needed.
- Really good local examples of supermarkets supporting local partners by providing donations of food, & money to support organisations.
- More specific support around cultural food should be considered – in terms of supply chains and the food parcels.
- People with low/unstable income who are unable to leave home due to shielding, much of the support has fallen to LA or charity orgs to support. Also vulnerable people who prior to pandemic were dependant on food banks/support from charities have become increasingly reliant – limited support for these orgs directly from gov. in respect to increased demand.
- Welcome the Government decision to remove the need for a Health Care Professional to sign off the Healthy Start Voucher application. Many value families with young children been able to access £3.10 or 6.10 if they have more than one child but would voice concern that during lock down there still is not a way of submitting the form online and requires a printer to print off the form which in turn gives access. It would be good to see an online option develop which would mean a personal printer wasn't needed. In addition it would be good to see Healthy Start Vouchers increase with Inflation and to have a sudden increase to £4 per voucher would help more vulnerable people access healthy food in this great time of challenge.
- What money people have in their pockets is a vital component in giving people the opportunity to purchase food healthy food which can sometimes be more expensive. The increase of the basic rate of Universal Credit increasing to £94 a week is a good thing and we would strongly encourage this to remain in place. Low income is highlighted as a major reason why vulnerable people go without food and having a decent level of income is of vital importance. It's also important that other people who are not on Universal Credit have not necessarily seen an increase and still remain on £74 a week. It would be good if this £94 level could be increased with inflation. In addition many problems that existed before the pandemic crisis still exist. Claimant's are still having substantial amounts of money taken off their original payment due to the substantial levels of deductions that are happening when people have arrears and the 5 week waiting period for Universal Credit either leaves vulnerable people without money or when they claim an advance payment to cover the gap they end up losing it week on week through deductions which are taken.

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?

- Expecting that as lockdown ceases, the 'emergency response' will downgrade and therefore donations from public/companies etc will naturally reduce or stop, at a time where a further wave of financial hardship is likely to occur as redundancies occur, payment holidays end and evictions are rescheduled. Benefit sanctions are likely to restart when conditionality is applied to benefits like UC again – possibly higher rate as more people claiming UC, including those that may not have had previous experience with benefits systems. There needs to be improved support and investment into Debt agencies which would help tackle pre-existing debt which was there before Coronavirus and the new wave.
- Current shortfall for LCC means extreme measures are required if further government support is not received. Small, med + large scale 3rd sector and charities are all equally feeling the strain and may be subject to reducing or closing altogether—leaving most vulnerable people without support.
- Higher pricing. A key reason for people contacting the Local Authority for food has been due to affordability of food, with less supply and fewer offers on food being available, meaning that food bills have increased. This coupled with more food being required due to families and households spending more time at home.
- Greater investment is needed to support charities and Third Sector organisations who have contributed to local area emergency food responses and utilised reserve budgets, putting additional pressure on their financial situation. These organisation are needed more now than ever to support vulnerable residents.
- The Government must build on the progress made working with the food industry to push forward public health work on food advertising, labelling and access to food.

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?

- Information regarding shielding was not clear to the public and local authorities which has resulted significant requests for support and clarification from residents unsure about the system.
- The message about “not bulk buying” was not communicated or received well, this resulted in pressurised local food systems and in some cases businesses seeing this as a profit making manipulative opportunity.
- Generally information has been received too late, although the U turns for FSM were welcomed decisions but decisions left so late that its proved disruptive to local planning

Finally we are aware that a number of UK wide networks and organisations are now coming together to look at the whole crisis/emergency work needed both now and in future and also the longer term resilience of communities and individuals. This approach acknowledges the need to:

- Forecast food insecurity
- Understand demand

- Provide a crisis response to those who need it
- Building community resilience and a structural response