

COVID-19 crisis and the impact on food security

Summary

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on all aspects of our society, with access to food a particularly crucial issue. It is important to recognise the difficulties in responding to an unprecedented and fast evolving crisis such as this and the Poverty and Inequality Commission greatly welcomes all that has been done so far to put in place emergency food assistance for those who need it most. We applaud the Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector for rapidly responding to this crisis.

However, the Commission is concerned that some aspects of the response effort around emergency food could be better co-ordinated. Many community organisations have approached members of the Commission seeking help and advice on how to manage during this crisis. It was in light of these approaches that we reached out to frontline organisations to gather more evidence and heard consistent messages on the challenges that are currently facing many community groups.

We heard from the organisations that the scale and the nature of the support they are providing has changed dramatically and rapidly since the start of this crisis. They felt, and still feel, overwhelmed by the rise in demand for their help. The Commission would like to commend those who are working so hard to provide families and individuals with much needed assistance. However, we were also struck by the reports of how their efforts are being hampered by a lack of co-ordination of access to food and resources, communication and funding.

Emerging evidence also shows the rise in the number of households who are food insecure, with poverty exacerbated by lack of access to food, isolation and difficulties accessing the kinds of support, such as community food projects and food banks, that might previously have been available.

The funding announced by the Scottish Government through the Food Fund and Wellbeing Fund is very welcome. It will be important that

community groups are able to access funding quickly and straightforwardly.

The Commission makes two key recommendations to improve the way in which food is reaching those who need it.

1. The Commission recommends that the Scottish Government provide more visible leadership around emergency food provision to be sure that help is reaching those working in local areas and those people who need food.

2. The Commission recommends that a spokesperson is appointed to clearly communicate and reassure people about food provision during this pandemic and its aftermath.

Background

During a public health crisis like COVID-19, it is important that the population has access to nutritious food that supports its wellbeing. Without that regular access to good nutrition, we know that physical and mental health can deteriorate. Therefore, the Poverty and Inequality Commission welcomes how quickly the Scottish Government has acted to put in place emergency food assistance for those who most need it.

We endorse the general approach being taken in Scotland of each local authority putting in place an approach that is tailored to their local area to ensure that everyone has access to food. Furthermore, the Commission welcomes the announcement of the Food Fund, the Wellbeing Fund, and the publication of the guidance to assist local authorities in using the resources from the Food Fund.¹ We are particularly pleased to see the creation of a home delivery service of free essential food and other goods to those in the “Shielded” group of those most vulnerable to COVID-19, and the establishment of a national helpline which can enable those at high risk but without a network of support to access food and other support. We also commend local authorities who have all rapidly put in place arrangements to cover free school meals. The appropriateness of each response is something the Commission has offered to look at.

However, this unprecedented public health crisis has created a food emergency, which is impacting upon those in poverty and those

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/>

experiencing inequalities. Households that are at higher risk of poverty – those with children in the household, disabled people, minority ethnic households and larger families – are at higher risk of food insecurity at any time, but this has been heightened since the COVID-19 lockdown. This is because the risk that these groups experience because of low income is compounded by them also being at higher risk of food insecurity due to factors such as lack of food in the shops and isolation.²

There is a growing concern that there are some aspects of the response effort around emergency food that need to be better communicated, co-ordinated and more sustainable. Indeed, many community organisations have approached members of the Commission seeking help and advice of how to manage during this crisis. It has further been highlighted as an urgent concern by the Poverty Alliance,³ Food Foundation, Research Institute for Disabled Consumers⁴ and Child Poverty Action Group.

Evidence from the frontline

To evidence our concerns, the Poverty and Inequality Commission reached out to organisations at the front line of responding to the food crisis. We received reports from six organisations from different areas of Scotland around the challenges now facing them. The messages coming back from each of them are consistent and illustrate what we believe is being replicated across the country.

For each of these organisations, the message was clear that the scale and the nature of the support they are providing has changed dramatically and rapidly since the start of this crisis. They felt overwhelmed by the rise in demand for their help. The Commission would like to commend those who are working to provide families and individuals with much needed assistance. We were deeply affected by their stories of how they have stepped up to the challenges that are facing Scotland, putting the needs of their communities and vulnerable persons front and centre of their responses.

“In our first week we delivered over 500 meals in the two areas (we also are working alongside the Community Learning Development Team in

² Loopstra, R. (2020) *Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown*, Food Foundation https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf

³ <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Community-organisations-and-COVID19-PA-briefing-6-April-2020.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/news/covid-19-impact-disabled-and-older-people-uk>

[...] who estimated they did over 600 deliveries) and have since progressed to over 1500 in only a week.”

“We’re also experiencing high demand as we’re covering all of [...] in the absence of any other organisations/authority responding to these needs which is most likely down to staff being asked to work from home and all [...] buildings being closed. We are working with a skeleton staff of volunteers upwards of 35+ hours per week.”

However, we were also struck by the reports of how efforts are being hampered by a lack of co-ordination, funding and communication, and by concerns about the safety and wellbeing of volunteers and workers.

First, there are concerns that the approach being taken to emergency food provision is not strategic or co-ordinated enough. There are calls for local authorities and the Scottish Government to do more to co-ordinate responses in local areas. We hope that the recent guidance will help achieve this.

“The organisation has come under increasing pressure over the last two weeks from vulnerable people in need in other parts of the city and has been asked daily to support organisations and individuals from as far as Inverness to Dumfries. At present we do not see a coordinated response either from local or national government. The organisation is utilising our own reserves to continue to buy food while continuing to be told that funds will be made available soon!”

“Support from LA or Scottish Government to develop localised clusters across all sectors in communities would be helpful. Right now, it’s only working on a small scale if there are already established partnerships happening.”

Better co-ordination would help across a number of areas. For example, organisations are currently struggling to safely access enough food. They are having to resort to measures such as accessing their reserve funds and conducting their own supermarket shops, risking the safety of their volunteers. These solutions are neither safe nor sustainable and will ultimately mean these organisations will not be able to get enough food to people in poverty and others who need it. Access to food supplies for these organisations urgently needs to be better coordinated.

“We are experiencing significant food shortages and are using cash donations and reserves to bulk buy food. Local restrictions on the

number of items we can purchase in e.g. Tesco means we cannot replenish stocks more quickly and cheaply.”

“However, we’ve been screaming out for help with food costs. I’ve regularly had to either use our charity’s own dwindling funds or even pay for things myself to ensure people weren’t starving. We’ve had to rely on goodwill from others but the response from Council and Government has been extremely slow despite major announcements.”

Better co-ordination around funding would also help in making sure that every organisation gets access to the funds they need. There have been welcome announcements from the Scottish Government around funds becoming available and quickly released. However, the organisations we spoke to were worried that the announced support would not be filtering down to their level. Furthermore, the range of funding streams available could result in issues with organisations either being over-funded or under-funded. Bringing funders together to make best use of the available resources would help avoid duplication of effort by double funding the same activities. The sheer amount of time being taken to apply for and secure funding was also raised as a risk to being able to continue to provide support.

“My fear is that in the coming weeks, many orgs will have applied for funding through various agencies and be duplicate, triplicate or worse funded to do the same thing because of this mess.”

“Funding is an ongoing issue, at the moment funding is coming from different voluntary organisations which is very short term and a lot of time is taken up trying to secure ongoing funding and food.”

“Although there was a major announcement on 18th of March by the Govt, we’ve so far accessed no money and it’s a major stress for us. We were told there were all sort of funds would open, but I’ve been filling out a variety of applications since Monday 16th of March, with no response yet on anything.”

“We are now completely reliant on food donations from members of the community and a couple of our local stores who have continued to give us food donations but as we expand greatly, we don’t know how sustainable this is. We’ve had funding from our local area partnership, community council and a few donations from other charities such as neighbourly and STV appeal. We’ve been watching government updates that are releasing funding for local authorities and third sector

organisations however this doesn't seem to be coming down to our level."

The second main area of concern is a lack of clear and consistent communication. Some of the organisations expressed their frustration that there has been little or no attempt to engage community food projects in developing a strategic response to the provision of food. Others recognise that the challenges that local authorities are facing may have affected their ability to keep clear lines of communication open, e.g. the closure of council buildings and shift to home working. However, the overwhelming feeling here is one of frustration.

"No response to e-mails, and no information about the Resilience Plan or any attempt to engage us as third sector colleagues. We were initially told "information is confidential as being run by public health"

Third, there is also a worry of the safety of workers and volunteers coming through from the organisations. Those working in emergency food provision are risking their lives to provide for those in need and require Personal Protective Equipment.

"We need PPE items to help support us as we carry on through this crisis. We need steady supplies of this and to ensure we are not running our staff into the ground with fatigue and risking their health of catching/spreading the virus."

Finally, many of the people we heard from were clearly extremely anxious. They expressed their worries about keeping their staff and volunteers safe, about the lack of Personal Protective Equipment, about the mental strain of the work, and about how they would keep operating if their staff or volunteers became ill. The responsibility of providing for so many vulnerable people when they were unsure if they have the funding or resources to continue to do so also weighed heavily.

"Our staff that answer the phones are coming under pressure from people just wanting to chat due to mental health issues and loneliness."

"Mostly we are concerned that elderly people are not able to get the support they need from their families due to social isolation. Some families are dealing with very sick people in their home and are unable to get out of the house. I have heard that some families even though they are well they are too frightened to leave the house. Families who

previously supported us with fundraising are now coming to us for support as their businesses have collapsed or are now out of work.”

Evidence from people with direct experience of poverty

It is currently challenging to access people with direct experience of poverty to fully understand their current situation. Here, we bring together different types of evidence to present as clear a picture as we can of how this crisis has impacted on people who live in poverty.

A survey for Citizens Advice Scotland found that a third of people in Scotland are currently concerned about paying for food and essentials.⁵ This is far greater than the proportion of people in Scotland who were living in poverty (19%) before the coronavirus crisis,⁶ and the number of people who had experienced food insecurity in the previous year (9%)⁷. This suggests that worries about having enough to eat are extensive and also being experienced by people who may not have previously felt pressure on their finances.

Further evidence of the wide impact comes from Inclusion Scotland who found that 67% of the 448 disabled people who completed their online survey felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had had an adverse impact on getting the food or medicine that they needed.

Survey data from the Food Foundation paints a shocking picture, estimating that over 600,000 (14%) adults in Scotland are currently facing food insecurity.⁸ The UK-wide survey estimates that for the UK as a whole 8.1 million people (16%) are currently facing food insecurity. Of these, 21% didn't have enough money to buy adequate food supplies, 50% were unable to get the food they needed from the shops due to shortages and 25% were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed.

⁵ Fieldwork was conducted between 25-27 March 2020.

<https://www.cas.org.uk/publications/scotpulse-survey-results-march/april-2020>

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2016-19/>

⁷ Food insecurity defined by being worried during the past 12 months that they would run out of food due to lack of money or resources <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2018-summary-key-findings/pages/7/>

⁸ YouGov survey carried out 7-9 April 2020. Some of the findings can be found at:

<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-three-million-britons-are-going-hungry-just-three-weeks-into-lockdown/>. Numbers for Scotland are calculated using the mid-year population estimates.

A person is considered to be food insecure if they have experienced one of the following because they could not afford or could not get access to food i) had smaller meals than usual or skipped meals, ii) been hungry but not eaten, or iii) not eaten for a whole day.

Alongside this survey evidence, we have heard stories from people who are experiencing difficulty in accessing food, causing them great anxiety.⁹

Common themes are difficulty in accessing slots for shopping deliveries, particularly where vulnerability status is not official, lack of availability of food for restricted diets, and a lack of available assistance or knowing where to turn for assistance.

“We cannot get delivery slots online. Every week we order a shop for next day delivery from Tesco or ASDA. We cannot do that now. I even skipped my bedtime meds to stay awake for midnight to try and get a slot 3 days running, but after queuing to get on the website, all slots were gone by the time I got to them. Skipping meds has led to increased seizures for me so I can’t keep trying.”

“As a Type 1 diabetic i have specific medical dietary requirements to maintain good diabetic control and health. I need carbs with meals for my insulin. since the panic buying has happened i have been unable to purchase these foods. even with the new measures in place for shopping, pasta, rice etc have not been available. i have supplies at the moment but what will happen when these run out?”

“There is nothing to buy – we have to go shopping multiple times and can’t afford to buy in bulk. We can’t rely on takeaways as they’re too expensive and we’re supposed to be supporting our immune systems by eating healthily. In the shops, the only stuff left is junky stuff too.”

“Food banks are closing as they have no food, community meals have closed down and the community takeaway service is closed. A lot of them rely on volunteers who tend to be elderly, and donations to the food bank aren’t as helpful when you can’t even buy the stuff.”

Where families are receiving vouchers from local authorities instead of free school meals they may not be able to access the relevant shops.

“...received school meal vouchers but I can’t use them as I can’t get out to a shop. When I’m able to get a slot online I can’t use the vouchers online.”

⁹ This has been gathered from the comments provided in Inclusion Scotland’s online survey, transcripts provided by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, community organisations and personal contacts.

Some of those receiving support described what a lifeline it was to them.

"Thank you so much, the extra money from the voucher this week will make a big difference to us, I am self-employed and have been unable to work for the past 4 weeks, we have just got my partners wages coming in which isn't enough for us, we have 4 kids. It's a worrying time for everyone and I really appreciated the call from MFP it was good to talk to someone and have a rant about the situation. I have signed up to help the NHS and I will be answering emergency calls for them, this is paid work so hopefully this will help take the pressure off us too."

"Thank you so much for the food parcel. It was so kind to think that someone cared about me, it made me very emotional"

"You have no idea what a difference this parcel made to us this week. We had no money at all. Thank you, you are angels"

"To get a cooked meal delivered and fresh milk was just so kind. We have seen nobody for two weeks. Thank you".

At the moment it is difficult to get a full picture about the experiences of those in poverty in relation to food. The evidence we do have, however, demonstrates the huge impact the crisis is having on people's ability to afford and access food. It makes it all the more essential that community groups with their existing networks and understanding of the situation in their communities are able to play a full part in the response.

Thoughts on the actions taken by the Scottish Government

We came into this crisis with just over one million people in Scotland restricted by poverty. All the information that we have shows that COVID-19 is adding weight to those who were already struggling to stay afloat. The groups most at risk of food insecurity because of COVID-19 mirror those most likely to experience poverty - disabled people, large families, BME, disabled and those with children. The needs of people in poverty must be built into the government's response. This unprecedented public health emergency has created a food emergency for households up and down Scotland that we must respond to urgently

We fully recognise and endorse the approach the Scottish Government has taken to emergency food provision so far. We believe that local areas are best placed to make decisions and implement solutions that work for them.

We have examined the guidance provided to local authorities¹⁰ around the Food Fund. We commend the Scottish Government in making available this fund and providing clear advice on how it can be used. We welcome the guiding principles which are based on meeting people's needs in a flexible, dignified and safe way. There are challenges, however, where local areas take different approaches in ensuring that the needs of vulnerable groups are met consistently across the country. It is important that areas are able to learn quickly from each other about what works.

The guidance is explicit in setting out the importance of partnership working. The Commission's concern is that initial support may be more readily accessed by larger third sector organisations. Clearly, these larger organisations play an absolutely vital role but we need to ensure that the funding and co-ordination can also reach smaller community organisations. We do not have figures readily to hand on the proportion of food aid that smaller community organisations are currently providing. However, we do know that there are almost as many independent food banks (101) in Scotland as there are Trussell Trust food banks (135).

The Commission also notes the requirement for local authorities to report monthly on the key activities delivered, estimated need and reach of these activities and key challenges. We do not feel that this is sufficient. This is a rapidly evolving crisis which requires constant monitoring. We do not wish to place additional burden on local authorities in terms of reporting but given the urgency of the situation, and the need to prevent it spiralling, this information needs to be collected more frequently in order to learn and adapt approaches as necessary.

The new national helpline may provide an opportunity to support the gathering of data about needs and gaps in the provision of support. The Commission understands the decision to make the initial focus of the helpline on those who are at high risk of contracting COVID-19, but, given the evidence that food insecurity due to poverty is being exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, this should be reviewed as we progress through the crisis to see whether it should be expanded to those who are food insecure because of poverty.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/>

The information we have gathered from these smaller community organisations and from people with direct experience suggests that there may need to be some adjustments or improvements to the current approach to ensure that it is ultimately successful in ensuring that all those who need it have access to food.

Recommendations

We have two recommendations.

1. The Commission recommends that the Scottish Government provide more visible leadership around emergency food provision.

This unprecedented health emergency has created a food emergency for households up and down Scotland. The Scottish Government, Local Authorities, major charities and small community groups all have a crucial role in trying to make sure people can access enough nutritious food. But getting the system working effectively across so many actors requires strong and visible leadership. The guidance given to local authorities is a good start but now we need to be sure that help is actually reaching those working in local areas and the people who need that food.

There are many options for what form this could take - for example an accountable individual, a task group or advisory group. Whatever the form it should complement and guide the work being undertaken by individual local authorities.

In particular, more visible leadership is needed to:

- Support the assessment of the current situation on emergency food provision across Scotland on an on-going basis, using the reporting from local authorities and supplementing this with intelligence gathering from community organisations. This could be fed into local authorities and the Scottish Government to provide updates on effective and good provision and, importantly, areas of challenge. It needs to be done at least every two weeks.
- Identify gaps in food provision services and systems and support government in its advice to local authorities on how to address these.
- Share good practice across different areas
- Work with the Scottish Government to review and update the guidance for local authorities as and when needed.

2. The Commission recommends that a spokesperson is appointed to clearly communicate and reassure people about food provision during this pandemic and its aftermath.

We have a rapidly increasing number of households who need to know where to go for help with basics like food and essentials. If this was clearly set out, it would go a long way to allaying public anxiety and stress at this difficult time. Many of these households may have little or no internet access and therefore their main source of news is the broadcast media – TV and Radio. We would therefore urge the Scottish Government to adopt a similar approach to Food Security as that to COVID-19 health advice. That is to appoint a single spokesperson through whom essential information on accessing food services can be conveyed via the media to those who most need it.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission would like to thank the organisations that provided us with information on the challenges they are currently facing:

- **Pennypit**
- **Goodtrees Neighbourhood Centre**
- **PEEK**
- **Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership**
- **Moray Food Plus**
- **FARE**

All responses were received between 2-3 April 2020.

**Poverty and Inequality Commission
16 April 2020**