

## **Poverty and Inequality Commission’s view on local action in Scotland to tackle food insecurity during the coronavirus crisis**

### **Background**

At the start of the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Poverty and Inequality Commission identified access to food as a crucial issue. On the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020, we published our briefing “*COVID-19 crisis and the impact on food security*”,<sup>1</sup> based on case studies of six community organisations providing emergency food support. We welcomed the work of the Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector for their rapid response to provide emergency food assistance. However, we also reported that community organisations felt their efforts to feed those in need were being hampered by a lack of co-ordination of access to food and resources, communication and funding. We made two recommendations:

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

We are now beginning to move into the next phase of this crisis, with lockdown restrictions starting to ease. We wanted to follow-up on our previous work to explore how community organisations were managing now, particularly as the additional support provided by the Scottish Government at the start of this crisis has now had a chance to bed in.

We explored this in two ways. First, we were delighted to work with Professor John McKendrick and Stephen Campbell from the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) at Glasgow Caledonian University who carried out a survey of community organisations on our behalf. In total, we received 211 responses from across Scotland. The findings of this survey are presented in full in SPIRU’s report <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Food-insecurity-SPIRU-final-report-June.pdf>. Secondly, some of our commissioners visited four community organisations and a food surplus redistribution charity, speaking to staff and volunteers and seeing first-hand the way in which they are providing food to those who need it.

### **The Commission’s reflections on the survey findings and visits**

From both the survey and the visits, it is clear that the role played by community organisations in helping people weather the storm is vital. We are deeply impressed with the tremendous community response that is ensuring that families and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Poverty-and-Inequality-Commission-Food-insecurity-evidence-briefing-.pdf>

individuals continue to be able to access food. We heard uplifting stories and observed a strong community spirit, a sense of purpose and even humour.

Some of the findings of the survey are encouraging. The results suggest that most of the community organisations think the majority of issues are going well right now, and things are largely expected to remain the same for the next month. Likewise, the community organisations we visited also commented that after a hectic period at the beginning of lockdown, things were now beginning to feel more manageable.

However, from both the survey and the visits, we can see that there are still huge challenges. Community organisations report that demand for emergency food aid has been rising over the past month and they expect it to continue to do so. This is attributed to more local people who were already feeling the constant pressure of poverty becoming aware of the help offered and more people being newly swept into poverty. The 5 week wait for Universal credit is cited as being particularly difficult for many families to cope with. It is clear that many organisations feel they are working to their full capacity and already have doubts over whether they are meeting everyone's needs for emergency food support. It is no surprise then that many are also deeply worried about how they will continue to cope. This is further compounded by concerns about accessing sufficient funding in the future, the impact of the school holidays and how they will be staffed when many of their furloughed volunteers return to work.

## **Recommendations**

We see many improvements since our last briefing in this area. However, a number of challenges remain and new concerns, particularly around the future, are emerging.

In previous times, we have always advocated that the most effective lifeline for people being swept into poverty is getting cash directly to families. However, this global pandemic has meant these are not normal times and we recognise that communities need support in multiple ways that will meet their immediate and short term needs. As well as being a priority need, food is a human right and there is currently a need to get food to those trapped by poverty and those shielding who cannot otherwise access it.

Therefore, we make the following recommendations to ensure that emergency food aid can continue to deliver as effectively as possible:

### **1. More visible leadership**

**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.**

This is a reiteration of our previous recommendation as we believe that more visible leadership is still needed. We base this on three pieces of evidence we have from the survey and the visits.

1) The overwhelming majority of organisations (80%) are not confident they were meeting everyone's emergency food needs. One of the main reasons we previously made this recommendation was "to be sure that help is actually reaching those working in local areas and the people who need that food."

2) Demand is rising and expected to continue to do so. Combined with the risk of a second wave, there could well be a re-emergence of challenges around supply of food, access to and amount of funding and co-ordination of local work.

3) The projects we visited told us they felt there was a need for more visible leadership to "steer the ship", provide reassurance, information and guidance. They also reflected on newly emerging ways of working and how important leadership would be in ensuring the more positive aspects of these ways of working are kept as we move into recovery and renewal phases.

We set out in our previous briefing what more visible leadership could look like. Taking our new evidence into account, we now call for a national co-ordinator who can act as an important link between central government and those on the frontline of delivery (both statutory and voluntary). They should compile a national picture of emergency food provision, identifying areas where gaps need to be addressed and where additional funding should be provided. They would also provide leadership in supporting communities and local authorities with the transition out of the COVID-19 response phase and into the recovery and renewal phases.

## **2. Continuity of funding.**

**The Scottish Government should commit to topping up the Food Fund with what is required and for as long as is required.**

The view from the frontline is that people across Scotland are in increasing danger of being swept into poverty and will require a lifeline to help meet their basic needs. Alongside evidence such as the rising unemployment rates and the large numbers of people who are claiming universal credit, this is a real and present risk which we need to understand and mitigate against. Failure to do so could result in community organisations coming under pressure and facing challenges again with accessing sufficient funding, accessing food, having enough workers and volunteers to fulfil demand and protecting the wellbeing of those they do have.

The £70 million Food Fund has had a positive impact for many, and we welcome the establishment and administration of this fund. It has enabled many people to be provided with the food they needed in a compassionate and dignified manner. However, there are concerns over what will happen when this comes to an end. Many organisations are looking ahead to the future and worrying about how they will continue to resource their work. Already many have drawn on their reserves so their resilience to cope with an increased demand or second wave will be reduced. A commitment to continuing with the Food Fund would provide some much-needed reassurance.

### 3. Resilience, recovery and renewal

**Looking to the future, the Scottish Government should be learning from the experiences of how central government, local authorities and community organisations have come together and rapidly co-ordinated efforts to ensure that emergency food provision needs are met. This should involve meaningful engagement with community organisations and people with lived experience of poverty. This learning can be used to build resilience to deal with any future waves of COVID-19 or future pandemics. It can also contribute to thinking around recovery, renewal and building back better.**

As in our previous briefing, we recognise there are aspects to be positive about. Many of the challenges we identified previously have eased slightly. This can be partly attributed to the extremely rapid response put in place by the Scottish Government and local authorities to support community organisations. But it is also testament to the sheer hard work and commitment of the people in those organisations that worked around the clock to meet community needs; a true demonstration of the compassion that is at the heart of Scotland's communities.

Emergency food provision has also been the catalyst for encouraging positive change. New, fruitful partnerships have been formed at pace and community organisations feel that more value has been placed on what they do in terms of their ability to identify and help reach vulnerable families and individuals.

During our visits we heard that there is opportunity for positive social renewal post-COVID. Scotland's National Performance Framework is built around kindness, compassion and dignity. We now have a clear opportunity to shape new, more compassionate, public services by building on the alliances formed between sectors from the COVID community food aid response. We need to nurture those partnerships by allowing them to continue working together, planning together, training together, and supporting each other to deliver what will be vital COVID and post COVID public services. Crucial to the success of such an approach will be local and national leadership and most importantly the voices and direction of our citizens.

The SPIRU report, which accompanies this briefing, is rich in detail. It can provide a good starting point to understand the experiences of community organisations and continue the learning process.