

Feedback is an environmental charity which regenerates nature by transforming our food system. Moving towards a food system that nourishes both people and our planet will require significant changes to our food culture, the food economy and its governance. We are seeking to bring about these changes through a unique combination of campaigning and advocacy, citizen engagement and pilot programmes. For more information, visit our website: www.feedbackglobal.org

We welcome this follow-up on the impact of Covid-19 on the food system. The current Covid-19 pandemic continues to expose many aspects of our food system which pose major challenges to both ensuring that the public's nutritional needs are fulfilled fairly and equitably and to producing food without exacting a dangerous environmental toll. Our response to the enquiry is founded on our belief that true food system productivity should be measured as the greatest nutritional value consumed (with the least waste) for the least environmental harm or the greatest environmental enhancement. During the pandemic, we have supported communities in Merseyside and Sussex through:

- Working in partnership with local charities to deliver over 11,000 food parcels and meals between March and December 2020.
- Providing access to slow cookers, cooking skills information and regular deliveries of healthy food parcels to families and individuals suffering from isolation, poverty and poor food access.
- Working in partnership with local businesses and charities in Knowsley to deliver 2,500 lunch bags to children during the November half term.
- Working in partnership with community grassroots organisations to deliver nearly 400 Christmas parcels to families in Knowsley in December 2020.

The Government's response to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on our food supply chain needs to go beyond measures to relieve immediate scarcity – though these are of course important and vital – to encompass action that will help build a food system that is more resilient to future shocks, especially those posed by the ongoing climate emergency.

1. How the pandemic and the Government's response to it have affected food supply since July 2020

The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the level of corporate control of the current food system. The Government's response has, to a large extent, ignored the possibilities of supporting smaller and more local suppliers to secure supply chains. Supermarkets have financially [benefited from the pandemic](#), whereas many outdoor markets, which provide a vital service to local communities, have had to close. We are a member of the Sustain alliance for better food and farming and support [their call to keep markets open](#). As they highlight, "Open markets offer the health benefits of being in the open air, with goods usually being handled by fewer people, unlike enclosed shopping spaces, which has to be a safety consideration for limiting the spread of the virus. At the very least they should be given parity with supermarkets."

Moreover, [we called on supermarkets to return the nearly £2 billion in public funds in the form of a 12-month break on business rates](#). We are glad to see that supermarkets have returned this money and urge the Government to use it to address food access issues and provide

support for struggling food businesses, which are vital to local communities and regional economies.

The Government has not taken adequate action to ensure access to food; instead, vulnerable households are relying on unevenly distributed third-sector provision. For example, support for people required to shield ended at the end of July; these people continued to need support, but it was not provided. This was also highlighted by the issues with Free School Meals, notably the inconsistencies regarding whether food would be provided during school holidays and the sub-standard food parcels supplied to families instead of vouchers or money.

Here again, reliance on supermarkets to ensure good access to healthy food for all communities is not the only answer. Providing free school meal vouchers in the early part of the pandemic, which could only be spent in major retailers, was a missed opportunity to allow communities living in areas with markets and other forms of alternative provision to support these supply chains. A [recently published study](#) from the US context has suggested little evidence that increased access to a supermarket addresses the symptoms of a 'food desert', i.e. inequitable access to healthy food, and showcased that stronger interventions are needed. More research is needed to understand poor food access in the UK; however, it is disappointing that the Government has not taken this opportunity to support a greater variety of supply chain and delivery models.

Food access cannot just be addressed in a short-term manner – like in response to a crisis – or by a patchwork of overstretched local organisations; food access requires a long-term policy approach that takes a systemic view. Under the status quo, it has essentially been left to local councils and the voluntary sector to ensure people can access fresh food.

We are part of a project called [Knowsley Kitchen](#), which is providing fresh food boxes to people, and are deeply concerned about individuals who not only cannot access fresh food but are also not being adequately provided for by the Government. This is an example of someone falling through the cracks in the current system:

"Just to encourage, one of our volunteers returned to mine in tears. She had taken a box to a particularly vulnerable family, mum with serious mental health challenges, two kids, dad not around. The kids literally devoured the fruit. Our box was the only food in the house. We've just been back with a load of tins/packets and we can support them through. But this poor mum, struggling at best of times, off work to home school as best she can. We are so fortunate to be able to connect and support. Just makes you sad though how many slip through safety nets."

The Government has not adequately ensured the safety of workers in the food system. Updated [regulation](#) for migrant agricultural workers meant that these workers were not required to quarantine before working if travelling from abroad. This has led to a direct correlation between Covid-19 cases amongst migrant workers and farms or food processing facilities, and to an on-going increased risk for these workers. Government needs to take measures to ensure the safety of all food workers in the supply chain; an important step would be to ensure they receive sick pay if they have to self-isolate.

More people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds work in precarious and poorly paid jobs than white workers employed in the food supply chain; this has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. The hospitality, retail and manufacturing industries have been hardest hit by unemployment (70% of all job losses), and it is these same industries that employ

most food workers in the UK. Inadequate support for workers (beyond the furlough scheme) has led to the number of [BAME workers in hospitality dropping by 23%](#) compared to 13% of white workers. Mandatory ethnic pay gap reporting and a ban on zero-hour contracts would be a welcome step to protecting BAME workers in food sectors.

2. *What impact the current lockdown is having on food supply*

We encourage the Government to not focus solely on supply but consider the vital issue of food access. As highlighted in response to Question 1, the Government has not taken adequate measures to ensure all people can access fresh food in lockdown.

In terms of food supply, the pandemic, in tandem with post-Brexit import regulations, is underlining the long-term issue of the UK's [insufficient domestic food production](#), and in particular the [clear benefits that a boost to the horticultural sector would bring](#). With an awareness that consolidation of the farming sector is driving down the number of farm businesses and affecting the overall resilience of the system through decreasing the diversity of producers, the increase in domestic production should focus on support for SMEs and community-led agricultural enterprises.

The Government has made it difficult for small businesses to operate because of changes to rules without providing adequate notice or financial support. This leads to large quantities of waste in the food supply chain, not just at the restaurant level but for farmers who supply, for example, the hospitality industry. The scale of this waste is unclear because of insufficient measurement of food waste below the consumer level; this includes the repeated delay in the Government bringing forward a consultation, promised in the 2018 Waste and Resources Strategy, to require mandatory reporting on food waste by businesses over a certain size.

3. *What further actions the Government, public bodies and industry need to take*

We make the following recommendations:

- The pandemic has shown that the people who work in our food system are 'essential workers', and this needs to be reflected in Government provision. The Government should ensure that key workers in the food supply chain are offered vaccinations as soon as possible.
- The Government needs to think much more laterally about providing support to enable food access that goes beyond the main retailers. Different models of food provision which could improve access in areas particularly challenged by the pandemic's impacts include local cooperative buying networks, community supported agriculture schemes and food markets. We recommend the creation of a nationally funded but locally administered fund for starting up local food cooperatives, social enterprises and other types of community-embedded structures, which can respond to local need, help address food access and also sustain regional economies. This fund should also help enable a transition from 'Food Banks' to 'Food Pantries'. The Government's response to the pandemic has highlighted a gap between ambition to support local businesses and real investment in local food economies.
- Policy on food provision should be coherent with supporting local and regional businesses, supply chains and a more flexible and diverse food system. For example,

with regards to Free School Meal Vouchers, policy should enable these Vouchers to be used in food markets and other local businesses, not just major retailers. We strongly recommend the use of vouchers or cash payments over statutory food parcels. Furthermore, Free School Meals should be offered to families receiving Universal Credit, not just those who come under the very low-income threshold.

- Overall, the pandemic has further revealed the lack of coherent policy on food which encompasses production, supply, retail and healthy consumption. We recommend that the Government considers appointing a Commissioner for Food with oversight of these issues across different departments (e.g. Defra, MoH, DoE).
- As highlighted in response to Question 2, we are concerned about levels of food waste across the food supply chain and about how much of this waste is invisible under current measurement and food waste regulation. It has recently been announced that [the effects of lockdown on household food waste](#) will be examined. We urge the Government to examine the impacts of the pandemic across the entire food supply chain, notably on farm-level food waste. We also recommend that the Government brings forward its consultation on mandatory business reporting on food waste, which was first recommended by the EFRA Committee in 2017. We have further recommendations to holistically address food waste in [our policy brief](#).

For comments or inquiries, please contact Jessica Sinclair Taylor, Head of Communications and Policy at Feedback: jessica@feedbackglobal.org