

Submission to Parliament: COVID-19 and food supply

April 2020. Contact: Tom Skinner, Director – Greater Manchester Poverty Action,
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Background

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee called for submissions to support its “COVID-19 and food supply” Inquiry, and we as part of Greater Manchester’s Food Response Core Team were asked to write a part of its response, specifically to the question, “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?”

Shielding

Central Government efforts to provide food for up to 1.5m extremely vulnerable people shielding from COVID-19 are welcome, although there have been challenges around ensuring local authorities are fully aware of who is in receipt of support from the government’s scheme. This has made it difficult to ensure local responses are coordinated and complementary to the national scheme.

The biggest concern however is that the number of people in need far exceeds that list, both because the criteria [exclude some people who have serious health conditions](#) (there should be a larger semi-shielded list of people who, even if they turn down or are ineligible for food packages from the Government, are still prioritised for other services and access to supermarkets), and because they do not consider low income or other related socioeconomic factors. [More than three million](#) people reported going hungry in the first three weeks of the UK’s COVID-19 lockdown alone. [Greater Manchester Poverty Action’s own survey](#) of food support providers early in the COVID-19 crisis showed increased demand for their services, but concerns about the food supply and a major decrease in volunteer capacity that will have worsened further since the lockdown started.

Funding

The £3.25m grant for redistributing surplus food has helped to allay some of the worst fears about food supply to public sector and VCSE food providers, but food banks in several areas of Greater Manchester have still been running dangerously low on supplies and have had to buy food in, either depleting their own cash reserves or relying on bailouts from their local authorities. This financial hit compounds the impact of austerity in which those councils with the most financially vulnerable populations also experienced the [harshes cuts](#), and there is significant concern that the “Fair Funding Review” could continue or even accelerate that trend. These concerns about local authority and voluntary and community and social enterprise (VCSE) finances in Greater Manchester risk undermining the city region’s determination to provide for all of its citizens and to transition out of this crisis with a shared approach to reducing food poverty. A commitment to bolster funding for councils in the future, to meet the needs of their low-income and other vulnerable households (including but not limited to ring-fenced and better funded Local Welfare Assistance Schemes) is a missing pillar of the Government’s COVID-19 response.

Welfare

Household income itself remains a barrier to accessing food, despite many welcome moves from the Government – the furlough scheme, the end of the benefits freeze, the increase in support through Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit and the extra funding to councils to meet increased demand for support with paying council tax. The removal of the requirement for Healthy Start applications to have a signature from a health worker is welcome, and we encourage the Government to move as quickly as possible to launching the system for online applications, as well as setting targets to increase uptake.

However, the 5 week wait for Universal Credit continues to increase household food insecurity, as does the 2-child limit. We also advocate substantially increasing Child Benefit and scrapping the benefit cap that limits the total amount of support a household can receive through the benefit system.