

1 May 2020

Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London response to the EFRA committee enquiry COVID-19 and food supply.

Summary

1. The COVID19 pandemic has led to major disruptions in the UK and global food systems. The response by the UK government has been uncoordinated and inadequate.
2. Our research¹ highlights the broad range of policy input needed for food governance (at least 16 departments, plus multiple public bodies and agencies). Our research also highlights that while there have been efforts to connect this policy work in the past, food remains uncoordinated as a policy sector. The COVID19 crisis calls for a coordinated food response. Drawing on our research we recommend a cross-government committee to coordinate work on food policy.² We also provide the following more specific recommendations:
 - a. Address financial (in)security: For populations experiencing financial insecurity, it is close to impossible for the purchasing or consumption of healthy foods to be a priority. Actions include:
 - Reconsider the Universal Credit system so that it does not leave people with less money or with gaps in payment
 - Address challenges related to insecure work, such as zero hours contracts
 - Raise the minimum wage to a living wage
 - Increase the eligibility and amount of Healthy Start vouchers and link them to local agriculture and food production
 - Expand Free School Meals vouchers, and enable wider redeemability (in local food systems beyond supermarkets)
 - Provide funding and support for the expansion of local school meals to combat wider community food insecurity.
 - b. Ensure food availability, and increase community resources to access to food, during and post lockdown. Without wider community and policy support the UK food system will be slow to recover. Actions include:

¹ Sharpe, R., Parsons, K and Hawkes, C. (2020) *Coordination must be key to how governments respond to Covid-19 food impacts: a view from England* Rethinking Food Governance Guidance Note. London: Food Research Collaboration.

² Lang T, (2020) *Feeding Britain Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them*, ISBN: 9780241442227

- Support and subsidise the hospitality and food service sector to allow it to rebuild (supporting UK agriculture in the process)
 - Support UK farming, fishing and food production with proactive policies to stabilize labour and farm incomes
 - Invest in social spaces and organisations that can provide social outlets for children and families during and post lockdown (that also don't rely on High Fat, Sugar and Salt foods (HFSS) as their main attraction)
 - Provide access to affordable, healthy and safe food through both the supermarket and alternative food systems – beyond food aid.
- c. Advertising and communication around food needs to be rethought in the UK post lockdown. Actions include:
- A wider dedicated information and advertising campaign communicating a systems approach to food. This would help to educate on topics including: healthy and sustainable diets; risk and transparency of food governance; misinformation about diet on social media (e.g. miracle cures for COVID-19 or misleading claims about particular foods/diets) and finally
 - A comprehensive restriction of all forms of marketing and promotion of HFSS foods.
- d. Learn from international lessons that can be integrated into UK policy.
- Cities and national governments have launched services to allow citizens to get basic food items directly from small scale farmers supporting local production and providing access to healthy and fresh food³
 - Provided social safety nets and economic stimulus directly to vulnerable households so that they are able to purchase food despite the economic havoc wrought by Covid 19 lockdowns⁴
 - Appoint a cross-government committee to coordinate work on food policy; in NYC this is being led by a “COVID-19 Food Czar”⁵
 - Understand that “Food Security is Economic Security is Economic Stimulus”⁶.

About the Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London

3. The Centre for Food Policy is an interdisciplinary unit working to shape a food system that improves the health of people, the environment and the economy. The Centre for Food Policy's research uncovers how the food system really works in practice, in order to inform effective, joined up food policy. We understand the food system intimately: how a policy decision in one area can have knock-on effects on others. Our research takes a whole-systems approach with a pragmatic focus on decisions that form effective food policy.
4. We are submitting evidence to highlight that this whole-systems outlook has not been used by the UK government up to this point. We believe that a whole-systems approach is vital for long term UK food system recovery.

³<https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/desarrollo-economico/cuarentena/mercado-moviles-llevaran-productos-los-hogares>, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-09-go-fish-the-covid-19-edition/>

⁴ <https://mg.co.za/article/2020-04-21-south-africas-covid-19-economic-stimulus-plan-opportunity-out-of-crisis/>

⁵ <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/9224-de-blasio-food-czar-impending-hunger-crisis-coronavirus-mobilization>

⁶ https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/food_security_is_economic_security_is_economic_stimulus

5. We acknowledge that the COVID19 crisis response has occurred within a 10 week time frame. The food system landscape has changed dramatically each week, from pre-lockdown to lockdown (early March 2020), to the present (late April 2020). No policy response was going to be perfect, but we feel strongly that more could have been done and that more needs to be done, in a more coordinated fashion, and communicated more clearly to the public. This will not be the last such crisis with implications for UK food security and resilience. More needs to be done to ensure better food policy is built into any future crisis management plans.

Evidence related to the enquiries' terms of reference

6. Assessment of the COVID19 crisis and its impact on the UK and global food systems has been limited. We have gathered the following evidence from our networks (<https://foodresearch.org.uk/>), analysis of the media, and secondary data analysis. We also emphasise that multiple existing tensions and vulnerabilities within the UK food system have been highlighted by the crisis. These include: labour issues, food (in)security and food bank use; use of just in time and international supply chains; public trust and transparency within the food system; the cheap price but high public health cost of HFSS foods, food advertising, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and food loss and waste.

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?

7. The COVID19 crisis has emphasised that, although the 16+ government departments (plus multiple public bodies, agencies etc) involved in food policy in the UK have a wide policy remit, there are limitations to the HM Government (HMG) jurisdiction, and the speed of their policy impact across the UK food system. Due to jurisdictional boundaries, different departments have had different levels of communication with the public. From an external perspective, this has led to the appearance of limited coordinated public-facing communication from government departments over COVID19 food system issues.⁷
8. For example: there has been a lack of guidance on affordable healthy eating during lockdown, or how to access and cook safe food. The FSA can talk about food safety issues but not nutrition⁸, and PHE advice on diet has been neither strong nor visible. Eatwell guidance has not been updated since 2018.⁹ Advice on healthy eating and nutrition needs to be coordinated, and it should come from a central source.

⁷ Sharpe, R., Parsons, K and Hawkes, C. (2020) *Coordination must be key to how governments respond to Covid-19 food impacts: a view from England* Rethinking Food Governance Guidance Note. London: Food Research Collaboration. And Parsons, K. (2020) *Who makes food policy in England? A map of government actors and activities*. Rethinking Food Governance Report 1. London: Food Research Collaboration.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-consumers-on-coronavirus-covid-19-and-food>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

9. HMG's measures and actions appear to be short-term crisis management, with little regard for longer term food system stability and resilience. The policy actions and decision processes have not been communicated transparently, effectively, or with thought for long term implications.
10. For example: individual researchers engaging with the National Food Strategy have been informed that the National Food Strategy has been postponed/suspended for the duration of the COVID19 crisis, and its staff redeployed to the COVID19 effort. There has been no mention of this on HMG social media, or on the National Food Strategy's website. It is essential that this area of longer term policy planning continues after the immediate crisis has ended, and that the public be clearly informed about its progress.
11. Alternative food networks (such as Sustain, and Sustainable Food Cities) have filled this communication void, sharing local government policy and support much more rapidly than the corresponding government departments¹⁰. This demonstrates that clear, coordinated communication with the public about the impact of COVID19 on UK food systems is possible: we need to see this from HMG.

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?

12. HMG has worked primarily with large businesses within the food system (e.g. supermarkets)¹¹. This indicates that the government conflates the issue of food supply with major retailers only.
13. HMG has ignored the capacities of other sectors, such as hospitality and food service, and 'alternative' local food systems. These have been clearly shown to be significant supporters of high value British agriculture, horticulture, fisheries and animal and dairy production. Alternative food systems have been shown to have greater resilience, and have experienced less disruption to their supply networks¹² - but HMG has offered limited support and engagement to these smaller, more complex agents within the food system. Indeed, there has been a deeply concerning lack of engagement between HMG and the wider landscape of organisations that support the wider UK food system.

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?

¹⁰ <https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/>; and <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/apr20-local-food-systems-responses-to-covid-19/>

¹¹ <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/03/21/daily-update-on-the-coronavirus-response/>; <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-03-23/33713/>, and <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-03-23/33453/>

¹² <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/apr20-local-food-systems-responses-to-covid-19/>, <https://www.jamesmartinchef.co.uk/suppliers-and-deliveries-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

14. The Centre for Food policy's latest research¹³ reveals that, prior to the COVID19 crisis, much of the UK population had limited resources to prioritise a healthy diet. Operation Yellowhammer documents¹⁴ had already forecast that food supply disruptions would hit low-income groups hardest, with a reduction in choice, limited availability of certain foods, and rising food prices. Data collected in the first weeks of lockdown¹⁵ have shown that household food insecurity has increased.
15. COVID19 has a proportionally higher impact in deprived areas¹⁶, and in obese populations.¹⁷ Both poverty and obesity have been constant over the last decade¹⁸. Those experiencing poverty are more likely to also experience obesity. Increasing incomes while at the same time providing access to healthier foods for these groups would reduce the impact of this and future pandemics or other food system shocks.¹⁹
16. Our previous research has identified multiple actions to improve the food environment and reduce food insecurity. These actions are critical to build a more resilient food system coming out of the COVID19 crisis. We have provided these recommendation in the summary section (A,B,C).
17. We also recommend examining best international policy responses²⁰ as outlined in summary section (D).
18. HMG has focused much of their response on the issue of emergency household food access through existing food bank and food aid networks, and by sharing vulnerable people's information with supermarkets for food deliveries. The COVID19 crisis has highlighted HMG's decade-long reliance on these food aid organisations, who have provided vital support in the

¹³ Anna Isaacs, Kimberley Neve, Joel Halligan, Corinna Hawkes; "How do families living in low-income areas engage with the food environment, and what does this mean for effective obesity prevention policies?" NIHR, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London, January 2020

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-humble-address-motion>

¹⁵ https://osf.io/qugry/?view_only=boffbce001c74fa59634db3496fccc9, and The Food Foundations *Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown Preliminary report* https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand17april>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/covid-19-deaths-twice-as-high-in-poorest-areas-in-england-and-wales>

¹⁷ <https://www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/blog/articles/2020/04/obesity-and-coronavirus-covid-19>, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/30/link-obesity-covid-19-now-blatant-ignore/>, <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/197216/being-male-overweight-lead-more-serious/>

¹⁸ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SNO3336/SNO3336.pdf>, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sno3336/>

¹⁹ [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(18\)30045-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(18)30045-8)

²⁰ https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/resource-and-information-guide-hunger-food-and-the-coronavirus/?utm_source=April+1%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Dec.+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email, <https://www.ifpri.org/covid-19>, <https://www.unscn.org/en/news-events/recent-news?idnews=2040>, <http://www.fao.org/in-action/fapda/tool/index.html#main.html>, and <https://padlet.com/anhacademy/COVID19>

- absence of a properly funded and coordinated government response to UK food insecurity. During the early weeks of the crisis, food banks were unable to operate efficiently,²¹ owing to a lack of donations and staff, and disruptions within referral mechanisms and supply chains etc. To take the strain off overstretched food aid networks, we recommend economic interventions that will have positive impacts on diet and the wider UK food system. These include revising the Universal Credit system, and raising the minimum wage to a living wage.
19. Provision of food vouchers (such as Healthy Start) and free school meals has been disrupted, causing further food insecurity. These interventions have been proven to be effective at promoting healthy dietary outcomes and reducing food insecurity, and have positive economic impacts.²² However, the implementation of vouchers has not been effective within the COVID19 crisis.²³ For this reason, provision of vouchers and meals must be expanded; they must increase in value; and the processes for applying for them must be simplified. . Combined, these interventions will have a positive impact on households and the wider UK food system.
 20. We are also extremely concerned that advertisers are using food donations, lockdown, and the wider COVID19 crisis as an opportunity to promote HFSS foods e.g. doughnuts (e.g. Krispy Kreme social media campaign “#servingsmiles”)²⁴. Likewise, advertising campaigns have been run to promote increased consumption of beef, despite health and climate emergency implications.²⁵
 21. We recommend a whole systems approach to advertising and communication around food. This should include comprehensive restriction of all forms of marketing and promotion of HFSS foods, along with additional campaigns to counter misinformation about diet on social media.

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?

22. We are concerned that small and medium enterprises will be unable to withstand the financial shock caused by the COVID19 Crisis. Agriculture and food account for 9% of the UK’s small and medium sized businesses (15% in rural areas)²⁶. This represents a large volume of small-

²¹<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-03-23/33732/https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/fareshare-calls-for-more-food-funding-and-volunteers-to-support-vulnerable-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/>

1. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/04/17/coronavirus-food-banks-questions-answered>

²²<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2018.02.009>, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-healthy-start-scheme-evidence-review/pages/6/>, https://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/free_school_meals/

²³ <https://bbc.co.uk/news/education-52488208>

²⁴<https://www.krispykreme.co.uk/serving-smiles>

²⁵<https://ahdb.org.uk/news/ahdb-rallying-cry-to-stay-home-and-celebrate-steaknight>

²⁶https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828079/Businesses_-_August_2019_includes_SME_update_.pdf

scale growers, fishers²⁷, manufacturers, and retailers. If this infrastructure disappears, it will be very difficult to replace; the food system will be left to bigger and better-resourced companies, with the result that the UK will lose economic diversity and resilience.

23. Securing labour for the UK food system is also crucial. Many workers in the UK's hospitality, retail and agriculture sectors are among the lowest paid and most vulnerable. Many are from overseas and unable to enter the country or access places of work due to lockdown²⁸. They lack job security, have poor working conditions, and their employment status is precarious²⁹. HMG needs to improve labour protections, and implement long term plans to increase productivity, while improving wages, working conditions, job security and career prospects in this sector.
24. Local food system resilience is absolutely critical, as it is likely that global trade will be disrupted in the long term.
25. There is a risk that a No-Deal Brexit may occur, due to a breakdown in EU withdrawal negotiations within the COVID19 crisis. This would have a major impact on the UK food system. We are concerned that HMG may use COVID19 mitigation measures to mask the adverse impacts of a No-Deal Brexit, thus avoiding the close level of scrutiny that should be applied to the withdrawal process.
26. Finally, the UK's progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) must be maintained; both in funding for UK based advancements (including food loss and waste reduction), and international SDG progress through DFID and GCRF funding. The SDGs are linked to improving global food security, and mitigating climate change impacts.

Contact

27. christian.reynolds@city.ac.uk

Declaration of interest

28. The authors (Christian Reynolds, Anna Isaacs, Kimberley Neve, Laura Pereira, Rosalind Sharpe, Rebecca Wells) have no conflicting interests to declare.

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²⁷ <https://www.plaas.org.za/covid-19-the-impact-on-small-scale-fishers-a-perspective-from-ocean-view/>

²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-farming/picking-for-britain-coronavirus-crisis-draws-workers-to-farms-idUSKBN222oHW>

²⁹ <https://unitetheunion.org/what-we-do/unite-in-your-sector/food-drink-agricultural/>