Coronavirus' exposure of food, place and community resilience: a Welsh local authority perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Coronavirus has accentuated the cracks within the fragile UK food system. Empty shelves and empty stomachs, the damaging consequences of coronavirus have led to an unprecedented increase in food insecurity and food access.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on multiple perspectives of those working to combat food insecurity, inequality, and inaccessibility in Gwynedd; exploring the responses of the pandemic from food banks and charities, innovative food distribution collaborations and the role of maintaining already fragile rural communities.

Findings: This article concludes that the need for transformative place making to build stronger, more resilient communities has never been more pressing with support from public sector funding to help alleviate some of the hardship and pressure with the rise in poverty and austerity, coronavirus imposed or not.

Originality: This study focuses on a single Local Authority area in North Wales, Gwynedd, an area where little food research has been published to date. The coronavirus pandemic also places the timely research within the scope of food access and distribution during hardship. The paper discusses the impacts exposed by the pandemic and lessons which can be drawn and reflected on for future benefit.

Keywords: sense of place, food insecurity, inequality, poverty, coronavirus

1

INTRODUCTION

The UK was ranked second best pandemic prepared country in the world (Nalabandian *et al.*, 2019). However, the preparedness plan was focused on influenza, this meant as a new unresearched virus started to spread, it was not possible to implement some planned preventative actions (UK Government, 2020). Caduff (2020, p.468) highlights the failure of the government to also consider the large impact of said extreme measures on the daily lives and norm of many places, and how the 'name of survival will haunt us for decades'. The already fragile neo-liberal, consumption driven, globalised UK food system, susceptible to external shocks (Benton, 2020; Lang, 2020), has become fractured and is exposing the vulnerabilities and inequalities in the unjust system (Pollock *et al.*, 2020). This paper provides an insight into some of the food and drink access approaches used to help individuals during the pandemic within Gwynedd, North Wales. The paper explores the grassroot initiatives driven by communities and organisations, volunteerism, and the need for a review of existing policy.

For those who had the means to, stockpiling, hording and panic buying became options, leaving shelves stripped bare (Power *et al.*, 2020) and just-in-time supply chains struggling to cope with the increased demand (Benton, 2020). Health-vulnerable individuals, that were encouraged to self-isolate were left unable to book delivery slots (Eskytė *et al.*, 2020) with some risking their health to buy essential goods (Scope, 2020). The inequality gap grew further, 'the forgotten vulnerable' (Patel *et al.*, 2020), the fatal combination of growing austerity in the UK (Lambie-Mumford & Green, 2017; Power *et al.*, 2020; Strong, 2020), and the damaging economic consequences of coronavirus (reduced hours/unemployment/universal credit/benefit dependence), have led to an increased number of individuals going hungry (IFAN, 2020; Trussell Trust, 2020).

Exploring several perspectives of those working within the four pillars of food security: (a) food availability (b) food access, including both affordability and transport (c) food utilisation and, (d) the stability of the food supply to combat food insecurity, inequality, and inaccessibility in Gwynedd, North Wales, this paper provides in-depth insight into rural localised responses to food access during the pandemic. The aims are to (1) explore the varied responses of small communities on their collective actions to combat the impacts of coronavirus on food accessibility and to (2) provide insight into the opportunities and barriers created by the pandemic and how these relate to the need for change within the current food system. This niche-specific research provides a greater understanding of pandemic induced food and drink access issues and the consequential responses in rural North Wales and provides insight into further research avenues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food aid and Big Society

Emergency food aid has been sourced through various forms in the UK, including but not limited to: food banks, Fareshare, FoodCycle, breakfast and lunch clubs, community cafes, social supermarkets, soup kitchens and soup runs.

Caplan (2016) discusses *Big Society or Broken Society?* And whether food should be considered *charitable gift* or *entitlement*. Caplan (2016, p.9) highlights that although donations from both the public charitable and voluntary sector have been praised 'as examples of the vibrancy of democracy and society…they are [also] associated with profound changes to the UK welfare state, the discourses of politicians, the policies of government, and the views of many voters.' The 2010 coalition UK government launched the Big Society, a more inclusive view of society in which communities play a vital role in alleviating both health and social problems (Blond, 2010).

Herzfeld (1992) argues that indifference is socially produced, and the role of the media and governance in the creation of a blame society should not be ignored, playing an important role in the process of defining the social problems arising and influencing (in)directly policy (Buse *et al.*, 2012; Wells & Caraher, 2014). With users and victims of food aid being misrepresented using the blame-laden 'scrounger' rhetoric (Garthwaite, 2016, p.2), it is not surprising that policies and benefit rules are tightened or even removed completely, causing hardship and distress. In 2017-18, the top three reasons for referral to a food bank were 'income not covering essential costs', 'benefit delays' and 'benefit changes' (Trussell Trust, 2019), this will be further exacerbated with the introduction of Universal Credit's five week delay of full payment, and now coronavirus. 38% of Welsh households have seen an increase in food costs since March 2020, with more than 200,000 households cutting back on food for adults (Sefydliad Bevan Foundation, 2020).

Although food banks should be applauded, it has been questioned that food entitlement is a UK government problem, and should be considered a human right rather than a charitable concern (Dowler, 2002; Cloke *et al.*, 2017). This form of charity is depoliticized, allowing governments to 'offload their welfare responsibilities' (Riches, 2002, p.658) and therefore their commitments to Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Article 25 The Right to Means for Adequate Health, whist also maintaining some level of control (Caplan, 2016). It could also be argued that food aid and food banks instil a false sense of progress and therefore lessening the need for immediate action within the UK.

3

Coronavirus, food and rurality

UK rural livelihoods and economies have had their resilience and adaptability tested before; 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (Phillipson *et al.*, 2004), 2007/8 financial crisis (Commission for Rural Communities, 2010) and more recently Brexit, which Dwyer (2018) suggests could lead to increased rural poverty in North Wales. Phillipson *et al.,* (2020) highlight the UK implications for rural economies caused by the pandemic, including demand and supply, the disruption and reconfiguration of supply chains, collaboration and adaptation, business recovery measures, financial concerns and the need for cross sectoral response. However, Galanakis (2020, p.6) suggests the true 'consequences for humanity, economy, and, subsequently, food systems' is unknown.

Coronavirus and Wales

The focus of governmental response has been on 'health, social care and supporting systems, many impacts have not been highlighted to the same extent' (Chang *et al.*, 2020, p292). Political devolution has allowed the four UK nations to respond differently, adopting different approaches to food access, distribution, and procurement. The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 was approved by Senedd (Welsh Parliament) in March, with amendments in April granting Welsh Government emergency powers to manage certain aspects and impacts of the pandemic. However, devolution also caused confusion when the Prime Minister referred during UK television briefings to lockdown measures without clarifying the changes were relevant only to England (Cushion *et al.*, 2020).

There have been just under 220,000 reported cases and over 5,575 coronavirus related deaths in Wales (Public Health Wales, 2021), with those living in deprived areas having a mortality rate twice as high as the least deprived areas (ONS, 2020a).

Shielding individuals: food access and deliveries

Wales experienced lockdowns and 'fire-breaks' throughout 2020 (Figure 1). Initially, 130,000 individuals in Wales were encouraged to self-isolate and shield themselves from potential risks (Welsh Government, 2020a). To combat the issues of shielding and food access, a weekly food parcel was made available for those experiencing enforced shielding, for the first 12 weeks of the initial national lockdown. Welsh Government implemented the £15 million scheme, involving weekly deliveries with enough food for a single person (Welsh Government, 2020b). These boxes were free of charge; however, were only available to those individuals directly advised by the NHS to shield because of health concerns and did not account for other household members or dependents. However, the true number of individuals self-isolating was far higher, as self-imposed shielding individuals also occurred, based on an individual's perceived level of risk unknown.

4

METHODS

This research concentrates on a community food system approach (Peters, 1997) with a strong focus on social reproduction and care (Picchioni *et al.*, 2021). The qualitative data collected explores food responses to the pandemic. This approach enables a more holistic view and critique of the socio-economic food system hierarchies; helping to bridge the gap between food as a collective good and the more traditional food systems perspective, providing a critical lens for multi-scalar approaches and recognising the local actors, workers and collective action as global agents of change (Picchioni *et al.*, 2021).

A case study approach is used to gain and illustrate an in depth understanding and appreciation for the situation (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). The Gwynedd case study was developed using multiple sources (Stake, 1995; Mason, 2018), the multi-methods approach implemented interviews, and document, video and website analysis, gathering qualitative data for analysis.

Secondary data were collected through multi-media avenues including video and website analysis. This involved daily manual data scraping of publicly available platforms and websites, including social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, and local news websites. Often the information was scattered across different sources and platforms, highlighting the need for data triangulation (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). Information on each initiative identified was noted, including relevant contact information, base location, description of access type, support given, support received, volunteer dependency. Food access points that supported individuals through the pandemic, some established prior, and some developed as a result were recorded in the dataset. The dataset did not take into consideration the many shops that remained open to sell essential goods, rather the points of emergency food access, and the establishments that changed their purpose dramatically to facilitate some form of food access.

Reflecting on the authors' positions as food-related academics in the North Wales region, known food-related networks including charities, local businesses, educational institutions, and Councillors were invited to share their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with willing respondents, who were given the opportunity to communicate in Welsh and/or English. Questions for the semi-structured interviews were structured under headings based on the four dimensions of food security (Gross *et al.*, 2000); availability, access, utilization and stability. In some cases, snowball sampling occurred as interviewed individuals signposted the authors to other possible contributors. Between November 2020 and January 2021, a total of fourteen live interviews were conducted with local charities, businesses, and councillors via online platforms, and seven written contributions were received. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and allocated a respondent number.

155 Anonymisation was completed to avoid the politicisation of responses, due to the participation
156 of local councillors.

157 Transcripts were thematically coded using Saldana's (2009) two cycle coding approach. Due
158 to the ethnographic perspective of the study, during the first coding cycle both descriptive
159 coding and In Vivo coding were undertaken, to honour the participant's voices and to ensure
160 the analysis was truly grounded in the perspectives of those interviewed (Saldana, 2009, p91).
161 A total of 92 child codes were generated across all transcriptions. The second cycle of coding
162 focused on pattern coding, whereby nineteen root codes were generated. Codeweaving was
163 undertaken to integrate categories (Saldana, 2009); in this case, often encountering and/or
164 complementing each other, highlighting the complex and intertwined nature of food systems.
165 Each transcript was then re-visited, and themes collated and considered for each interview to
166 determine and verify that the overall themes identified were comparable to the key points
167 made within each dialogue, ''accurately' reflecting the meanings evident in the data set as a
168 whole' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this process of inductive thematic analysis (Braun &
169 Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017), a total of five overall key themes were identified as
170 discussion points, emphasising the data-driven findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Direct
171 quotations were then selected to support the themes and help illustrate the key points.
172 Translated quotes are provided by the authors, as native speakers, ensuring that there is no
173 change to the narrative of the comments (Wiles *et al.*, 2005). Throughout, Lincoln and Guba's
174 (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in thematic analysis was followed, with regular peer
175 debriefing between authors and reflexive writing to examine and evidence emerging
176 impressions and themes (Morse & Richards, 2012; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The final section of
177 the discussion focuses on the implications for policy in Wales based on the findings.

178 A map was created using the secondary data points and any points referred to in the interviews
179 that were not found initially. A total of 27 responses were identified, 23 in using secondary
180 data and four additional through the interview process, these were mapped using point data
181 (figure 2) to show the scale and location of access points identified across the Local Authority
182 (LA).

183

FIRST REPORTED CASE (WALES)
28 FEBRUARY 2020

First known case was reported in Swansea, South Wales.

INITIAL OUTBREAK
(28 FEBRUARY -11 MARCH)

PANDEMIC CONFIRMED
(11 MARCH - 23 MARCH)

Closure of schools.

UK LOCKDOWN
(23 MARCH - 1 JUNE)

First national lockdown.
Only essential services to remain open.
No non-essential travel, outside exercise limited to once a day.
Social distancing.
Some stores placed restrictions on the number of items.
Gatherings of two or more people banned.
Closure of borders and Welsh mountains/rural green spaces.
Extension on initial 4 week lockdown duration in Wales.

CORONAVIRUS ACT 2020
(25 MARCH)

Powers granted for authorities to:
- Take people into or keep them in quarantine
- Restrict or prohibit mass gatherings
- Close premises

RESTRICTIONS EASED
(1 JUNE - 7 SEPTEMBER)

Slow opening of hospitality and entertainment.
Social distancing still in place.

RESTRICTIONS ENFORCED
7 SEPTEMBER - 19 OCTOBER

Beginning of local lockdowns (county level).
Mandatory face coverings.
Limitations on social gatherings and events.

'FIRE-BREAK'
(23 OCTOBER - 9 NOVEMBER)

Second national lockdown (coinciding with half term and traditional celebrations).
Similar restrictions as the first UK lockdown.
'Stay at home' - no gatherings permitted.

POST FIRE-BREAK
9 NOVEMBER - 15 DECEMBER

Two-household bubble can form.
Slow opening of hospitality and entertainment.
Curfew for alcohol sales.
Schools reopen.
Reopen of non-essential business.
No travel to and from England.
No travel restrictions within Wales.
Work from home if possible.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR
19 DECEMBER - 19 FEBRUARY

Tier-4 restrictions and third national lockdown.
Only two-household bubble permitted on Christmas day.
Social distancing in public areas.
Schools closed.

184

185   *Figure 1: Coronavirus timeline in Wales Feb 2020 – time of submission*

CASE STUDY

Gwynedd

Gwynedd is one of twenty-one LA areas in Wales, the second largest in terms of land area and one of the most sparsely populated, at 49.0 person per square kilometre (Welsh Government, 2020c). The Snowdonia National Park covers much of Gwynedd (838 square miles), a working landscape comprising of settlements, agriculture, business, and services. Highly seasonal and focussed on leisure and tourism, the LA is highly dependent on external income and capital, linking to the seasonality of public services such as public transport. Gwynedd has varying levels of deprivation spanning the region, 34% of Gwynedd has been ranked in the most deprived 50% of Wales (Welsh Government, 2019a). The Gwynedd and Anglesey Well-being Plan (Gwynedd and Anglesey PSB, 2018) highlighted following public consultation that a strong sense of community is important to its residents.

Very little food research has been published to date that focuses on the North Wales region specifically. This paper aims to highlight the vast array of grassroots initiatives developed within the small communities of Gwynedd, a new perspective, shining light on the rural and often hidden communities of North Wales.

Figure 2 illustrates the identified food access points within Gwynedd at the time of initial submission. It must be acknowledged, that this is not an exhaustive list. Often hidden within communities, responses are occurring 'on the ground', without the knowledge of the wider community and often without want of recognition. The many online platforms and social groups that also assisted food access have not been mapped, often facilitated by community members, these are key areas that should be explored in further future research. Additional context and information on several of the varied responses identified are discussed below to provide insight into some of the creative, innovative and non-traditional methods of support and food access adopted a direct result of the pandemic.
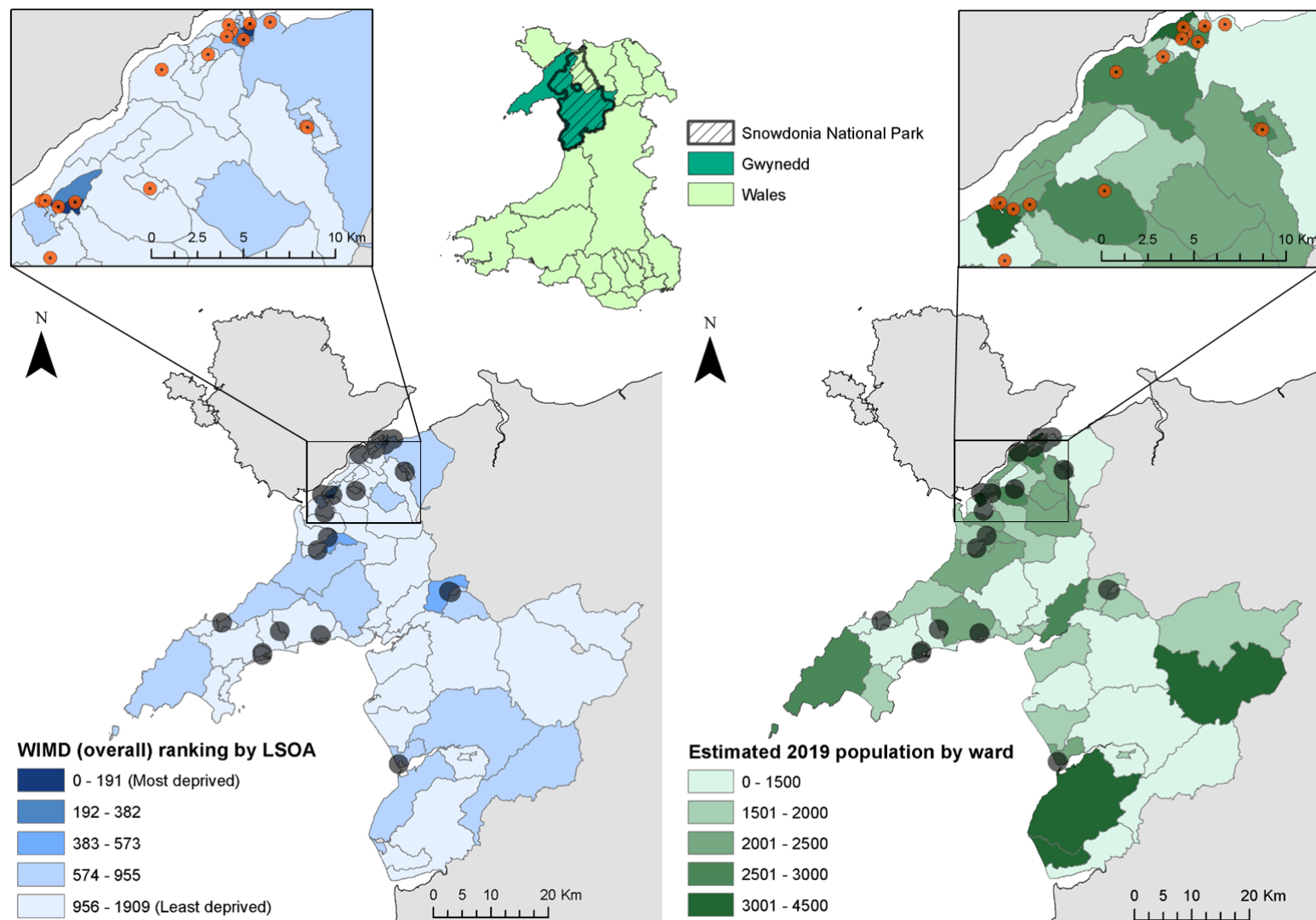
211

Figure 2: Emergency response food access points identified (inset images show the most deprived areas classified by WIMD, which is also where most responses were identified)

213 **_Mantell Gwynedd_**

214 The local County Voluntary Council (CVC) aims to support volunteers, voluntary and
215 community groups, and be a strong voice for the third sector. It is part of Third Sector Support
216 Wales (TSSW) which is a network of 19 CVCs in Wales along with the Wales Council for
217 Voluntary Action (WCVA). The Gwynedd Volunteer Centre is a core function of Mantell
218 Gwynedd and during the pandemic they have supported hundreds of individuals into
219 volunteering. A Bank of Volunteers was created in March 2020 and over 600 people signed
220 up to help others in crisis (Kaye & Morgan, 2021). So far, there are over 1,000 volunteers in
221 Gwynedd who have also registered on the Volunteering Wales platform.

222 _Porthi Pawb Community Food Project_

223 Porthi Pawb [Translation: Feeding Everyone] received £1000 from Mantell Gwynedd's Small
224 Grants Fund towards feeding the vulnerable and elderly in Caernarfon (Mantell Gwynedd,
225 2020). Chris Summers, a local chef, wanted to give back to his local community. Initially 60
226 meals were prepared weekly, however the project has grown distributing on average 650
227 meals a week fulfilling the needs of the local community, moving from a home kitchen to school
228 kitchen to meet the demand. The project continues to grow, and working with Gwyl Fwyd
229 Caernarfon, the local Food Festival, the project received £10,000 through the _National Lottery_
230 _Awards for All_ grant to provide food, packaging and fuel (The National Lottery Community
231 Fund, 2020).

232 _MaesNi Community Group_

233 The MaesNi project is funded through the Invest Local Programme, with the area given £1
234 million over 10 years to improve their community. By May 2020, the Maesgeirchen community
235 had supported (funded by grants from the coronavirus resilience fund, Steve Morgan
236 Foundation, MaesNi, Neighbourly, Tesco Bags for Help, Food for Life, Eglwys-y-Groes and
237 Penrhyn House) over 4000 meals and lunches, essential deliveries, befriending schemes,
238 education and activity packs, virtual boxing sessions, 12 mobile phones and 1 phoneline to
239 access support, all delivered and organised by volunteers with support from MaesNi, Penrhyn
240 House and the Maesgeirchen Partnership (MaesNi, 2020).

241 **_Partneriath Dyffryn Ogwen Partnership_**
242 _Dyffryn Gwyrdd_

243 A new initiative, funded by the National Lottery in August 2020, focusing on the prevention of
244 fuel poverty, transport poverty, food poverty and rural isolation. Including several food poverty
245 initiatives: community growing (allotments and public fruit trees), waste reduction (Fareshare
246 collection and distribution on Sunday and Tuesday evenings) and community befriending

247 schemes (Green Valley partnership with Coed y Brenin Café to provide and deliver hot food
248 to elderly and other vulnerable people who are unable to return to the café).

249 *Cadwyn Ogwen*

250 An innovative partnership between local businesses working together to sell and deliver goods
251 locally using a community owned electric vehicle on a weekly basis, supported by ARFOR
252 grant funding. The aims of the project were to provide a route for local food purchasing during
253 the pandemic and support local businesses and supply chains (Ogwen Partnership, 2020).
254 The idea branched out onto Facebook to provide a discussion area for sharing feedback, ideas
255 and recipes using the Cadwyn Ogwen produce.

256 **Adra Housing Association**
257 Recognising the hardship that was facing some of their tenants and customers, in December
258 2020, Adra Housing Association donated a total of £13,000 to food banks local to their tenants
259 and customers across North Wales, of which, £2,500 was contributed to food banks in
260 Gwynedd (Adra, 2020).

261 **Sunday Lunch Scheme**
262 A partnership between Llanrug Community Council and local business A&M Catering June
263 2020 provide free Sunday lunch for vulnerable residents, those self-isolating or within the at-
264 risk category. The scheme received positive feedback and distributed on average ~100 meals
265 per week during the first lockdown. The project was funded through various donations from
266 A&M Catering, Bangor Masonic Hall, and the Provincial Grand Lodge of North Wales.

267 **Neges**
268 Established by not-for-profit organisation Menter Mon, through their Mon Larder project,
269 working with several partners, Neges established a food consolidation and distribution network
270 across Gwynedd and Anglesey, working with local restaurant Dylan's commercial production
271 kitchen, transformed to produce ready meals from locally sourced produce and to pack weekly
272 food parcels. The parcels were delivered to vulnerable people across the two counties upon
273 direct referrals to Neges by the two Las. Operational from April to July, uptake for the boxes
274 was slower than anticipated but the service made 14,520 deliveries to NHS staff and
275 vulnerable individuals. These deliveries included over 10,000 lunch bags for NHS staff at the
276 regions hospitals, 1,878 one-person parcels, 266 two-person parcels and 1,779 family or four-
277 person parcels, amounting to weekly food support for 9,526 individuals (Prosser *et al*., 2021).

278 ***UNDEB Bangor (Bangor University Students' Union)***

279 UNDEB organised several responses; click and collect services with a local supermarket with

280 volunteer student drivers, winter care packages, and 'The Big Give'; donating 'left-over' food

281 from students leaving their accommodation to Bangor Cathedral Foodbank.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

283 The discussion below is a culmination of the data collected, with the headings representing

284 the key recurring themes identified.

285 ***Partnership working, local provision and moving online***

286 *'…one thing culturally that was a bit of a shock is that for the first time we saw that*

287 *supply chains were fragile.'* Respondent-9322

288 This initial response paper highlights collegiality of food and drink businesses from producers

289 to suppliers that came together during a time of crisis. In Gwynedd, positive collaborative

290 approaches to food distribution were established ensuring the vital role of local business and

291 ensuring products would not be wasted. Local businesses, when possible, donated goods,

292 time, and space, to provide what they could. Not all the food responses identified had physical

293 premises, they have been supported by community offerings, schools, centres of worship etc.

294 Normally closed doors opened to provide safe spaces to collate, produce, store and/or

295 distribute goods. However, all were highly dependent on availability of space, goodwill, and

296 benevolent individuals.

297 The pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of the food and drink system in Wales, largely

298 dependent on imported goods and the seasonal hospitality sector, the need for long term

299 sustainable local solutions are needed to ensure that food and drink businesses can survive

300 and make meaningful contributions irrespective of a global pandemic.

301 The increase in partnership working across Britain since the outbreak of coronavirus has been

302 well documented (Barker & Russell, 2020; Power *et al.*, 2020; Prosser *et al.*, 2021), with the

303 benefits of new and emerging markets, supporting communities and waste reduction.

304 Partnerships have been built between consumers, producers, suppliers, regional wards, local

305 businesses, charities, and housing associations in applying for grants, distributing food, and

306 signposting to available services. The flow of goods and knowledge within and between wards,

307 developed strong networks between people and organisations, a key attribute that should be

308 maintained post-pandemic.

309 *'Roedd ganddom oddeuty 346 o bobol oedd yn cael cinio bob Dydd Sul am 16*

310 *wythnos...ac roedd gennyf ddigon o arian dros ben i wneud hamper nadolig i bawb*

311   *(gyda nawdd a chefnogaeth cwmni Morrisons)' [Translation: We had about 346 people*
312   *having lunch every Sunday for 16 weeks ... and I had enough money left over to make*
313   *a Christmas hamper for everyone (with sponsorship and support from Morrisons)]*
314   Respondent-9281

315 However, partnership working is strongly reliant on trust, informality and lack of signed
316 agreements can lead to issues. One of the case studies identified was left in a challenging
317 position when a major food retailer withdrew from a project on distribution day, costing the
318 project time, money, and quality goods.

319 Local shops play an invaluable part in the food response, permitted to remain open as an
320 essential service, they altered their modes of communication, access, and distribution to meet
321 the needs of the local communities.

322   *'Mae'r siopa lleol wedi bod gwerthfawr yn edrych ar ôl y gymuned' [Translation: The*
323   *local shops have been invaluable in looking after the community]* Respondent-9275

324   *'It's really inspiring to see people turn to local suppliers and producers as the food*
325   *chain has struggled to cope'* Llyr Gruffydd MS, Plaid Cymru's shadow rural affairs
326   minister (Hughes, 2020)

327 Innovative projects such as Cadwyn Ogwen provided access to local goods from vegetables,
328 meat, seafood, preserves and beer. Fostering the need for stronger shorter supply chains,
329 economic resilience and place attachment during the time of crisis. However, in other areas
330 of Gwynedd the loss of access to local produce was evident with the closure of produce
331 markets. In Bangor, the Friday open air market was cancelled until further notice on the 25th
332 of March 2020 following a decision by Gwynedd Council. This meant the loss of a local fruit
333 and vegetable stall and butcher. In some cases, these producers have moved online or found
334 alternative pathways to market distributing their goods via home delivery and/or takeaway
335 services.

336 Some partnerships and communities used online platforms as a means of communication.
337 Facebook was a common ground for many residents and community groups organically
338 formed such as Cofis Curo Corona, Curo'r Corona'n Coginio and Bangor Wales Coronavirus
339 Support Group. In 2018-19 it was estimated that 13% of households in Wales did not have
340 access to the internet (Welsh Government, 2019b), it is unknown whether this number has
341 altered, however the growing pressures placed on individuals' finances over the past year,
342 choices may have been made in terms of what is essential to the household. Lack of home
343 online/internet access is problematic: (1) the closure of public spaces (libraries and community
344 centres), for some these vital spaces provided opportunity to connect for personal and

345 educational reasons, (2) central services, such as benefit systems including Universal Credit
346 have moved on to digital platforms, (3) online booking for food deliveries, (4) information
347 sharing; for example local gatekeepers highlighting 'free food/bwyd am ddim' opportunities
348 and food banks opening times which in some cases is dependent on volunteer availability.
349 Data poverty is already identified as an issue and Welsh Government is striving to 'ensure that
350 no citizen is left behind' embracing a digital first approach ensuring digital inclusion for all
351 (Welsh Government, 2020c, p.5).

352 ***Sustaining community***
353 It is important to acknowledge that although food provision was often one the main purposes
354 of the responses identified, the 'more than food' intangible outcomes repeatedly occurred. The
355 hidden and in some cases more valuable consequences, such as social interaction and the
356 sense of being part of something bigger ensued. For those volunteering, this took the form of
357 giving back, to ensure that community life is maintained; for those receiving support, a feeling
358 of being remembered. The pandemic forced individuals to quickly evaluate their situations, for
359 some, they were classed as vulnerable individuals, almost overnight, forcing them to look at
360 themselves in a different way.

361 *'One's got used to thinking of vulnerable people as the people living in the poorer*
362 *parts of the ward. And that vulnerability remained. But people who you would never*
363 *have considered vulnerable, needed your help'.* Respondent-9295

364 During the first national lockdown measures of community spirit in the UK increased; 77.9%
365 of adults said they thought people were doing more to help others (ONS, 2020b). The
366 responses identified demonstrate an increase in social connections, sense of belonging and
367 trust. The pandemic heightened the need for companionship and commonly befriending
368 schemes were discussed as a gap within our current system. In most cases, the supply of
369 volunteers and those willing to help often surpassed demand. It was felt that the notion of
370 community spirit was not new, but what communities in Gwynedd have always done in times
371 of hardship or crisis.

372 *'I wouldn't say it's [community spirit] stronger…it's strong anyways just be the nature*
373 *of the people that are here and the shared experiences…but it has been reinforced'.*
374 Respondent-9268

375 *'Bod pobl mewn cymunedau bach, wedi dod allan I helpu ei gilydd yn ystod yr amser*
376 *anarferol yma.' [Translation: People in small communities came out to help each other*
377 *during these extraordinary times'].* Respondent-9325

14

378 There are more community-led or owned assets in Gwynedd than any other LA in Wales
379 (Cribb *et al.*, 2020) [possibly due to Gwynedd's large land cover], supporting the notion that
380 communities and local people are taking ownership of their communities holding higher stakes
381 and contributing to foundational economies and to the Wales Well-being Goal of building a
382 more prosperous Wales.

383 ***Goodwill and a system open to abuse***
384 Although the pandemic heightened community spirit, indicative of the UK Government's notion
385 of a Big Society (Blond, 2010), as time passed it was felt by some that volunteer fatigue was
386 evident, and as more people returned to work the burdens of volunteering were felt by less. It
387 was vocalised by some that volunteers felt taken advantage of, risking their safety to buy and
388 deliver requested goods which in some cases were not necessarily deemed as essential
389 items.

390 The general approach to food access in Gwynedd was non-means tested and provided to
391 individuals that requested or needed food. Many of the respondents worried about the *moral*
392 *maze* as described by Beck & Gwilym (2020) of distinguishing between those 'deserving' or
393 'undeserving' of help.

394   *'…you've got to be prepared to take everybody at face value'* Respondent-9268

395   *'…we weren't in a position to sort of say he/she deserves food… you know, we didn't*
396   *have the expertise to sort out the goats from the sheep if you will'* Respondent-9295

397 In several cases where food was provided to those deemed vulnerable, a contentious issue
398 arose surrounding a recipient's abilities to pay. In many cases across Gwynedd, food was
399 provided free of charge. This means therefore, that in some cases, recipients may have been
400 able to afford food, but their access was restricted simply by their health requirements. Had
401 opportunities been in place for these individuals to contribute financially to these provisions, if
402 they had the means to, it is possible that more vulnerable individuals could have been reached
403 and for a longer period, due to financial constraint being one of the main challenges in terms
404 of resource provision. The pandemic has accentuated the challenges faced by many in low-
405 income households, particularly families reliant on free school meals. The ability of these
406 households to contribute financially to the aid they may have received is not in question here,
407 rather whether a differentiation for aid recipients should have been made between those with
408 limited access to food for financial reasons and those experiencing food (in)access because
409 of health or mobility issues. It is important to note that non-means tested systems were
410 dependent on people's self-assessment of their own situations. Therefore, subjective and
411 open to abuse or deception, although rarely experienced, some respondents raised it as a

412 concern. In some cases, in the close knit-communities, those trying to play the system, *'got*
413 *found out pretty quickly'* Respondent-9268.

414   *'…a few people, I'm sure, did take advantage and they didn't really need food, but most*
415   *people were extremely in need, you know, responsible and honest about it'*
416   Respondent-9295

Alternative future pathways to food distribution

418 It is hoped for some the issue of food inaccessibility will pass as those deemed vulnerable will
419 return to shopping and work 'as normal', but food crises and poverty will still exist. The
420 pandemic has shone light on the ability of communities to find innovative ways to provide
421 access to food and essential goods; from community kitchens, meals on wheels, meal
422 vouchers/food credits, food cooperatives and stigma-free delivery services. These alternatives
423 to food banks and food access warrant further exploration to ensure food security may be
424 guaranteed at the most local level possible, benefitting the whole community. It should also
425 be noted that due to the informality of the groups and their creation it is difficult to identify what
426 is going on where, the lack of formalisation and structure could herald challenges. One of the
427 major concerns expressed by the respondents was proudness, for those who have only
428 recently experienced hardship *'there must be someone more worthy'* [Respondent-9295] or *'I*
429 *don't want people thinking I need help'* [Respondent-9268]. Therefore, moving forward de-
430 stigmatisation of food access points should be paramount, one respondent proposed working
431 closely with supermarket chain deliveries, so goods could be delivered in branded vehicles,
432 so others would not know if it the food delivery was charity or paid goods. However, as
433 highlighted by Power (2020) the increase embedded nature of collaboration and partnerships
434 between LAs and food aid providers risks further institutionalising food aid, an issue raised 20
435 years ago by Richies (2002) regarding off-loading welfare duties.

Organisational Responses from Private, Public and Community Sectors

437 Many of the responses identified were grassroot initiatives, developed through and by
438 communities. Networks quickly established; databases of time rotas, skills and levels of
439 willingness were created, leaflets handed out and posters put up. Businesses adapted and
440 changed their modes of communication, ordering and delivery. Different levels of responses
441 were felt across the sector with some feeling that the local networks 'kicked in faster' and
442 developed to fit community needs over time, for example housing organisations reaching out
443 to their residents, phoning tenants, and conducting welfare checks. An issue that became
444 apparent regarding emergency responses surrounded charity and organisation
445 memorandums. Charities had the facilities to help but were not permitted under their current

446 structures/aims/objectives/memorandums/articles as they were not written to deal with sudden

447 change such as a pandemic.

448 However, the fullest and more correct picture of responses to food access involves the full

449 range of social capitals drawing from different sectors and organisation types for expertise,

450 funding, volunteer mobilisation etc. The biggest stakeholders gain vital corporate social

451 responsibility publicity and possible long term marketing benefits through association. Citizens

452 Advice Centres, social welfare, housing & benefits officers, charities, and faith-based services,

453 all have clear expert community knowledge and other more hidden roles to play across food

454 access services delivery networks. Often organising their internal capacity effectively, making

455 a difference with very little resource, even during the pandemic. Volunteers commit and do

456 their work for a range of motivations, as do wider food activist and lobby groups. These factors

457 all merit further detailed investigation at the most local scale to enable a rich discussion of

458 comparative future paths to alternative noninstitutionalised, locally effective, and sustainable

459 responses to times of crisis and food crises more generally.

460 ***Implications for policy: The right to food***

461 Wales has a clear outlook for food and drink with already established successful food

462 strategies focused on re-localising the food and drink industry, such as 'Food for Wales, food

463 from Wales 2010–2020' (soon to be replaced by a new food strategy) and The Well-being of

464 Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which provides a supportive framework for future

465 visions. However, the pandemic saw '*any* food…prioritised over access to *good* food'

466 (Sanderson Bellamy *et al.*, 2021, p.791).

467 There is need for more accountability to drive more transformative change within the current

468 food system, whether this be through UK Law and the 'Right to Food' (as supported by Sustain

469 (House of Commons, 2020a) and Nourish Scotland (House of Commons, 2020b)), or through

470 strengthened food policy governance and monitoring. Regardless of the approach individuals

471 must feel safe, respected, and fulfilled, with access to healthy, good quality affordable food, a

472 right the current food system is not providing. As highlighted in 'Food: On the Margins in

473 Plymouth' (Pettinger, 2020), the need to create solutions that optimise and maximise the

474 support available to individuals and their communities to source and access healthy good

475 food, will involve multiple strategies and stakeholders to achieve,. Food is rarely ever named

476 within over-arching policy, a failing to recognise that food is often affected by these policies

477 and can be a contributor to their success. As highlighted previously, food should be considered

478 a human right rather than a charitable concern (Dowler, 2002; Cloke *et al.*, 2017). In Wales,

479 an approach to food governance that improves quality of life for all, encompassing both social

480 and environmental factors would also contribute to the Well-being for Future Generations Act.

481 Recently, MPs have called on UK Government for the 'Right to Food' to be to be given
482 legislative footing, which would drive action on food insecurity across Whitehall and
483 Government (House of Commons, 2021). As discussed previously, Wales' devolved status is
484 not without complication or confusion and can ultimately mean political barriers and levers of
485 change are held by UK Government. The UK Government needs to empower communities
486 and cooperative action through transformation of the current food system, one which facilitates
487 place-based approaches fit for the communities they serve. This supports the report 'A Welsh
488 Food System Fit For Future Generations' (Bellamy & Marsden, 2020) which suggests a new
489 vision for Welsh food which is centred around re-localising the food system to strengthen food
490 security and capture more local value.

491 ## CONCLUSION

492 Food access and system vulnerabilities have only been heightened by the pandemic, but in
493 Gwynedd so has the willingness of communities to come together. The responses within this
494 paper were appropriate for the communities they served, as in most cases they were designed
495 and administered by them. What emerged is the need for more robust infrastructure across
496 the LA, bridging rural and urban places, to counterbalance and support the strength of the
497 community safety net, a net that is also fragile and dependent on goodwill and capacity. As
498 the pandemic continues it is important to note the unsustainable dependence on volunteer
499 support, the need for more community focused public sector funding is clear, funding that is
500 not dependent on charity or generosity. Within Gwynedd there is a need for more holistic
501 planning of community spaces to respond equally and to ensure that areas are not ignored,
502 especially those without key community members, close to urban centres or have been
503 previously identified as an area in need. Therefore, it could be argued that in conjunction with
504 Picchioni *et al.,* (2021) additions of social reproduction care to a food systems approach,
505 followed in this paper, responsibility should also be recognised as a core component in
506 working towards a strengthened food system.

507 The study confirms some of the impacts and challenges experienced in urban regions have
508 been similarly felt within the rural context (McDowell, 2020; Lombardozzi *et al.*, 2021). The
509 true effects, direct and indirect, of the pandemic are far from being exposed. The vital role of
510 the community and the sense of togetherness within the Gwynedd case study highlight the
511 need to maintain a sense of belonging to build the resilience and wellbeing of the places we
512 live, contributing to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, encouraging long-
513 term logical thinking based on lived experiences. The innovations that have emerged echo
514 Galanakis' (2020, p.6) need to avoid 'business as usual' approaches and use the opportunity
515 to develop more sustainable and modern food systems. This opportunity linked with the

516 legislative vision of a better Wales has potential to change the current food system for the
517 better.

518 The changing nature of coronavirus also means that existing Welsh legislation and policy may
519 need to be revised considering the changes and impacts with increased resourcing; more
520 research conducted into volunteer hours, donations received, grant payments and capacity is
521 needed to ensure best use of spend on appropriate resourcing. The need for transformative
522 place making processes to build and maintain resilient communities as both an overarching
523 idea and hands-on improvement tool has never been more pressing with the rise in poverty,
524 austerity and hardship coronavirus imposed or not. The pandemic has exposed the hidden
525 capacity, empathy, and energy within the communities of Gwynedd, and more research is
526 needed to see if similar effects have been felt across other LA areas. This would provide
527 insight for policymakers and LAs, on the weaknesses in current provision and possible place-
528 based pathways to a more just, responsible approach. Lived experiences and place-based
529 approaches must be combined with a wider shift in the overall food system, supported centrally
530 with acts such as the Well-being for Future Generations Act, which recognise the important
531 role local communities play within the creation of a healthy and just food system. There are
532 opportunities to learn from the devolved nations of the UK in relation to their approaches to
533 food policy and support, this is especially pertinent with the upcoming (English) National Food
534 Strategy (Lang *et al.*, 2021).

535 The research reports on the initial responses that emerged from the pandemic, a fast-moving
536 unprecedented situation. The participants interviewed, were directly involved in delivering,
537 communicating and/or promoting food access initiatives in the Gwynedd region. A survey of
538 the users would provide further insight into the lived impact of food access initiatives and
539 unique user perspectives on service delivery. Further supporting data, such as multiple county
540 scales, could also inform how crisis events can stimulate innovative community action, build
541 community and social capacity, and provide lessons for the future.

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