



House of Commons  
Environment, Food and Rural  
Affairs Committee

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**COVID-19 and food  
supply**

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**First Report of Session 2019–21**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
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## The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and associated public bodies.

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## Summary

The Government's necessary actions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the public and industry's own reactions to the threat, disrupted the food supply system in the UK. Our key findings are as follows:

- **Increased consumer demand** for food in February and March left empty shelves and put immense pressure on retailers. Once the crisis hit, Government worked well with the retailers to quickly put in place measures to respond. However, the Government does not appear to have anticipated the situation, despite the experience of other countries. Increased buying was, in our view, not because of “panic” but largely a reasonable and predictable response to the expectation that more meals would need to be eaten at home. The Government could have made more effort to provide early public reassurance about food supply and should do so in the event of further lockdowns or restrictions. In encouraging people to shop online without acknowledging the limited capacity of retailers to cater for that demand, the Government caused public frustration. There should be better communication across Government and between Government and the public about online capacity.
- **The national voucher scheme for free school meals** was set up at commendable speed. However, it initially relied on the larger retailers who were able to meet the technical requirements, excluding discounters and convenience stores, even when they were able to offer workable voucher schemes which would have helped more children. In doing so, the Government did not sufficiently consider the realities of where families dependent on free school meals were most likely to shop for food, and was subsequently slow to adapt. Children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to experiencing insufficient nutritious food during the school holidays, so it is important that such schemes have universal reach.
- **Food insecurity**, which the UN defines as a lack of physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, is currently affecting 4.9 million adults plus 1.7 million children, and was exacerbated by the pandemic. Use of food banks in March and April effectively doubled compared to the same time last year at the same time as donations were squeezed. While the Government made £16 million available in the short-term for food redistribution, we consider that it should continue to fund FareShare's efforts to redistribute food from the farmgate to frontline community groups, at a cost of £5 million a year. Food waste at a time of such critical need is particularly abhorrent. The Government should evaluate the impact of the £63 million provided to local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and consider whether further support is necessary. The Government should appoint a Minister for Food Security, empowered to collect robust data on food insecurity and draw together policy across departments on food supply, nutrition and welfare. The Government should continue to measure and report levels of food insecurity across the country. The Government should also consult on whether a “right to food” should be given a legislative footing as a matter of

great urgency, in anticipation of increasing challenges to the food security of the nation post-COVID-19. It should amend the Agriculture Bill so that food security assessments should take place yearly, rather than every five years. The National Food Strategy must address national and personal food security. Lessons must be learnt from the experience in all four nations on how best to avoid and respond to food insecurity. We are aware that a combination of ending furlough and a possible second wave of coronavirus may conspire to make the level and severity of food insecurity significantly higher. Therefore, the Government urgently needs a sustainable plan to mitigate the possible growth of food insecurity through a combination of financial and food supply strategies.

- **The closure of foodservice and hospitality businesses** was a huge shock for their food and drink suppliers. The Government could have done more to anticipate the problems that would arise. Now that the economy is reopening, the Government must ensure that foodservice and hospitality businesses that were thriving before the pandemic remain economically viable. These sectors may take over a year to recover from forced closure and further financial difficulties are likely. This will have an impact on their suppliers. The Government should monitor this situation as supply chains restart.
- **Key workers in the food supply chain** made efforts and sacrifices to feed the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We thank them unreservedly. Government guidance on measures to protect workers, such as on social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment, was not issued quickly enough. The Government should ensure that improved co-ordination mechanisms are in place between government departments, public bodies and with the devolved administrations so that, in future, guidance can be developed, cleared and issued more rapidly. The Government should gather data from industry and unions on how many workers in food processing could be disincentivised to self-isolate by their employment terms, such as the lack of statutory sick pay, and also evaluate whether migrant workers face other issues that increase the risk of outbreaks, for example language barriers.
- **Future disruptions**, for example because of a disorderly end to the transition period or climate change, will pose different, and potentially greater, challenges than the COVID-19 pandemic, where cross-border supply chains were largely undisrupted. The Government cannot afford to be complacent. It should provide reassurances that food supply disruptions have been factored into contingency planning for the end of the transition period. Defra should review the annual Sector Security and Resilience Plans for the food sector in light of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the extent to which consumer behaviour can disrupt supply chains. It should also be clearer about the difference between resilience and efficiency, and assess the extent to which our dependence on multi-national, just-in-time supply chains affects resilience. Given the industry's concerns about the potential impact of a disorderly end to the Brexit transition period, this should happen as a matter of urgency.

# Introduction

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1. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK has included: advice for people with symptoms to self-isolate; advice for clinically extremely vulnerable people to shield (stay at home at all times); and a period of “lockdown” where people were required to stay home except for essential shopping and exercise, combined with the closure of foodservice businesses such as restaurants, pubs and cafés.<sup>1</sup> At time of publication, the Government had started reopening the economy.<sup>2</sup>

## Our inquiry

2. The actions taken by the Government to tackle the spread of COVID-19 in the population affected food supply, not least because of the changed needs of consumers. In the weeks prior to the announcement of the national lockdown, this resulted in widespread scenes of empty shelves in supermarkets.<sup>3</sup> We were therefore concerned about whether the food sector had effective and resilient food supply chains in the face of measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> On Tuesday 24 March, the day after lockdown started, we held a teleconference with the Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to discuss increased consumer demand in supermarkets and potential labour shortages in key areas.<sup>5</sup> We subsequently announced an inquiry on COVID-19 and food supply on 3 April 2020, with the following terms of reference:

- a) 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?
- b) 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?
- c) 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?
- d) 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?<sup>6</sup>

We received over 150 written submissions and took oral evidence from businesses in the food supply chain, food aid organisations, charities, academics and Defra. Officials from Defra and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) briefed us in private on 22 April. We also conducted an online public survey from 9 to

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1 GOV.UK, [‘Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance and support’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

2 GOV.UK, [‘Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance and support’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

3 For example, [“Retired seaman, 79, pictured by empty supermarket shelves says coronavirus panic-buying ‘worse than living through WW2’”](#), The Sun, 20 March 2020

4 Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans 2018](#), February 2019, p 17

5 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0002](#))

6 [“Inquiry on food supply during the Coronavirus pandemic launched”](#), Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee news story, 3 April 2020

28 April, asking whether people had experienced difficulties accessing food.<sup>7</sup> Over 5,500 people responded to our survey, the results of which are summarised in Annex A. We would like to thank everyone who contributing to our inquiry by submitting evidence, providing briefing and sharing their personal experiences of accessing food.

3. The response to COVID-19 and its effects on food supply and demand have evolved as our inquiry progressed, and therefore our inquiry was supplemented by regular correspondence with the Government to ensure key issues were immediately drawn to its attention.<sup>8</sup> Our Report is intended to inform future Government and industry action, both in response to the current pandemic and future disruptions to food supply. The Report starts with the first visible effect of the pandemic on food: increased consumer demand in shops before and during lockdown (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 examines personal food insecurity. Chapter 3 looks at the impact of closing and reopening the foodservice and hospitality sectors and Chapter 4 focuses on key workers in the food supply chain. Chapter 5 contains our assessment of the Government's preparedness for the crisis and our overall conclusions on resilience and food security.

4. During our inquiry, we took evidence on seasonal agricultural labour, amidst concerns that travel restrictions would prevent the usual numbers of migrant workers, who do such work, from coming to the UK.<sup>9</sup> However, these matters will be addressed in our separate inquiry on labour in the food supply chain.<sup>10</sup>

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7 [“MPs launch online survey into coronavirus and access to food”](#), Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee news story, 9 April 2020

8 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [‘COVID-19 and food supply: All correspondence’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

9 See, for example, The Country Land and Business Association ([COV0011](#))

10 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [‘Labour in the food supply chain’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

# 1 Shops and supermarkets

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## Significantly increased demand

5. The impacts of COVID-19 on food first became visible through increased consumer demand in shops and supermarkets. In China, there was an increase in retail sales as people stocked up on the necessities.<sup>11</sup> Many European countries also experienced “panic buying” caused by fears of food shortages.<sup>12</sup> When we asked whether the UK Government should have anticipated the increased consumer demand, Andrew Opie, Director of Food and Sustainability at the British Retail Consortium (BRC), stated that “from mid-February onwards, everybody knew that excessive buying was on the way” and that:

in some ways, it was entirely predictable, because many of our members run stores in Europe, which saw the impact of COVID before it reached the UK. We were feeding that back to Government.<sup>13</sup>

Andrew Opie explained that in the UK, “the first excessive buying started towards the end of February and went right through to the third week of March”.<sup>14</sup> Figures from market analyst Kantar, published on 31 March, showed that “year-on-year supermarket sales grew by the fastest rate in over a decade during the past 12 weeks—increasing by 7.6%” and that March saw “the biggest month of grocery sales ever recorded” amounting to £10.8 billion.<sup>15</sup> Kantar stated that this was “even higher than levels seen at Christmas, the busiest time of year under normal circumstances”.<sup>16</sup> The BRC stated that for Christmas, “retailers have several months to prepare which they didn’t have in this case”.<sup>17</sup> On 23 March, Helen Dickinson, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the BRC, stated that there was “a billion pounds more food in people’s houses than there was three weeks ago”.<sup>18</sup>

6. As a result, many consumers encountered empty supermarket shelves.<sup>19</sup> Our survey (held in April) showed that most respondents had found it difficult to get the food they needed in shops and supermarkets, particularly dry and tinned goods.<sup>20</sup> Terms such as “panic buying” and “stockpiling” were frequently used to refer to the situation.<sup>21</sup>

7. Ian Wright, CEO of the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), explained that consumers were not just stockpiling:

Before the lockdown, let us say on 28 February, 30%, give or take, of food was consumed in what we call “out of home”; that is contract catering, pubs, clubs and restaurants or food to go, like sandwich shops [...]. By and large,

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11 [“Impact of coronavirus on global markets”](#), Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 14 February 2020

12 [“Coronavirus: Europe calls for calm as food shortage fears spark panic buying”](#), FoodNavigator, 16 March 2020

13 [Q134](#)

14 [Q130](#)

15 [“Record grocery sales in UK as shoppers prepare for lockdown”](#), Kantar, 31 March 2020

16 [“Record grocery sales in UK as shoppers prepare for lockdown”](#), Kantar, 31 March 2020

17 British Retail Consortium (COV0006) para 2.4

18 [“BRC CEO speaks at No.10 press conference”](#), BRC, 23 March 2020

19 For example, [“UK supermarkets appeal for calm as shelves empty”](#), The Guardian, 15 March 2020

20 Annex A

21 For example, [“Coronavirus panic-buying: as supermarkets ration items, should customers be stockpiling?”](#), The Independent, 16 April 2020

in those two weeks before the lockdown, the British shopper decided that they were going to eat everything at home, and that 30% walked across the road to retail.<sup>22</sup>

He stated that:

The consequence [...] is that the fantastic just-in-time processes that got shelves absolutely stocked pretty much every time rely on using immediate previous behaviour as a predictor of the next behaviour. That is fine unless the next behaviour is completely different, which it was, so the algorithms were completely banjaxed. As a consequence of that, shelves were empty and the distribution system, more importantly, that got stuff from the manufacturers to the distribution centres and to the shops began to be incapable of dealing with the demand.<sup>23</sup>

8. On 6 March, the *i* newspaper reported that the big four supermarkets had warned that “Government has been too slow to react to fears about food shortages due to the coronavirus outbreak sparking panic buying across the UK”.<sup>24</sup> Industry sources reported that despite a public claim from the Health Secretary on 5 March that the Government had been working with supermarkets, there had been no such interaction until 6 March, when the industry participated in a call with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.<sup>25</sup> Defra confirmed that “the first Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group (FCELG) meeting took place on 6 March and the group has been meeting weekly since then”.<sup>26</sup> Defra explained that “key issues identified by industry in FCELG meetings are fed into the relevant teams or departments to inform policy in these areas”.<sup>27</sup> The Secretary of State clarified that he had had conversations “with officials in Number 10 around about 7 March on this issue” and with the Health Secretary “on around 6 March, again about the threat of panic-buying”.<sup>28</sup> He also stated that “a supermarket chief executive will not necessarily know what every member of his management team and others in his organisation are doing” and that some of those people “would have been talking to officials within DEFRA about these matters”.<sup>29</sup> In late March, he told us that officials had been working with retailers from early February.<sup>30</sup>

### Public communication

9. Increased consumer demand led to supermarkets publishing a plea to consumers on 15 March, providing reassurance that “there is enough for everyone if we all work together” and asking for “everyone to be considerate in the way they shop”.<sup>31</sup> On 21 March, the issue of increased consumer demand for food was actively addressed in the Government’s daily press conference, when the Secretary of State asked the public to:

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22 [Q109](#)

23 [Q109](#)

24 [“Coronavirus in the UK: Supermarkets warn of panic buying as ministers were too slow to act on food shortages”](#), The *i*, 6 March 2020. The “big four” usually refers to Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons.

25 [“Coronavirus in the UK: Supermarkets warn of panic buying as ministers were too slow to act on food shortages”](#), The *i*, 6 March 2020

26 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV00142](#)) para 14.1

27 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV00142](#)) para 14.1

28 [Q218](#)

29 [Q228](#)

30 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0002](#))

31 [“Food retailers reassure customers and ask them to buy responsibly”](#), BRC, 15 March 2020

Be responsible when you shop and think of others. Buying more than you need means others may be left without and it is making life more difficult for those frontline workers such as our doctors and nurses and NHS support staff [...] there is more than enough food to go round [...] there is no shortage of food available.<sup>32</sup>

At the same press conference, Stephen Powis, NHS England National Medical Director, stated that “it is critical that by not stockpiling, by not selfishly shopping, by leaving these supplies for others too, that our health workers are able to get access to what they need” and that “frankly we should all be ashamed”.<sup>33</sup>

10. The Mental Health Foundation suggested that rather than being “selfish or nasty”, panic buying was “mostly the result of powerful psychological urges, and is a normal response to our distress”.<sup>34</sup> It stated that factors contributing to panic buying included: the need to regain some control during a situation that can feel “frightening and unbearable”; a “herd mentality, with everyone feeling pressure to do what other people are doing”; and “loss aversion—or our general tendency, as humans, to care more about avoiding losses than we do about acquiring equivalent gains”.<sup>35</sup> A respondent to our survey, who admitted that they had bought more than they normally would, explained that “whilst you try to shop responsibly, when you see items flying off the shelf, you can’t help buy additional items yourself before it runs out”.<sup>36</sup> Another stated “I don’t think there was any helpful guidance in respect of the likely effect of the lockdown on food supplies. There was a sudden flurry of news reports about people buying loo roll and pasta like it was going out of fashion, which scared us”.<sup>37</sup> Policy academics Professor Erik Millstone, Professor Terry Marsden and Professor Tim Lang, jointly criticised the Government:

What did HM Government expect when it effectively told the public that they could not consume food out of the home as normal? And then, when the public switched to buying food from supermarkets, and clearing shelves, consumers were castigated for over-purchasing and panic-buying, and it was left to retailers to take the lead and speak directly to consumers. HMG actively contributed to this situation. It showed a failure to understand market dynamics or consumer psychology.<sup>38</sup>

James Lowman, Chief Executive of the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS), stated that, with hindsight, he would have asked the Government to “think about common messaging”.<sup>39</sup> He explained that:

around 20 March, the Government started to develop plans for common messaging, to only buy what you really need. We were all braced to introduce that in stores. There is an advantage to having common messaging because consumers get used to seeing that same messaging. That did not get into

32 [“Coronavirus: Shoppers told to buy responsibly”](#), BBC News, 21 March 2020

33 [“Coronavirus: Shoppers told to buy responsibly”](#), BBC News, 21 March 2020

34 Mental Health Foundation, [‘Beyond panic buying’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

35 Mental Health Foundation, [‘Beyond panic buying’](#), accessed 15 July 2020

36 Annex A

37 Annex A

38 Professor Erik Millstone, Professor Terry Marsden and Professor Tim Lang ([COV0023](#))

39 [Q134](#)

stores until a week or 10 days later, by which time everyone had developed their own messaging anyway. It is certainly better in that situation to have a quick response.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, Andrew Opie, BRC, considered that “it is right that the industry does that [messaging], rather than Government” because he was “not sure the Government saying ‘don’t panic’ is always the best message”.<sup>41</sup> Payhembury Provisions, a community-run shop, suggested that rather than limiting messages to “don’t panic buy and then there will be enough for everyone”, the Government should also have communicated “its intention to urgently sort the supply chain problems”.<sup>42</sup>

11. The Secretary of State concurred that “all the evidence is that, if you want to avoid spurring panic-buying, the best thing is for it not to be talked about or covered at all, as far as is possible”.<sup>43</sup> He told us that he had therefore made a judgement that the industry was best placed to comment and that, with regards to his public statement on 21 March, there was a “time and a place for Government to intervene, and we did it at the right point, when we had nothing left to lose”.<sup>44</sup> He considered that Government intervention came at “exactly the right time”.<sup>45</sup>

### **Government support to retailers**

12. In order to help manage increased consumer demand, the Government announced on 19 March that it would temporarily relax elements of competition law to allow supermarkets to work together.<sup>46</sup> This allowed “retailers to share data with each other on stock levels, cooperate to keep shops open, or share distribution depots and delivery vans” and “to pool staff with one another to help meet demand”.<sup>47</sup> The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) explained that “competition law prohibits certain types of co-operation and information-sharing between businesses in order to safeguard competition and protect consumers”.<sup>48</sup> It explained that the Government had “legislated (via statutory instrument) to exclude certain agreements between firms in the grocery and dairy sectors from competition law” and that the CMA had “provided advice and assistance to government on these so-called ‘exclusion orders’, ensuring the risks of anti-competitive behaviour and consumer harm are kept to a minimum”.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the Government “temporarily relaxed rules around drivers’ hours, so retailers can deliver more food to stores, and [waived] the 5p plastic bag charge for online purchases to speed up deliveries”.<sup>50</sup>

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40 [Q134](#)

41 [Q134](#)

42 Payhembury Provisions ([COV0013](#))

43 [Q218](#)

44 [Q218](#)

45 [Q218](#)

46 [“Supermarkets to join forces to feed the nation”](#), GOV.UK press release, 19 March 2020; see also GOV.UK, [“Competition law exclusion orders relating to coronavirus \(COVID-19\)”](#), accessed 15 July 2020

47 [“Supermarkets to join forces to feed the nation”](#), GOV.UK press release, 19 March 2020

48 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV00138](#))

49 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV00138](#))

50 [“Supermarkets to join forces to feed the nation”](#), GOV.UK press release, 19 March 2020

13. James Bielby, Chief Executive of the Federation of Wholesale Distributors (FWD), explained that:

The competition law waivers were to allow supply to meet vulnerable people—the shielding community—to ensure that they had access to product, and to allow [retailers] to talk to Government and share information about people in order to prioritise certain delivery slots for people at home shielding. [...] It is much more around them collectively talking to each other to ensure the people who need food have access to food.<sup>51</sup>

While the BRC welcomed the decision to relax competition law, the ACS was concerned that it could have “negative consequences for less dominant elements of the food supply chain, including convenience stores and the wholesalers that supply them”.<sup>52</sup> The ACS also had concerns over “the lack of transparency in developing the Statutory Instrument” and “the small number of stakeholders that [...] Defra and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy sought to consult with”.<sup>53</sup> These were shared by the FWD.<sup>54</sup>

14. The CMA explained that “the exclusion orders themselves stipulate that the Secretary of State must publish a notice once there is no longer a significant disruption or threat to disruption to the supply of the relevant goods or services and the exclusion is therefore no longer justified”.<sup>55</sup> The CMA further suggested that “a difficulty for government will be deciding when the supply disruption the exclusion orders are meant to address is over” as “the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to continue to affect the lives of UK consumers and businesses for many months to come”.<sup>56</sup> Although “Government may also encounter resistance from the beneficiaries of the exclusion orders against their termination”, the CMA considered that “from a competition perspective, the longer such arrangements are in place, the greater the risk of consumer detriment occurring”.<sup>57</sup>

**15. We consider that, once the crisis hit, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) worked well with industry to put in place measures to help retailers to deal with significantly increased consumer demand.**

**16. However, it appears that the Government had not anticipated how much retail demand would increase and that it would have a disruptive effect on food supply to consumers via retailers. Given that empty shelves were already being reported in other countries that were ahead of the UK with regards to COVID-19 cases and responsive measures, this is surprising and disappointing.**

**17. It is entirely reasonable and predictable that consumers would want to buy more food in anticipation of a lockdown, the need to self-isolate if they developed COVID-19 symptoms, or school closures and changed working patterns resulting in more meals eaten at home. The Government and retailers, including convenience stores, failed to develop an effective joint communications plan in anticipation of increased consumer demand. At a time when the public was looking to the Government for advice on how**

51 [Q113](#)

52 [“Competition laws relaxed to allow supermarkets to feed the nation”](#), Defra in the media blog, 20 March 2020; Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#)) para 15

53 Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#)) para 16

54 Federation of Wholesale Distributors ([COV0072](#)) paras 17–18

55 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV00138](#))

56 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV00138](#))

57 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV00138](#))

to live safely, we consider that the Government could have made more effort to provide reassurances. *In the event of further lockdowns or restrictions, the Government should ensure that more emphasis is placed on reassuring the public that there will be enough food and essential supplies for everyone.*

18. We heard concerns about the relaxation of competition law on smaller retailers and their suppliers. Smaller retailers played a vital role in providing food to people during the pandemic, particularly where they were unable to get to supermarkets, and we suggest that in future, the Government must ensure that small retailers are well supplied and supported. While the relaxation has helped retailers manage a period of unprecedented demand, the longer the exclusion orders are in place, the greater the risk of detriment to consumers. *The Government should clarify the conditions to be met in order for the exclusion orders relating to the COVID-19 pandemic to expire. The Government and Competition and Markets Authority should review whether the relaxation of competition law has been detrimental to consumers and suppliers to large retailers during the pandemic.*

## Online delivery

19. Prior to the pandemic, “online capacity was about 7.5% of all sales”, and in 2019, the eight retailers “selling online delivered groceries [were] AmazonFresh, Asda, Iceland, Morrisons, Ocado, Sainsbury’s, Tesco and Waitrose”.<sup>58</sup>

20. Andrew Opie, BRC, stated that online grocery shopping had seen “phenomenal growth” during the pandemic that meant that “we have probably seen five or six years’ growth of online in about seven or eight weeks”.<sup>59</sup> Online capacity is now estimated to account for around 11.5 to 13 per cent of the groceries market.<sup>60</sup>

21. The Grocer explained that “there are lots of reasons why people are going online for food”, and that:

government advice to avoid gatherings in public places had already put many people off visiting overcrowded supermarkets; warnings against the use of public transport made getting to stores trickier; and guidance to work from home where possible removed shopping trips from weekly routines.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, Government announcements actively encouraged shopping online, for example on 23 March, the Prime Minister stated that people should “use food delivery services where you can”, in order to avoid going out shopping.<sup>62</sup>

22. Many larger retailers increased their capacity for online shopping, for example, Tesco “increased the number of online orders fulfilled each week from 590,000 in the first week of the crisis, to more than 1.4 million”, Asda increased “from 450,000 slots to around 725,000” and Sainsbury’s “doubled capacity to 600,000 online slots per week”.<sup>63</sup>

58 Q148 [Andrew Opie]; Competition & Markets Authority, [Anticipated merger between J Sainsbury PLC and Asda Group Ltd: Final report](#), 25 April 2019, para 57

59 Q151

60 “The Power List 2020: online shopping”, The Grocer, 8 June 2020

61 “The new coronavirus emergency service: online grocery”, The Grocer, 27 March 2020

62 “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 March 2020”, GOV.UK, 23 March 2020

63 “The Power List 2020: online shopping”, The Grocer, 8 June 2020

Convenience stores also made efforts, with more than 46,000 “launching home delivery services and ramping up existing ones”.<sup>64</sup> According to the ACS, around 12 per cent already offered home delivery and 26 per cent provided click and collect services.<sup>65</sup>

23. Despite these efforts, many people struggled to access food via online orders; our survey showed that more than half of respondents had ordered food to be delivered, but 83 per cent had found it difficult to get what they needed.<sup>66</sup> Money Mail highlighted the experiences of its readers who described the situation as a “fiasco” and “appalling”.<sup>67</sup> A respondent to our survey stated that “online shopping is like a lucky dip”.<sup>68</sup> In addition, some consumers found that they were unable to get the food they needed, either because of minimum order amounts or product limits.<sup>69</sup>

24. In addition to meeting demand from existing and new consumers, retailers offered priority delivery to the approximately 2 million Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people who had been advised by the Government to shield and needed support with food.<sup>70</sup> Our survey found that of the people who had tried to register with a supermarket and/or online grocery service as a vulnerable customer, 70 per cent rated the efforts made by supermarkets and online grocery services as somewhat or very unhelpful.<sup>71</sup> However, Macmillan Cancer Trust stated that even people with cancer who are classed as CEV were “finding it difficult to get priority delivery slots” which were “being made available, but just not in the quantity required for those vulnerable groups”.<sup>72</sup> For many disabled people, Action for ME<sup>73</sup> noted that online shopping was “a way of accessing food and essential supplies”.<sup>74</sup> The pandemic meant that they were “having to compete with able-bodied individuals for deliveries” and that there had “been no attempt to safeguard those who are housebound with a disability but are not clinically vulnerable to Covid-19”.<sup>75</sup> Disabled People Against Cuts stated that “there are 14 million disabled people in the UK qualifying for reasonable adjustments of one sort or another under the Equality Act 2010, but the register will only assist an anticipated 10% of disabled people”.<sup>76</sup> It added that disabled people were statistically less likely to have online access, and that:

non-priority delivery slots apparently become available late at night with reports of people staying up all night on consecutive nights in order to obtain one. For people with certain impairments, particularly those with energy limiting illnesses, this is not possible.<sup>77</sup>

25. The BRC explained that “clarifying who online retailers should be prioritising and the data needed to identify them has been a difficult process” and that “action would have been quicker and easier to make if all 4 UK countries had been involved in the discussion and

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64 [“The new coronavirus emergency service: online grocery”](#), The Grocer, 27 March 2020

65 [“The new coronavirus emergency service: online grocery”](#), The Grocer, 27 March 2020

66 Annex A. The survey respondents were self-selecting, so these results should not be taken as an indication of the experiences of the wider population.

67 Money Mail ([COV0131](#))

68 Annex A

69 Annex A

70 [“Plans to ease guidance for over 2 million shielding”](#), GOV.UK press release, 22 June 2020

71 Annex A

72 Macmillan Cancer Support ([COV0070](#))

73 Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

74 Action for M.E. ([COV0024](#))

75 Action for M.E. ([COV0024](#))

76 Disabled People Against Cuts ([COV0031](#))

77 Disabled People Against Cuts ([COV0031](#))

ready to make the changes to regulation and policy at the same time”.<sup>78</sup> It also stated that “retailers knew there was sufficient food in the supply chain for everyone but recognised getting that to the homes of the millions of vulnerable consumers who would need to self-isolate was the challenge and raised this early in the incident with Government”.<sup>79</sup> The BRC considered that “there was a misconception within Government of the capacity of online delivery to meet the requirements of those self-isolating” and that its “messaging from the start was that we needed community solutions to supplement an increased online capacity; neighbours, relatives and volunteers to shop on behalf of vulnerable consumers and deliver to their homes”.<sup>80</sup> However, Andrew Opie, BRC, commended Defra “for its speed of reaction to the requests we made in early March for relaxation of regulation” such as “relaxing drivers’ hours for truck drivers and online deliveries, and relaxing curfew delivery hours, which allowed supermarkets to make deliveries right through the day, 24/7”.<sup>81</sup>

26. The Secretary of State told us that he had asked retailers about their capacity to increase online delivery and had been told that “the maximum that they could go to within a realistic short-to-medium-term timeframe was probably about 12%”.<sup>82</sup> He added that he had explained this to the Health Secretary and “that is why we also, very quickly, started to move to different arrangements for food parcels done through a commercial contractor for the shielded cohort, and also started work on volunteers”.<sup>83</sup> Food parcels are explored in the next Chapter.

**27. The spike in demand for online grocery shopping and home delivery was an obvious consequence of measures designed to stop the spread of COVID-19. We commend the efforts of supermarkets and convenience stores in ramping up their capacity to offer online shopping throughout the pandemic. The Government’s temporary relaxation of rules around drivers’ hours also helped.**

**28. There is no reason why the Government should have had any misconceptions about the capacity of online retailers to cater for the increased demand from consumers shopping from home. Online accounted for a small proportion of the market before the pandemic and retailers were advising Defra on their capacity to increase the service. In encouraging people to shop online without acknowledging the limited capacity of retailers to cater for that demand, the Government set the scene for public frustration and for blame to be placed at the door of the retailers. We are concerned that there may have been a failure of communication between Government and the public, and across Government. *The Government should clarify how it intends to manage the mismatch between demand and capacity for online food shopping in the event of a second wave of COVID-19 infections. There should be better communication across Government and between Government and the public about online capacity.***

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78 British Retail Consortium ([COV0006](#))

79 British Retail Consortium ([COV0006](#))

80 British Retail Consortium ([COV0006](#)) para 4.1–4.2

81 [Q130](#)

82 [Q220](#)

83 [Q220](#)

## Physical access to shops

29. In order to manage consumer demand, many retailers put in place measures such as social distancing, limiting numbers in-store, screens at checkouts and reserving priority hours for vulnerable customers and key workers.<sup>84</sup>

30. We heard concerns about the unintended consequences of these measures for some people with disabilities. Parkinson's UK stated that "many of our supporters are having problems" including "waiting in long lines to get their shopping as they cannot stand for sustained periods of time" and "quieter shopping times at the beginning of the day [before] their medication has kicked in".<sup>85</sup> Winvisible, a disabled women's charity, considered that "a more accessible time [for protected hours] would be early afternoon, but as that is a peak time for the [supermarkets], we get the message that we don't count".<sup>86</sup> Guide Dogs for the Blind noted that "maintaining a safe distance from other shoppers in supermarkets is difficult for blind and partially sighted people, if not impossible", which "puts them at greater risk from coronavirus when shopping".<sup>87</sup> Disability Rights UK highlighted that some "people are not allowed into shops in pairs, which makes taking a PA [personal assistant] or family member for support, difficult or even impossible" and that "efforts such as one-way shopping, or having to walk the length of the store, are difficult or impossible for people with various impairments, such as mobility impairments, visual impairments, learning disabilities".<sup>88</sup> Limits on product purchases meant that volunteers, PAs or carers shopping for multiple clients or service users "have often been refused the option to buy in excess of any product restrictions that are in place e.g. eggs, toilet paper".<sup>89</sup>

31. Disability Rights UK concluded that "the government and the food industry did not initially take adequate steps to support all disabled people and people with long term health conditions to access sufficient healthy food", and that "initial efforts excluded a significant number of disabled people".<sup>90</sup> It stated that "the government and the supermarkets failed to realise that being at-risk includes non-medical impairments, often coupled with social circumstances".<sup>91</sup> Fazilet Hadi, Policy Manager, Disability Rights UK, suggested that the supermarkets should "think about their duties under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, and to work with Disability Rights UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the Business Disability Forum [...] to think through what a reasonable adjustment will look like under the Equality Act".<sup>92</sup>

32. Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK, told us that she had "found Defra open—it certainly approached us rather than the other way around" but that "we have found the communications difficult sometimes in the sense of getting to a clear, agreed decision".<sup>93</sup> She added that "the time it has taken to reach decisions has been the biggest problem, particularly where money is concerned" and that "there is some confusion

84 For example, "[Coronavirus: Supermarket shoppers 'keep calm' and queue](#)", BBC News, 27 March 2020

85 Parkinson's UK ([COV0044](#)) para 14

86 WinVisible ([COV0106](#))

87 Guide Dogs for the Blind ([COV0054](#))

88 Disability Rights UK ([COV0056](#))

89 Disability Rights UK ([COV0056](#))

90 Disability Rights UK ([COV0056](#))

91 Disability Rights UK ([COV0056](#))

92 [Q85](#)

93 [Q94](#)

across Government about funding for the voluntary sector and, frankly, I am sure there is not enough to go around, full stop”.<sup>94</sup> Fazilet Hadi, Disability Rights UK, stated that that Defra officials were “well motivated” but that:

The issue for me is that we are talking about very detailed issues such as how we can get more online shopping slots. We are not sitting down with Defra and the supermarkets and talking about a big plan that asks: “Who are the groups that are really affected and who are struggling to access food because of the coronavirus situation; what is our strategy; and what role is each of us playing?” [...] we need that big thinking and planning now, because we have done the emergency stuff and have learned that all us have probably done some things wrong, and we now just need to reflect on what has happened and move forward.<sup>95</sup>

33. Andrew Opie, BRC, agreed that “there is no doubt that [social distancing] presents more difficulties for vulnerable and disabled consumers”.<sup>96</sup> He stated that it was “absolutely not the position” that “carers would not be allowed into stores with the customers” and that:

We are working through some of these issues. We think the steps we have put in place, particularly the training of all colleagues, to look out for not only those who might be disabled but those who have hidden disabilities, has really helped with that process. We are continuing the conversation with those groups. [...] We have a lot of responsibilities. We are looking at making sure that our signage is clear and that the advice we give through our websites and customer care lines reflects the concerns of charities. We are pretty confident we have done a really good job since the social distancing came in. We are now tweaking that communication and messaging, working with those charities.<sup>97</sup>

34. Defra stated that to help “people who are not shielded but are struggling to access food”, it was “connecting those in need with local volunteers to deliver food from shops, will allow local authorities to refer food vulnerable people for prioritised supermarket delivery slots, and to signpost people to commercially available food box delivery options”.<sup>98</sup>

**35. The significantly increased demand for online shopping, combined with in-store measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and limit excessive buying, have had a negative impact on people who are not shielding but struggling to access food, despite being able to afford it. We accept that some mistakes and compromises were inevitable and that retailers, on the whole, responded well to the unprecedented situation, although they will need to adjust to different needs more quickly in future. However, we urge Defra to consult with retailers and charities to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for this group of people as the pandemic continues. Ensuring that the necessary steps to contain future pandemics or other crises do not result in disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities or other vulnerabilities should be built into the Government and industry’s emergency planning.**

94 [Q94](#)

95 [Q94](#)

96 [Q152](#)

97 [Q152](#)

98 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#)) para 4.5

## 2 Food insecurity

36. The commonly used definition of food security, agreed at the UN-FAO summit in 1996, states that food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. This chapter looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected food security.<sup>99</sup>

### Food aid and food banks

37. In 2014, Defra defined food aid as “an umbrella term used to describe any type of aid giving activity which aims to provide relief from the symptoms of food insecurity and poverty” including “a broad spectrum of activities, from small to large scale, local to national, emergency one-off operations or well established food banks”.<sup>100</sup> There is a complex network of provision of food aid across the UK. There are over 2000 food banks in the UK, of which around 1200 are operated by the Trussell Trust.<sup>101</sup> The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) estimated that, in addition, “there are more than 3,000 independent frontline food aid providers operating outside of the food bank model” including soup kitchens, community food projects and school holiday meal providers.<sup>102</sup> IFAN stated that “on top of these numbers, the Salvation Army runs numerous food banks and food aid schemes across the country”.<sup>103</sup>

38. The Government does not currently collect robust data on food insecurity.<sup>104</sup> We are therefore reliant on estimates from charities. Anna Taylor, Chief Executive of the Food Foundation, told us that fifteen per cent of adults reported food insecurity in the first phase of lockdown, and that as of June, there were 4.9 million adults and 1.7 million children experiencing food insecurity.<sup>105</sup> The Trussell Trust does not gather data on the number of individual food bank users; but instead measures food bank use by the number of three-day emergency food parcels it provides.<sup>106</sup>

99 [FAO.org, ‘Food Security Policy Brief’](https://www.fao.org/3/a/06202e.pdf), June 2006; the FAO is the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN)

100 Hannah Lambie-Mumford, Daniel Crossley, Eric Jensen, Monae Verbeke and Elizabeth Dowler, [Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid: Final report](#), February 2014

101 [Food banks in the UK](#), Commons Research Briefing [CBP-8585](#), House of Commons Library, 15 July 2020, p 5. This does not include food banks operating from schools.

102 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

103 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

104 House of Lords, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), Report of the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, Session 2019–21, [HL Paper 85](#), para 73

105 [Q201](#)

106 [Food banks in the UK](#), Commons Research Briefing [CBP-8585](#), House of Commons Library, 15 July 2020, p 5

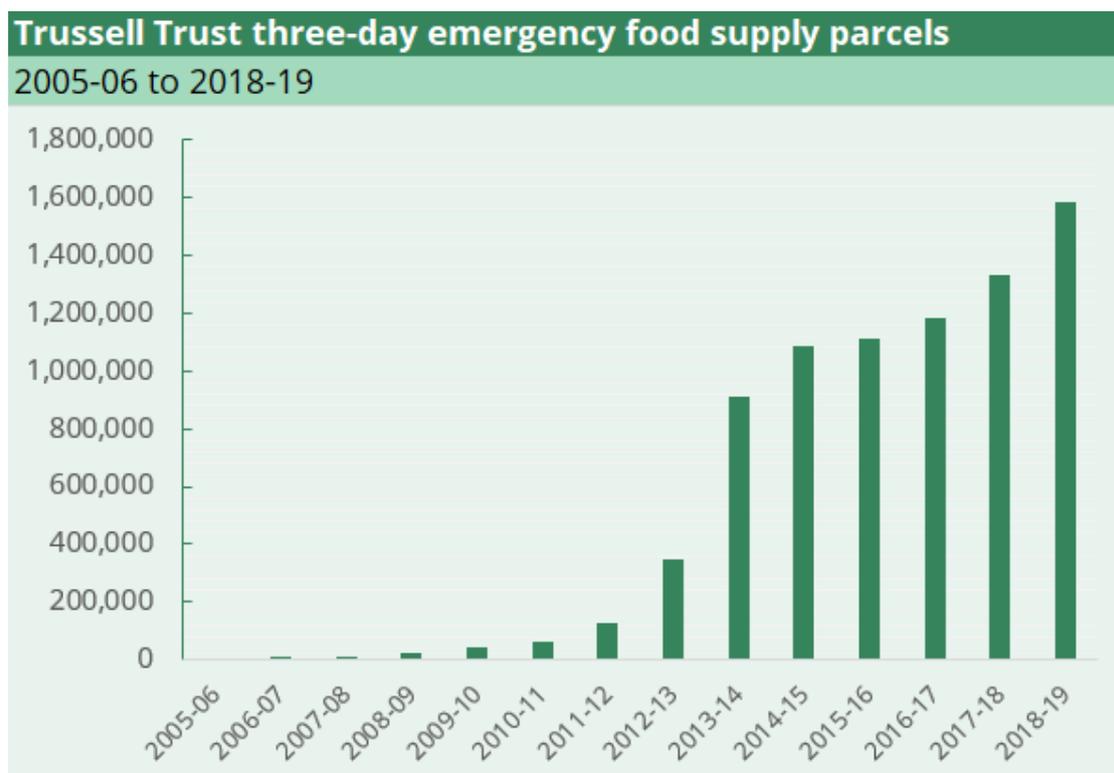
Figure 1: Food parcels provided by the Trussell Trust between 2005 and 2019<sup>107</sup>

Figure 1 shows that the number of food parcels provided annually was increasing year on year up to 2019. In its 2019 *State of Hunger* report, the Trussell Trust estimated that 8–10 per cent of UK households were food insecure in 2016–18 and that “up to 2% of UK households used a food bank in 2018/19”.<sup>108</sup> The Trussell Trust found that “there are higher rates of food bank use in former industrial urban areas in the North and Midlands, some coastal towns, and a range of London boroughs”.<sup>109</sup>

39. Food bank use before the pandemic was driven by factors largely unrelated to the food supply chain. The main drivers were identified by the Trussell Trust as: inadequacy, gaps and reductions in benefits (affecting two thirds of users); challenging life experiences (such as eviction or divorce); ill health, particularly poor mental health; and a lack of informal support.<sup>110</sup> The Trussell Trust stated that “food banks should not be necessary in a society such as ours, and we continue to work towards this by campaigning for change on policies that we know drive food bank use”.<sup>111</sup>

107 *Food banks in the UK*, Commons Research Briefing [CBP-8585](#), House of Commons Library, 15 July 2020, p 6

108 The Trussell Trust, *State of Hunger 2019 Executive Summary: A study of food insecurity and poverty in the UK*, p 4. Households are classed as severely food insecure if one or more adults skip meals, under-eat or go hungry because of lack of money.

109 The Trussell Trust, *State of Hunger 2019 Executive Summary: A study of food insecurity and poverty in the UK*, p 4

110 The Trussell Trust, *State of Hunger 2019 Executive Summary: A study of food insecurity and poverty in the UK*, p 7

111 The Trussell Trust ([COV0003](#))

### *Impact of the pandemic*

40. In the previous Chapter, we discussed unprecedented consumer demand for food in shops and supermarkets. This had consequences for food banks. IFAN explained in May that “independent food banks and other food aid providers began reporting shortages of supply in early March and have continued to struggle to access food, particularly ambient non-perishable food, either through purchasing from supermarkets and wholesalers or through donations from these sources and food redistribution charities”.<sup>112</sup> IFAN stated that “during the first few weeks of the crisis, independent food banks weren’t able to purchase food in supermarkets because of lack of supply and the rationing imposed by supermarkets” but added that “by the middle of April this situation started to improve so that food bank teams could make purchases of food and could start to buy in bulk again”.<sup>113</sup>

41. With regards to demand for food banks, Emma Revie, Chief Executive of the Trussell Trust, stated that the impact of the pandemic was “instantaneous and profound”.<sup>114</sup> She explained that in the last two weeks of March “there was an 81% increase in demand and, quite alarmingly, a 122% increase in the number of children receiving food through our food banks”, compared to the same period of time last year.<sup>115</sup> This indicated that “we were definitely seeing a disproportionately high number of children”.<sup>116</sup> The Trussell Trust provided further figures, which showed “an 89% increase in the number of people turning to our food banks in April across the UK, compared to the same time last year”.<sup>117</sup>

42. Emma Revie stated that “the primary reason why people were coming was that there was an insufficiency of income to cover essentials”.<sup>118</sup> According to the Government, “there has been unprecedented levels of demand for Universal Credit” since the pandemic started: “from 1 March 2020 to 23 June 2020, the DWP has received 3.4 million individual declarations to Universal Credit”.<sup>119</sup> The Food Foundation stated that it expected “to see the numbers falling into food insecurity for economic reasons increasing as a result of further job losses as the pandemic continues, and savings having been spent”.<sup>120</sup> On 22 June, the Work and Pensions Committee published its Report on the Department of Work and Pension’s (DWP) response to the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>121</sup> It concluded that the “baked-in wait for a first payment in Universal Credit means that some claimants take out an Advance in order to make ends meet, which must then be paid back within 12 months” and that “these repayments are creating additional hardship at a time when many households are already struggling to get by”.<sup>122</sup> The Work and Pensions Committee called for DWP to “review the Advances system and consider what changes are needed to make it more flexible, so that in times of crisis like these it can react quickly to meet claimants’ needs”.<sup>123</sup>

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112 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

113 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

114 [Q51](#)

115 [Q51](#)

116 [Q51](#)

117 The Trussell Trust ([COV0153](#))

118 [Q51](#)

119 GOV.UK, ‘[Universal Credit declarations \(claims\) and advances: management information](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

120 Food Foundation ([COV0114](#))

121 Work and Pensions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [DWP’s response to the coronavirus outbreak](#), HC 178

122 Work and Pensions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [DWP’s response to the coronavirus outbreak](#), HC 178, para 33

123 Work and Pensions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [DWP’s response to the coronavirus outbreak](#), HC 178, para 34

43. Food aid providers are supported by organisations such as FareShare, which is a national network of charitable food redistributors that takes “good quality surplus food from right across the food industry” to “almost 11,000 frontline charities and community groups”.<sup>124</sup> FareShare stated that “the week before the pandemic lockdown we redistributed enough food to create almost a million meals for vulnerable people every week - from surplus food alone”.<sup>125</sup> It explained that as of May, this had “risen to 2.2 million meals per week and demand is rising still”.<sup>126</sup> FareShare was concerned that “post furlough measures it is highly likely that we will see a much larger number of long term vulnerable and that surplus food volumes at the level that are currently passed on for social use are insufficient to meet demand”.<sup>127</sup>

44. Lindsay Boswell, CEO of FareShare, explained that it had recently completed a trial with Defra “on neutralising the cost for British farmers and growers to redistribute surplus food” and that the trial was “being evaluated within Defra”.<sup>128</sup> He considered the trial to have been a “a howling success” with “an 85% increase in the amount of fresh produce—fruit and vegetables—that we are able to get to frontline community groups”.<sup>129</sup> FareShare suggested that one solution was for Government “to make available £5 million per annum to support farmers, growers, manufacturers and distributors to safely and quickly divert surplus food to FareShare without incurring additional costs—particularly during this critical time - rather than have it go to waste”.<sup>130</sup> Lindsay Boswell stated that with this funding, FareShare could “double the volume of food that we are able to redistribute”, which would still only be one per cent, or 20,000 tonnes of the amount of food that is wasted at the farm gate”.<sup>131</sup> Our predecessor Committee’s 2017 report on *Food waste in England* found that an estimated “10 million tonnes of food and drink waste arises post-farmgate each year, 60% of which could be avoided”.<sup>132</sup>

45. IFAN concluded that “the Government is not doing enough to support people access sufficient healthy food” and that “the food industry is making substantial donations to the emergency food supply chain however these measures are limited”.<sup>133</sup> It pointed out that “some independent food banks and food aid providers are signed up to the national food surplus redistribution charity FareShare and can benefit from a temporary free membership scheme” but that “there is a substantial number of independent food aid providers not signed up to FareShare or who are unable to access this support”.<sup>134</sup>

46. Defra highlighted that it had:

announced a £16 million funding pot that will help front-line services distribute food to vulnerable people. Both purchased and surplus food will be used. £1.8 million of this funding will go towards the Waste Resource Action Programme’s (WRAP) COVID-19 Emergency Surplus Food Grant.

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124 FareShare, ‘[FareShare: Fighting hunger, tackling food waste in the UK](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

125 FareShare ([COV0065](#))

126 FareShare ([COV0065](#))

127 FareShare ([COV0065](#))

128 [Q62](#)

129 [Q62](#)

130 FareShare ([COV0065](#))

131 FareShare ([COV0065](#))

132 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2016–17, [Food waste in England](#), HC 429, para 2

133 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

134 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))

This Defra-funded grant programme was launched on April 2nd to enable not-for-profit redistribution organisations to overcome barriers to the distribution of surplus food that would otherwise be wasted in the wake of COVID-19. This additional funding will top up the £3.25 million already announced for this grant programme.<sup>135</sup>

In June, the Government announced that “an additional £63 million” would be “distributed to local authorities in England to help those who are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to coronavirus”.<sup>136</sup> When we asked the Secretary of State if the Government would continue to provide the £5 million a year to continue funding FareShare’s work on redistributing surplus food from the farmgate to frontline community groups, he replied that “this was very much a one-off payment to deal with the coronavirus crisis” and it was because “at the peak of this, because of panic-buying and other difficulties, initially the supermarkets had less surplus food to redistribute”.<sup>137</sup> He considered that “as things return to normal, we can expect some of those other donations of surplus food to kick back in, so it probably will not be necessary to sustain this year on year”.<sup>138</sup>

**47. Use of food banks was increasing before the pandemic and has effectively doubled during the pandemic. It is likely that the situation will get worse before it gets better. Food bank use is normally a symptom of, amongst other things, a lack of sufficient income and social support, rather than a food supply issue and we note the June 2020 report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which addresses these matters and calls for flexibility in Universal Credit advance payments.**

**48. During the early stages of the pandemic, however, supply to food banks and food aid organisations was disrupted. At the same time, a significant amount of food is still being wasted in the supply chain. Food waste must always be reduced, but, at a time of such critical need, it is particularly abhorrent. We commend Defra for providing £16 million of funding for the redistribution of food to vulnerable people. However, we recommend that Defra continues to provide the £5 million annual funding for FareShare to redistribute surplus food from the farmgate and across the supply chain to frontline food aid providers, for a further two years. As well as helping those who struggle to afford food as the effects of the pandemic continue, it would also reduce food waste at the farmgate. Over the next two years, Defra should evaluate whether the scheme has been successful and whether it should continue or be expanded as part of its efforts to reduce food waste. The Government should evaluate the impact of the £63 million provided to local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and consider whether further support is necessary.**

## Free school meal vouchers

**49. Free school meals are provided for all school children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.<sup>139</sup> For other year groups, free school meals are usually provided for children whose parents receive certain benefits, such as income support.<sup>140</sup> Department for Education**

135 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (COV0142) para 9.2

136 “£63 million for local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials”, GOV.UK press release, 11 June 2020

137 [Q240](#)

138 [Q240](#)

139 *School meals and nutritional standards (England)*, Commons Research Briefing [SN04195](#), 22 June 2020, p 4

140 *School meals and nutritional standards (England)*, Commons Research Briefing [SN04195](#), 22 June 2020, p 4

(DfE) statistics showed that in January 2020 in England, “17.3% of pupils are known to be eligible for free school meals, an increase from 15.4% in 2019”.<sup>141</sup> The Government stated on 31 March that 1.3 million children received “benefits-related free school meals”.<sup>142</sup>

50. From 23 March 2020, schools in England were closed with the exceptions of the children of key workers and vulnerable children.<sup>143</sup> On 31 March, the DfE announced that “children eligible for free school meals will benefit from a national voucher scheme allowing them to continue to access meals whilst they stay at home”.<sup>144</sup> In addition, “schools can continue to provide meals for collection or delivery themselves”.<sup>145</sup> The DfE stated that “schools can now provide every eligible child with a weekly shopping voucher worth £15 to spend at supermarkets”.<sup>146</sup> Vouchers could be claimed during the 2020 Easter, May half-term and summer holidays, due to the “unprecedented nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak”.<sup>147</sup>

51. The DfE’s chosen supplier for the free school meals voucher scheme was Edenred.<sup>148</sup> Edenred explained that “it was not mandated or envisaged that all schools would have to use the system”, but that:

Nevertheless, 17,518 schools - more than 80 per cent of all schools—have used the system so far, with the majority of them using it regularly. More schools have registered to order vouchers for the upcoming school summer holiday.<sup>149</sup>

The Children’s Food Campaign and School Food Matters stated that “the Edenred system was quickly overwhelmed with applications and was not able to quickly process the requests for vouchers” because:

The national school meal voucher scheme for England was only intended as a last resort option where existing catering arrangements were not viable, however the high profile promise of £15 per week per child raised expectations amongst many parents, whilst the centrally funded nature of the scheme provided an incentive for school leaders to drop catering relationships (adding to the already precarious business models of the public sector caterers) and enrol families in this scheme instead.<sup>150</sup>

52. When the scheme was announced at the end of March, retailers signed up to the scheme were Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda, Morrisons, Waitrose and M&S, with the DfE “working to get more shops to join the scheme as soon as possible”.<sup>151</sup> Stephanie Wood, CEO of the charity School Food Matters, stated that “lots of people are really angry that DfE has defaulted to the big six supermarkets, two of which are really irrelevant when

141 GOV.UK, ‘Schools, pupils and their characteristics’, accessed 15 July 2020

142 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020

143 *School meals and nutritional standards (England)*, Commons Research Briefing [SN04195](#), 22 June 2020, p 23; “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 18 March 2020”, GOV.UK, 18 March 2020

144 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020

145 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020

146 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020. [The £15 is per week per child.](#)

147 GOV.UK, ‘Providing free school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak’, accessed 15 July 2020

148 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020

149 Edenred ([COV00161](#))

150 Children’s Food Campaign and School Food Matters ([COV0055](#))

151 “Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals”, GOV.UK press release, 31 March 2020.

it comes to families on low income: Marks & Sparks and Waitrose”.<sup>152</sup> The Children’s Food Campaign and School Food Matters stated that “many lower income families are likely to shop [at] Aldi, Lidl, Co-op or chains of independent/convenience stores”.<sup>153</sup> They added that “only two retailers offered online redemption of vouchers, but online shopping portals required a minimum spend, and delivery slots were largely unavailable to anyone registering new accounts”.<sup>154</sup> Aldi, McColl’s, Iceland and Company Shop group have subsequently joined the scheme.<sup>155</sup>

53. Edenred stated that “in order for a retailer to join the scheme, they must have a digital gift card system already in operation that can be processed in every one of their stores” and that “Iceland, Aldi and McColl’s were in a position for us to support them in implementing a system”.<sup>156</sup> However, Lidl told us that it had been informed that a physical voucher mechanism was possible, and that it submitted a proposal on 27 April “detailing how a physical voucher could be delivered”.<sup>157</sup> Lidl stated that “disappointingly, we were then subsequently informed by Edenred that the Department for Education are no longer considering suppliers such as Lidl, that cannot offer an e-gift card solution”.<sup>158</sup> Lidl considered that:

The decision by the Government and Edenred to not onboard suppliers that cannot offer an e-gift card solution has so far denied hundreds of thousands of Lidl customers from being able to spend their vouchers in our stores, forcing them to go elsewhere - and in many cases pay more - to access the scheme.

In their latest correspondence the Government set out that the decision to exclude Lidl has been taken to allow all parties involved in the scheme to focus on service performance. Measuring the performance of this scheme in any way other than by how it enables access to as many households as possible, seems counterintuitive to the entire purpose of the scheme.<sup>159</sup>

Co-op Food told us that it had a “physical gift card scheme, which was up and running before the crisis began” and that it had “made a practical and scalable offer to both the Department for Education and Edenred before the National Voucher Scheme was launched”.<sup>160</sup> Co-op Food stated that “after weeks of discussions we identified a number of challenges that we knew would take many weeks to overcome so we came to the conclusion that the interests of the schools and families we wanted to support would be best served by offering Co-op giftcards for sale to schools”.<sup>161</sup> However, it was “concerned that some schools who have bought vouchers from us directly may be financially penalised relative to schools who have used the Edenred scheme”.<sup>162</sup> The ACS explained that “only one

152 [“‘Grave concern’ at supermarkets’ takeover of free school meals”, The Grocer, 24 April 2020](#)

153 Children’s Food Campaign and School Food Matters ([COV0055](#))

154 Children’s Food Campaign and School Food Matters ([COV0055](#)); [The two retailers offering the facility for vouchers to be used online were Asda and Waitrose, see COV0163.](#)

155 [“Aldi joins Free School Meal voucher scheme”, GOV.UK press release, 21 April 2020; GOV.UK, ‘Providing free school meals during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak’, accessed 15 July 2020](#)

156 Edenred ([COV0161](#))

157 Lidl ([COV0159](#))

158 Lidl ([COV0159](#))

159 Lidl ([COV0159](#))

160 [Jo Whitfield to Neil Parish](#), correspondence, 11 June 2020

161 [Jo Whitfield to Neil Parish](#), correspondence, 11 June 2020

162 [Jo Whitfield to Neil Parish](#), correspondence, 11 June 2020

convenience store operator has been able to participate in the national free school meals voucher [scheme] because of the requirement for retailers to commit to acceptance across every branded retail outlet”.<sup>163</sup> This was challenging because “most convenience stores are operated by independent retailers or symbol group retailers, which are independent retailers trading under a brand for example Spar, Costcutter or Nisa”.<sup>164</sup> The ACS was “disappointed that more was not done to include convenience stores in the initial launch as local shops have a unique reach into every community across the UK”.<sup>165</sup>

54. Andrew Opie, BRC, stated that “the biggest disappointment of the whole thing has been the lack of willingness from both DfE and its providers to work with the retailers to find workable solutions”.<sup>166</sup> James Lowman, CEO of ACS, agreed, and considered that there “were some assumptions made about where people would want to access food that were wrong”.<sup>167</sup> Anna Taylor, Food Foundation, stated that the situation “had knock-on impacts on children”, and that “in the first month, about a third of children did not get any substitute. That has fallen since then”.<sup>168</sup> She considered that the number of children dependent on free school meals “is likely to go up very significantly as [...] people shift on to the benefits system”.<sup>169</sup>

55. Wales took a different approach to England and stated that “schools or local authorities have the discretion to purchase gift cards or e-vouchers from local supermarkets or shops”, adding that “the choice of retailer should reflect those which operate in the local area”.<sup>170</sup> In April, it was reported that “the Welsh Government had scrapped plans to introduce a national voucher scheme”.<sup>171</sup> The Welsh Education Minister considered that “the best plan was for councils to decide what works best for their local communities”.<sup>172</sup> Anna Taylor stated that where schools had “decided to put in place their own parcels” they had dealt with “safeguarding, educational and nutritional needs [...] in a way that a national scheme is just limited in its ability to do”.<sup>173</sup> She concluded that “the national scheme was important, in this instance, as a safety net, but the importance of community-led responses has been shown over and over again”.<sup>174</sup>

56. The Local Government Association (LGA) was less critical and stated that “although there have been some challenges with bringing that offer to scale via the chosen provider, and a need to expand the range of participating retailers, the move has been welcomed as a sensible alternative to school-based provision”.<sup>175</sup> We asked the Secretary of State how Defra had worked with the DfE in developing the voucher scheme. He told us that Defra “had a number of conversations with DfE about trying to broaden the eligibility for some

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163 Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#))

164 Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#))

165 Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#))

166 [Q173](#)

167 [Q175](#)

168 [Q206](#); see also The Food Foundation et al., *Free School Meal Holiday Provision in England: Parliamentary Facts and Figures Briefing*

169 [Q214](#)

170 Welsh Government, ‘*Revised guidance for schools in Wales: supporting children eligible for free school meals*’, accessed 15 July 2020

171 “*Coronavirus: Children’s food vouchers scheme scrapped*”, BBC News, 18 April 2020

172 “*Wales reveals £33m plan for free school meals to give eligible children £19.50 in vouchers, money or food a week*”, WalesOnline, 22 April 2020

173 [Q204](#)

174 [Q204](#)

175 Local Government Association ([COV0091](#)) para 3.2

of the other stores, so that the vouchers could be used in a wider range of stores” and that “progress on that was made, particularly with some of the other supermarkets”.<sup>176</sup> David Kennedy, Director General of Food, Farming and Biosecurity at Defra, stated that:

The challenge is standing new approaches up that we do not have very quickly, in order to reach as many people as possible. There is a trade-off there between design and complexity, and just getting something stood up that works for most people. [...] The situation was the same for the Department for Education; it is standing up an approach from nothing, where the urgent need was there, and you have trade-offs in finding the right balance.<sup>177</sup>

**57. With the need to quickly provide children with a substitute for free school meals after schools closed, the Department for Education (DfE) designed a national voucher system. The speed with which it was set up was commendable and some teething problems were inevitable. However, the system has been beset by significant problems, ultimately leading to about a third of children experiencing greater food insecurity in the first month. A particular problem was the Government’s immediate reliance on the larger retailers to participate in the scheme, with discounters and convenience stores excluded for technical reasons, even when they were able to offer workable voucher schemes which would have helped more children. There was a need for closer collaboration on the part of both Government and retailers. The Government did not sufficiently consider the realities of where families dependent on free school meals were most likely to shop for food. We note that vouchers can be used during school holidays. Children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to experiencing insufficient nutritious food during the school holidays, so it is important such schemes have universal reach. Penalising some schools that use voucher systems outside the problematic national scheme ignores the fact that the ultimate priority, as recognised by those schools, should be keeping children fed. Although more retailers were added to the scheme, we consider that this took too long. We are disappointed at the apparent lack of willingness to quickly adapt the scheme in response to the issues that emerged. Later in this Chapter we will set out our views on cross-Government coordination in relation to food security.**

58. At time of publication, the Government and schools were working on fully reopening schools.<sup>178</sup> However, further school closures may be necessary, as demonstrated by the local outbreak in Leicester at the end of June.<sup>179</sup> *The Government should now be more flexible and recognise the importance and success of most community-led responses to the provision of free school meal substitutes. Schools should be allowed to provide vouchers for whichever retailers serve their community best, without financial penalty. In addition, schools should be encouraged to continue catering directly for their pupils without being put in a financially worse situation than those using the national voucher scheme.*

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176 [Q247](#)

177 [Q250](#)

178 GOV.UK, ‘[Guidance for full opening: schools](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

179 [“Leicester schools to close in first localised lockdown”](#), Schools Week, 29 June 2020

## Food parcels

59. In this Chapter we have primarily looked at how food insecurity has affected those struggling to afford food. In the final part of this Chapter, we look at another, novel group of people that was at risk of falling into food insecurity during the pandemic: those identified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and advised by the Government to “shield”, or stay at home at all times.<sup>180</sup>

60. The Government identified 2.2 million CEV people, who were advised to fully shield from 23 March to 6 July, with shielding not deemed necessary after 1 August.<sup>181</sup> Defra explained that “a key element of the Shielding Programme established by the Government in March 2020 is assisting individuals without any other means of getting to access essential food supplies” and that “the majority of registered individuals have said that they have access to support networks and do not need food deliveries”.<sup>182</sup> Defra contracted “established wholesalers Bidfoods and Brakes to deliver weekly parcels of essential items directly to individuals’ doorsteps” containing “essential food and non-food items such as bread, fresh fruit and vegetables, toilet paper and soap”.<sup>183</sup> Brakes stated that the service “was conceived, sourced and delivered within nine days”.<sup>184</sup> As of 30 June, over 4 million packages had been delivered.<sup>185</sup> Defra clarified that the total contract value for the food parcel scheme was £208 million.<sup>186</sup> The Government supplied “over 150 bulk deliveries of food to Local Authorities” in England, which ensured “councils had the resources to support shielding individuals at the local level while the ‘direct to doorstep’ system was developed and rolled out”.<sup>187</sup> Defra “also shared data with supermarkets” and “supermarkets are prioritising these individuals for delivery slots”; see Chapter 1 for more.<sup>188</sup>

61. Independent Age stated in April that “a small, but significant proportion of people [had] been waiting longer than a month for their first food parcel” and that:

At a time where access to sufficient, healthy food is paramount for those who have been identified by the NHS as ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ it is very problematic that some individuals have shared via our survey that due to specific health reasons, such as being a coeliac or having a restricted diet due to diabetes, a proportion of their food parcel is unable to meet their needs or puts their health at risk.<sup>189</sup>

This view was shared by many who responded to our survey in April: only 44 per cent of those who had received a food parcel said that the parcel had met their needs.<sup>190</sup> A typical response was that “the food parcel is insufficient for two of us, it does not accommodate my dietary needs and is not nutritionally balanced”.<sup>191</sup>

180 GOV.UK, ‘[Guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

181 GOV.UK, ‘[Guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020; ‘[Plans to ease guidance for over 2 million shielding](#)’, GOV.UK press release, 22 June 2020

182 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#)) para 10.3

183 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#)) para 10.4

184 Brakes UK ([COV0076](#)) para 14

185 [Q253](#)

186 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0163](#))

187 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#)) para 10.2

188 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#)) para 10.6

189 Independent Age ([COV0038](#))

190 Annex A

191 Annex A

62. Newcastle City Council explained that “while gratefully received, foods supplied in the emergency bulk offer were not sufficient to provide a nutritionally balanced food parcel” and that it had “used its own funding to purchase supplementary content”.<sup>192</sup> However, it stated that “anecdotally, the quality of the government shielding programme food parcels is reported to be good, with high levels of satisfaction from residents”.<sup>193</sup> Similarly, the LGA stated that “although there were issues with the food provided through the initial one-off bulk delivery of food drops to councils, we are not aware of concerns being raised about the content of the food deliveries now in place to individual households”.<sup>194</sup> The Secretary of State concurred with this assessment.<sup>195</sup>

63. However, the LGA acknowledged that there were “concerns that the contents did not represent a healthy diet or address specific dietary requirements”.<sup>196</sup> Defra stated that the contents of food parcels had “been reviewed by nutritionists to ensure they provide adequate nutrition for one person for one week”.<sup>197</sup> They were “intended to provide basic supplies to those who need them most” and they were designed “in consultation with nutritionists and industry groups”.<sup>198</sup> Defra conceded there were “some limitations” around what could be included as it was only possible to include ambient foods.<sup>199</sup> Those with “special dietary needs that may not be met by the packs they receive”, were advised to “contact their Local Authority for further help and advice”.<sup>200</sup>

**64. The distribution of food parcels to people who were Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and without other means of support was a valuable way of ensuring that those people had access to basic foodstuffs. We accept that many of the complaints about the contents of parcels were likely to relate to the early food parcels made from the emergency bulk food offer from Government to local authorities. Once the centralised system was in place, it appeared to operate very well. However, if the Government repeats such an endeavour in future, such as during a second wave of COVID-19, it should make greater efforts to ensure that nutrition and dietary needs are given higher priority from the start.**

## Government responsibility for food insecurity

65. The Food Foundation stated that “Covid-19 has had serious and wide-reaching consequences for the UK’s food system, leaving millions facing food insecurity”.<sup>201</sup> Ian Wright, CEO of the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), stated that:

this crisis has thrown up an absence of responsibility in Government for hunger and for the 2.5 million people for whom their main meal of the day comes through donated food, whether it be FareShare, food banks or whatever mechanism. Those mechanisms have all been put at risk by this crisis because, clearly, retailers and distribution centres that usually are

192 Newcastle City Council ([COV0052](#)) para 1.7

193 Newcastle City Council ([COV0052](#)) para 1.8

194 Local Government Association ([COV0091](#)) para 4.7

195 [Q253](#)

196 Local Government Association ([COV0091](#)) para 4.7

197 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#))

198 “[Nutritional content of the government food parcels](#)”, Defra in the media blog, 2 April 2020

199 “[Nutritional content of the government food parcels](#)”, Defra in the media blog, 2 April 2020. Ambient foods are those that can be stored at room temperature.

200 “[Nutritional content of the government food parcels](#)”, Defra in the media blog, 2 April 2020

201 Food Foundation ([COV0114](#))

the biggest source of donations for FareShare and others and would have normally have given food away have been holding on to it because they were afraid at the start of the crisis about their supply.<sup>202</sup>

He considered that “we have Ministers for women, minorities, veterans and the disabled, and we should have a Minister for the hungry” because “no single Ministry or Department has responsibility for that coordination”.<sup>203</sup> His suggestion echoed a 2019 recommendation by the Environmental Audit Committee that “the Government appoint a minister with responsibility and accountability for combatting hunger and food insecurity within the UK”, following an inquiry into the Government’s progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on hunger and malnutrition.<sup>204</sup>

66. Anna Taylor of the Food Foundation considered that “there are lots of good examples of where [Government, local government and charities] have worked together on particular challenge issues” but that:

The problem we have is that we do not have a national co-ordination mechanism, as I would call it: somewhere that those three constituency groups essentially come together with a common understanding of what the need is, where it is and who is experiencing it. That would then drive an allocation of who is going to do what to try to address it.<sup>205</sup>

She told us that “the problem has been dealt with in quite a piecemeal way” but that Defra had “stepped into a leadership vacuum” and “done a quite incredible job in trying to bring together different parts of Government to address the issue of food vulnerability”.<sup>206</sup> However, she stated that “the policies it has leverage over for tackling this issue are reasonably limited” and that “we really need to strengthen that cross-Government leadership, bring in the local authorities and civil society, and come up with a proper national plan for the coming months” because “the chances are that this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better”.<sup>207</sup>

67. Pre-pandemic, there were campaigns calling for the “right to food” to be enshrined in UK legislation.<sup>208</sup> Anna Taylor stated that “we could really progress thinking around the right to food if we start with children, largely because we have food insecurity, which we have widely documented, among children, but we also have very significant inequalities in obesity among children, with double the rates among the poorest children compared to the wealthiest”.<sup>209</sup> She suggested that “we need a children’s right to food commission”.<sup>210</sup> However, Professor Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy, City, University of London, told us that “there’s only one piece of legislation for ensuring that everyone is adequately fed, and that is for children”.<sup>211</sup> He suggested that “we need a food resilience and sustainability act” and that “the public’s health requires us to equally make sure that adults are well

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202 [Q122](#)

203 [Q122](#)

204 Environmental Audit Committee, Thirteenth Report of Session 2017–19, *Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK*, HC 1491, para 56

205 [Q202](#)

206 [Q202](#)

207 [Q202](#)

208 For example, Sustain, *‘Achieving everyone’s Right to Food’*, accessed 15 July 2020

209 [Q214](#)

210 [Q214](#)

211 [Q209](#)

fed, and the elderly as well, because the knock-on to the NHS is absolutely immense”.<sup>212</sup> Professor Lang stated that “if you don’t have it in legislation, you don’t have indicators, it doesn’t happen”.<sup>213</sup> Anna Taylor added that legislation “drives those accountability mechanisms which we don’t have at the moment, it drives an understanding of what’s going on on the ground”.<sup>214</sup> She stated that “if we get the legal structures right, the governance arrangements are right and Parliament is involved in scrutinising those, we will not be in the situation we have now with such high levels of unmet need”.<sup>215</sup>

68. On 6 July, the House of Lords Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment published its report *Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food*.<sup>216</sup> It considered the right to food and stated that:

On balance, although the intentions of the ‘right to food’ are laudable, the same aims could be achieved through strengthened national governance around food policy, improved monitoring of food insecurity [...] and by ensuring that the aims of any national food strategy are supported by robust accountability measures.<sup>217</sup>

69. We asked Henry Dumbleby, Independent Lead of the National Food Strategy and Non-Executive Director at Defra, about the right to food, and he responded that:

When you get into the nitty-gritty of what you mean by “right to food”, in a society with a developed welfare system, unlike, for example, India, where right to food has been very successful, it would be very difficult to define exactly what the right to food is. [...] There is this thing about the food system; it is across numerous Departments and sometimes falls through the cracks. I am not personally convinced that the right to food is the right thing to convene those needs around.<sup>218</sup>

The National Food Strategy was originally expected to report in Summer 2020, but Henry Dumbleby told us that he was preparing an interim report “on a response to the Covid-19 aspects of the food system, which will include some thinking on food insecurity”.<sup>219</sup>

70. The Secretary of State highlighted the difficulties of gathering data and stated that the Government had “chosen to address this particular issue in a different way, which is through the Agriculture Bill”.<sup>220</sup> He explained that “every five years, required in statute, there will be a food security assessment that will look at self-sufficiency and international food security, as well as household food security within the UK” and that “through that clause in the Agriculture Bill, we have committed to regularly review and monitor this

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212 [Q209](#), [Q214](#)

213 [Q215](#)

214 [Q215](#)

215 [Q215](#)

216 House of Lords, *Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food*, Report of the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, Session 2019–21, [HL Paper 85](#)

217 House of Lords, *Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food*, Report of the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, Session 2019–21, [HL Paper 85](#), para 545

218 [Q230](#)

219 National Food Strategy, [‘Our Approach & Principles’](#), accessed 15 July 2020; [Q229](#)

220 [Q231](#)

situation”.<sup>221</sup> Minette Batters, President of the National Farmers Union, argued instead that “the mechanism to review food security [...] without any shadow of a doubt, that should be looked at on a yearly basis”.<sup>222</sup>

71. The Secretary of State also highlighted that:

during this crisis we established a cross-Government taskforce to look at the issue of access to food for those who were vulnerable and could not leave home, as well as those who could not afford food. One of the roles of Victoria Prentis, as Minister who covers these issues within Defra, has been to chair that taskforce and pull together other Government Departments to make sure that we have the right response.<sup>223</sup>

72. **One of the key questions for our inquiry was what the COVID-19 pandemic had shown about our food system, not just in terms of food supply, but also demand. There are clearly millions of people whose ability to afford sufficient, nutritious food has been severely disrupted or worsened. Lessons must be learnt from the experience in all four nations on how best to avoid and respond to food insecurity. We are very concerned that this situation will be exacerbated as the economic impacts of the pandemic continue to unfold. We are aware that a combination of ending furlough and a potential second wave of coronavirus may conspire to make the level and severity of food insecurity significantly higher. Therefore, the Government urgently needs a sustainable plan to mitigate the possible growth of food insecurity through a combination of financial and food supply strategies. *Following the publication of the National Food Strategy, we recommend that the Government consults on whether a “Right to Food” should be given a legislative footing to ensure the Government has a reference point for action to tackle and measure food insecurity, with the flexibility to meet that commitment using different measures. This should happen as a matter of great urgency, in anticipation of increasing challenges to the food security of the nation post-COVID-19.***

73. *The Government should amend the Agriculture Bill so that food security assessments should take place yearly, rather than every five years.*

74. Responsibility for food falls across several Government departments, but there is a risk that food insecurity falls between the cracks with no clear lead. The establishment of a cross-Government taskforce looking at food insecurity during the pandemic indicated that Defra recognised the value of coordination across Government. However, the national voucher scheme for free school meals would certainly have benefitted from a faster and more joined-up approach between the DfE and Defra. We consider that Defra has made a good effort to tackle the issue, but it alone cannot tackle the causes of and solutions for food insecurity. *The Government should measure and report levels of food insecurity across the country. We recommend that the Government appoints a Minister for Food Security, empowered to collect robust data on food insecurity and draw together policy across departments on food supply, nutrition and welfare in order to deliver sustainable change.*

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221 [Q231](#)

222 [Q38](#)

223 [Q227](#)

### 3 Foodservice sector

75. Chapters 1 and 2 of the Report have focused on some of the most visible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food supply and demand. In this Chapter, we look at the impacts of closing and reopening the foodservice sector.

76. Pre-pandemic, Britons were fond of consuming food out of the home: by June 2019, consumers' spend on eating out was almost equal to that spent on food and drink in retail.<sup>224</sup> The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) estimated that with almost 52 million adults eating an average of 15.7 meals out a month, the total implied spend was £77.3 billion in 2019.<sup>225</sup> The Soil Association stated that “food consumption out of home is significant with close to 30% of meals now eaten in this setting”.<sup>226</sup>

#### Closure and reopening

77. On 16 March, the Prime Minister asked the public to “avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and other such social venues”, a message reiterated on 19 March with regards to “pubs, bars and restaurants”.<sup>227</sup> On 20 March, he stated “we are [...] telling cafes, pubs, bars, restaurants to close tonight as soon as they reasonably can, and not to open tomorrow”.<sup>228</sup> The Government stated that planning rules would be relaxed “so pubs and restaurants can operate as hot food takeaways during the coronavirus outbreak”.<sup>229</sup> The trade body UKHospitality stated that reduced footfall into hospitality businesses had already begun in February.<sup>230</sup> Kate Nicholls, Chief Executive of UKHospitality, provided figures:

You could see during February and into early March that footfall had declined by about 20% over most of our town and city centres. It then accelerated as we ran into the political announcement. It was already down 50% to 70% in the run-up to 16 March. It dropped off to about 90% down in town and city centres after 20 March.<sup>231</sup>

78. Kate Nicholls stated that “there was no meaningful consultation prior to the decision taken to close premises, prior to the announcement on 16 March that customers were going to be advised not to visit pubs and restaurants”.<sup>232</sup> UKHospitality stated in April that “while some venues are utilising the relaxed planning rules to operate as takeaways, or are offering their services up at greatly reduced rates to key and NHS workers, for the majority of hospitality businesses, the Government’s announcement [had] led to their closure until further notice”.<sup>233</sup> Kate Nicholls told us that “it was quite clear after that weekend of the 23rd that consumer reaction to the lockdown had meant that there was

224 Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, [Eating-out review 2019](#), November 2019, p 1. Part of the reason is that there is a lower volume of food eaten out of home, but it tends to be more expensive.

225 Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, [Eating-out review 2019](#), November 2019, p 3

226 The Soil Association ([COV0032](#))

227 [“Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 16 March 2020”](#), GOV.UK, 16 March 2020; [“Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 19 March 2020”](#), GOV.UK, 19 March 2020

228 [“Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 20 March 2020”](#), GOV.UK, 20 March 2020

229 [“Government to grant permission for pubs and restaurants to operate as takeaways as part of coronavirus response”](#), GOV.UK press release, 17 March 2020

230 UKHospitality ([COV0004](#))

231 [Q183](#)

232 [Q181](#)

233 UKHospitality ([COV0004](#))

almost an entire closure”.<sup>234</sup> She added that “everybody stopped going to work; everybody did obey the lockdown and stay at home, so coffee shops, takeaway venues, cafés, lots of those business that the Government initially thought may be able to stay trading in some way, shape or form, closed down”.<sup>235</sup>

79. On 23 June, the Government announced that, from 4 July, pubs and restaurants would “be able to reopen, providing they adhere to COVID Secure guidelines”.<sup>236</sup> Businesses were advised to maintain social distancing of two metres if possible, or one metre plus mitigating measures if not.<sup>237</sup> The Government also asked businesses to keep “a temporary record of your customers and visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your business, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed”.<sup>238</sup> The decision came after a month of deliberations in Government over whether to relax the requirement for people to maintain social distancing at two-metres.<sup>239</sup> Prior to the reopening of the sector, Kate Nicholls stated that with a two metre rule, outlets would only be able to make about 30 per cent of normal revenues, whereas one metre would increase that to 60–75 per cent.<sup>240</sup>

80. Regarding the announcement to reopen, Kate Nicholls stated that it was “unfortunate that it took so long to get an answer published, but we have a good answer [...] which allows us to move forward with confidence”.<sup>241</sup> However, she emphasised that:

It is undoubtedly going to take a longer time for us to recover. Demand will be suppressed. [...] We are going to see a continued squeeze on demand in the sector going forward, from a drop in inbound tourists, a restriction on the numbers of people returning to work in town and city centres, and a softening of consumer confidence. We do not think it is forecast to recover until the start of 2022.<sup>242</sup>

There were also concerns about collecting customer data: the British Beer and Pub Association stated that it posed “significant logistical challenges”.<sup>243</sup>

81. On 8 July, the Government announced *A Plan for Jobs 2020*, which set out measures to “support the UK’s economic recovery while continuing to prioritise people’s health”.<sup>244</sup> This included a reduced rate of VAT for hospitality as well as support for discounted meals in pubs and restaurants. Because of timing, we were unable to take evidence on these measures as part of our inquiry.

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234 [Q182](#)

235 [Q182](#)

236 “*PM announces easing of lockdown restrictions: 23 June 2020*”, GOV.UK press release, 23 June 2020

237 GOV.UK, ‘[Review of two metre social distancing guidance](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

238 GOV.UK, ‘[Closing certain businesses and venues in England](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

239 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee on 27 May 2020 HC 322, [Q32](#); “*Coronavirus: 2m review to be completed in the ‘coming weeks’*”, BBC News, 15 June 2020

240 “*Coronavirus: Boris Johnson launches review into 2m social distancing rule*”, BBC News, 14 June 2020

241 [Q187](#)

242 [Q196](#)

243 “*Pubs reopening from 4th July is a welcome first step on long road to recovery*”, British Beer & Pub Association, 23 June 2020

244 GOV.UK, ‘[A Plan for Jobs 2020](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

## Impact on suppliers

82. The closure of foodservice businesses had an immediate impact on their food and drink suppliers, who saw their market removed overnight. The Soil Association stated that “those processors servicing food service were put into immediate peril, and this was passed rapidly to the farming community”.<sup>245</sup> The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) stated that “the collapse of the food service sector” led to “a massive redeployment of produce to the retail sector”, but suggested that “this redeployment has not been quick enough or responsive enough to market signals”.<sup>246</sup> The Tenant Farmers Association (TFA) pointed out that “given the growth of this sector over recent years prior to the outbreak of the virus, we had seen a significant amount of investment at both the primary production and processing levels to service this increasingly lucrative market”.<sup>247</sup>

83. The dairy sector was hit hard by the closure of foodservice: the CLA stated that some dairy producers saw “the milk price fall significantly as their contracts are directly linked to the food service sector, in which demand has evaporated”.<sup>248</sup> The CLA concluded that “the supply chain has been unable to cope with the speed or nature of Government decisions to impose the lockdown”.<sup>249</sup> On 8 April, the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF) stated that foodservice orders had fallen by approximately 70–80 per cent, equivalent to around 1 million litres of milk being produced every day with no market.<sup>250</sup> The AHDB told us that “across April, May and June, the financial impact on GB Dairy farmers as a result of COVID-19 was £41.08m” and that 4,565 out of an estimated 8,580 farmers had “suffered a milk price reduction”.<sup>251</sup> Additionally, “455 had milk collections cancelled, 450 had payments deferred, 2,150 were asked to reduce milk output and 610 have had the volume they get paid a full price on reduced”.<sup>252</sup> This was despite increased demand from retail (see Chapter 1).<sup>253</sup>

84. On 17 April, the Government announced that it would “temporarily relax elements of UK competition law to support the dairy industry through the coronavirus outbreak”.<sup>254</sup> This would “enable further collaboration between dairy farmers and producers so they can avoid their surplus milk going to waste and harming the environment”, for example “sharing labour and facilities, cooperating to temporarily reduce production or identifying where there is hidden capacity in the supply chain for processing milk into other dairy products such as cheese and butter”.<sup>255</sup> Dairy UK and the AHDB also began “work to bring the industry together to identify spare processing capacity, how to stimulate demand and how production could be temporarily reduced”.<sup>256</sup>

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245 The Soil Association ([COV0032](#))

246 The Country Land and Business Association ([COV0011](#)) paras 3–4

247 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#)) para 3.1

248 The Country Land and Business Association ([COV0011](#)) para 4

249 The Country Land and Business Association ([COV0011](#)) para 4

250 “Q & A: Getting To Grips With The Impact Of Covid19 On Milk Supply Issues”, RABDF, 8 April 2020

251 Written evidence to inquiry on Government support to the dairy sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (HC 598), [Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board](#) (DAS0003) para 5

252 Written evidence to inquiry on Government support to the dairy sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (HC 598), [Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board](#) (DAS0003) para 5

253 [Q17](#) [Tom Hind]

254 “[Dairy industry to join together to manage milk supply](#)”, GOV.UK press release, 17 April 2020

255 “[Dairy industry to join together to manage milk supply](#)”, GOV.UK press release, 17 April 2020

256 “[Dairy industry to join together to manage milk supply](#)”, GOV.UK press release, 17 April 2020

85. According to Tom Hind, Chief Strategy Officer, AHDB, “the main benefit” of relaxing competition law had been “the sharing of data” which had “enabled us to get a much better picture of the issues in terms of supply and demand from a processor point of view”.<sup>257</sup> However, the TFA considered that “whilst the Government suggested that the relaxation would allow retailers, suppliers and logistic services to work together to move more product into retail, there is no evidence that there has been much success”.<sup>258</sup> The TFA suggested that there was a role “for Government to step in to fund the purchase of this product for onward distribution through charitable networks such as food banks, homeless projects and refuge shelters which are all under pressure at the current time”.<sup>259</sup> The TFA warned that instead, “it would seem that the principal intention of the work that AHDB and Dairy UK (representing the processors) are doing to utilise this relaxation is not in fact to get routes to market, but to find capacity to convert liquid milk into powder, butter and cheese for storage”.<sup>260</sup> It stated that “taking product [off] the market through storage will have major implications for the milk market when it begins to return to something like normal”.<sup>261</sup> Minette Batters, NFU, also highlighted the long term effects of private storage aid across Europe.<sup>262</sup>

86. On 18 June, the Government announced the Dairy Response Fund, “to help those dairy farmers most in need in England overcome the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak”.<sup>263</sup> Although the NFU welcomed this, it was disappointed “that many affected dairy farmers may miss out on much needed support”, particularly as “many farmers who anticipated Defra assistance for income losses will not qualify for the new scheme, which calculates eligibility based on milk price instead of lost income”.<sup>264</sup> We currently have a separate inquiry on the Government’s support for the dairy sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Dairy Response Fund.<sup>265</sup>

87. Although there had been significant consequences for some dairy farmers, Minette Batters explained that “there is no sector that has not been impacted” by the closure of foodservice and hospitality businesses.<sup>266</sup> She explained that:

We have also seen challenges in potatoes. All our fish and chip shops shut overnight, so those who process potatoes that would normally go into that market have been massively challenged. [...] There are big problems with carcass balance in the beef sector, [...] there is the lockdown in other countries. We saw the lamb market very close to collapse when we lost access into the French market. That is now starting to recover but, of course, for cuts such as lamb shanks that would be eaten a lot in out-of-home eating, there is just no demand [...] poultry, of course, 2 million birds lost from the out-of-home market and creating a bottleneck into retail. It is a complex picture and throughout, the one connected theme is perishability.<sup>267</sup>

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257 [Q18](#)

258 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#)) para 4.4

259 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#)) para 4.4

260 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#)) para 4.4

261 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#)) para 4.4

262 [Q18](#)

263 GOV.UK, ‘[Dairy Response Fund 2020](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

264 ‘[Dairy Response Fund opens for applications](#)’, NFU, 18 June 2020

265 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, ‘[Government support to the dairy sector during the COVID-19 pandemic: Call for evidence](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

266 [Q7](#)

267 [Q7](#)

88. On 17 June, as reopening of foodservice businesses was being considered by the Government, the Food and Drink Industry Roundtable convened by the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), representing food manufacturers, published a report stating that “food purchasing [in hospitality] is estimated at £1 billion per month alone” and warned that “there has been less focus on the ‘Squeezed Middle’—those manufacturing and supply businesses that sit behind the food and drink provision into these sectors, over 95 per cent of which fall into the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) category”.<sup>268</sup> The report considered that for these “7,400 businesses and the 430,000 people it employs”, there are “concerns that the restarting of the hospitality and food service market could be negatively affected by the inability of its supply chain to restart”.<sup>269</sup>

89. The Secretary of State told us that the Government had been “closely monitoring the food wholesale sector, where the loss of the service trade has affected certain businesses quite badly” and that its assessment was that “although there has been some financial distress, the largest players have managed to cope by furloughing staff and through increased sales to convenience stores and so forth, and will be well placed to restart”.<sup>270</sup> He considered that “for food manufacturers, it will be a further return to business as normal, so we think that they will be fine”.<sup>271</sup> However, he acknowledged concerns “around credit and credit insurance” whereby “one of the concerns that the big manufacturers and wholesalers have is that they may restart delivering food to pubs, restaurants and hotels, and end up with quite a large list of debtors and find lots of businesses going into administration”.<sup>272</sup> He stated that the Government was “looking at a package to try to help support the credit insurance market, so that those manufacturers can get the cover that they need”.<sup>273</sup> The FDF-convened industry roundtable had also called for measures such as the extension of the furlough scheme until the hospitality and foodservice markets “return to commercially viable levels”, as well as other financial support measures.<sup>274</sup>

**90. The closure of foodservice and hospitality businesses was a huge shock for their food and drink suppliers, particularly those providing perishable goods who were unable to find alternative markets quickly. The Government could have done more to anticipate problems that would arise, particularly as it was necessary Government health measures, rather than market forces, that caused severe economic disruption. This was particularly demonstrated by the crisis in the dairy sector, which we are examining in a separate call for evidence.**

**91. We cautiously welcome the decision to allow foodservice and hospitality businesses to reopen with reduced social distancing, as this will increase the likelihood that they and their food suppliers will survive the economic impact of the pandemic. The Government must ensure that foodservice and hospitality businesses that were thriving before the pandemic remain economically viable. We welcome that extra support for**

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268 [“The squeezed middle need support if hospitality restart is to succeed”](#), Food and Drink Federation press release, 17 June 2020; Food and Drink Industry Roundtable, [UK Food and Drink: Maintaining Post-Covid-19 Capacity in Hospitality and Food Service Supply Chain Businesses: ‘The Squeezed Middle’](#), June 2020, p 2

269 Food and Drink Industry Roundtable, [UK Food and Drink: Maintaining Post-Covid-19 Capacity in Hospitality and Food Service Supply Chain Businesses: ‘The Squeezed Middle’](#), June 2020, p 2

270 [Q265](#)

271 [Q265](#)

272 [Q265](#)

273 [Q265](#)

274 Food and Drink Industry Roundtable, [UK Food and Drink: Maintaining Post-Covid-19 Capacity in Hospitality and Food Service Supply Chain Businesses: ‘The Squeezed Middle’](#), June 2020, p 4

**the sector was announced in the Plan for Jobs 2020. In addition, every effort must also be made to minimise the risk of infection and protect customers and staff. The next Chapter explores key workers in more detail.**

*92. The hospitality and foodservice sectors may take over a year to recover from forced closure and further financial difficulties are likely. The Government should work with producers, processors and wholesalers to understand their concerns and monitor the health of food and drink suppliers, particularly SMEs, over the next 18 months as supply chains restart. In its response to this Report, the Government should include a plan for how it intends to support food and drink suppliers to the hospitality and foodservice sector during this turbulent time.*

## 4 Key workers in the food sector

93. From 23 March, schools, nurseries and colleges “remained open only to a priority group of children and young people, children who have a parent who is a critical worker and vulnerable children”.<sup>275</sup> Critical sectors included “Food and other necessary goods”, with key workers including “those involved in food: production; processing; distribution; sale and delivery; as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (for example hygienic and veterinary medicines)”.<sup>276</sup> During our inquiry we were interested in how key workers contributed to the effectiveness of food supply, and whether the Government had done enough to enable them to work safely.

94. **We would like to put on record our unreserved thanks to all the key workers in the food supply chain whose efforts and sacrifices have meant that the nation is being fed during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

### Government guidance for workplaces

95. With food being a critical sector, many businesses in the food supply chain continued to operate during lockdown. Government guidance for food businesses included the following advice:

- a) social distancing measures should be implemented at entry points, in shared accommodation and at work;
- b) wherever possible “employees should be organised into cohorts or groups built around natural work teams. Cohorts work together, take their breaks together, change together, and travel together if relevant”;
- c) shift starting times, changeovers and breaks should be “staggered”;
- d) hand washing facilities or hand sanitiser “should be provided throughout the workplace” and “anyone handling food must wash their hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds”.<sup>277</sup>

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) also published guidance on *Adapting food manufacturing operations during COVID-19*.<sup>278</sup> It stated that the “current situation” should not change the requirements for the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the food industry, “for the protection of workers, and where appropriate to prevent the contamination of food during food production”.<sup>279</sup> The guidance stated that “inappropriate use and handling of face coverings could present a risk to food safety and hygiene as well as to the health and safety of staff” and that there should be “procedures in place for hygienic handling and storage or disposal” of face coverings worn by staff during travel to work.<sup>280</sup>

275 GOV.UK, ‘[Critical workers who can access schools or educational settings](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

276 GOV.UK, ‘[Critical workers who can access schools or educational settings](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

277 GOV.UK, ‘[Guidance for food businesses on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

278 Food Standards Agency, ‘[Adapting food manufacturing operations during COVID-19](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

279 Food Standards Agency, ‘[Adapting food manufacturing operations during COVID-19](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

280 Food Standards Agency, ‘[Adapting food manufacturing operations during COVID-19](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

96. However, the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) was “particularly disappointed by the delay and lack of practical detail in the guidance for food and drink manufacturers which arises from different government departments”.<sup>281</sup> It explained that:

In some cases, we have seen headline announcements but the detail underpinning this is slow to follow, resulting in uncertainty within companies of what measures to implement and next steps. This has meant that companies have had to use their best judgement in order to continue operating, while awaiting official advice on safe practices, for example on operating procedures in factories where social distancing by two metres may not be practicable.<sup>282</sup>

The FDF stated that “the guidance that is published has not always been fit for the sector”, citing the examples of “the guidance published in February 2020”, which “was not suitable for food and drink manufacturing” and “the long awaited Public Health England guidance which “contained limited practical information and less detail than the guidance already published by Food Standards Scotland and Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association several weeks earlier”.<sup>283</sup> It had also been published in April “after a week of promises that it was ‘imminent’”.<sup>284</sup> Nick Allen, Chief Executive of the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA), stated that “one of the challenges we had in the early days was the lack of clarity of the advice from Public Health England” and that:

There was one week where every day we were assured that, by the end of the day, we would have the information that we needed to discuss with our members and that they needed to discuss with the people working in the plants. We waited all week for it. Eventually, we were told it had come through on the Monday, and then [...] it was held up another two or three days because it had to go through the devolved Governments. In the meantime, as an association, we formed our own best guidance for practice. It started in Northern Ireland, where they created a Northern Ireland protocol, and then we introduced it to all our plants.<sup>285</sup>

Ian Wright, CEO of the FDF, explained that it became necessary for the industry to introduce social distancing from 23 March, “immediately after” the Prime Minister announced the start of the lockdown but that social distancing measures “had been introduced in plants and factories in the two weeks before”.<sup>286</sup>

97. Ian Wright also told us on 19 May that “the guidance on masks has been a real concern for all of our members and everybody in the industry” and that “we are now in a position where face coverings are advised for the general public but, of course, they are not advised in food manufacturing plants because, if you come in off the street having worn a face covering, it will be unsanitary.”<sup>287</sup> Similarly, Nick Allen stated that “the clarity of the advice coming forward is still a bit vague, particularly around the face masks” and that “having some standard for it would be extremely helpful”.<sup>288</sup> James Bielby Chief

281 Food and Drink Federation ([COV0068](#)) para 9

282 Food and Drink Federation ([COV0068](#)) para 9

283 Food and Drink Federation ([COV0068](#)) para 10

284 Food and Drink Federation ([COV0068](#)) para 10

285 [Q103](#)

286 [Q102](#)

287 [Q102](#)

288 [Q103](#)

Executive, Federation of Wholesale Distributors, stated that “the lack of information” on “face coverings and their use in public settings where social distancing is not possible” had been “less than helpful”.<sup>289</sup> Ian Wright also highlighted that “trying to get hold of face coverings, masks and that type of equipment has been a major issue through the whole of this”.<sup>290</sup> The BMPA stated that “Government requests in early April to industry [about] what type of, and how much, PPE is required for them was strange” as “this was at a time when industry was awaiting government guidance for PPE for its workers”.<sup>291</sup>

98. Ian Wright suggested that “speedy issuing of guidance on all matters” was “something that the Government could look at for future crises” because “the machinery of Government was not set up for quick guidance to be issued”.<sup>292</sup> The BMPA differentiated between the approaches of different Departments and stated that Defra had been “helpful and reactive”, noting that it had hosted “frequent conference calls” and had communicated effectively with the industry.<sup>293</sup> However, FSA’s “initial approach was not cooperative and was inconsistent”.<sup>294</sup> The BMPA stated that “decisions on the appropriateness of plants’ social distancing measures and PPE for workers and FSA staff were left to the local FSA teams instead of being dealt with centrally” which “led to local tensions and threats of closures of food factories”.<sup>295</sup>

99. The Secretary of State acknowledged that “there was a period of around a week when I know certain sectors of industry, particularly manufacturing, were asking for guidance and it took a little longer than we had perhaps hoped”.<sup>296</sup> He considered that:

that was largely because we were bringing quite a lot of elaborate, sector-specific questions to [Public Health England] and asking them to try to find an approach that worked, that kept staff safe, that prevented the spread of the virus and that enabled certain environments to continue. [...] Working out how that would be achieved in practice took a bit of time.<sup>297</sup>

With regards to face coverings, he stated:

The important thing to note is that there was already pressure on PPE supplies, and the scientific advice was always that the benefits of facemasks were probably quite limited. In a food environment, there is another problem, which is that a facemask can become a hygiene risk. [...] There was quite a lot of anxiety from the manufacturers in particular that, if there was a requirement for facemasks, they would literally have to close down. All of these factors—the lack of efficacy in terms of controlling the coronavirus, the risk of other hygiene problems and the lack of availability—were weighed in the balance when we made these sorts of judgments.<sup>298</sup>

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289 [Q104](#)

290 [Q102](#)

291 The British Meat Processors Association ([COV0042](#))

292 [Q105](#)

293 The British Meat Processors Association ([COV0042](#))

294 The British Meat Processors Association ([COV0042](#))

295 The British Meat Processors Association ([COV0042](#))

296 [Q258](#)

297 [Q258](#)

298 [Q259](#)

100. **Guidance on measures that businesses should take to protect workers, such as guidance on how to introduce social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment, was not issued quickly enough. We commend the processors, manufacturers, retailers and trade unions that developed and implemented COVID-secure working practices before the Government had issued satisfactory guidance. It is disappointing that guidance on social distancing in the workplace was only published in April. We recognise the pressure the Government, and in particular Public Health England, was under at the time. However, yet again, it appears that the Government was somewhat slow to react and support food businesses in dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 prevention measures. *The Government should ensure that improved co-ordination mechanisms are in place between government departments, public bodies and with the devolved administrations to ensure that in any future disruption, guidance can be developed, cleared and issued more rapidly. This may mean better resourcing of critical specialist functions, so they have the capacity to meet unexpected surges in demand.***

## Local outbreaks

101. Ian Wright stated that social distancing was “being observed in just about every circumstance where it can be observed”.<sup>299</sup> He explained that in a “minority of cases” including “abattoirs and one or two other similar places”, the design of factories necessitated that workers “stand closely together”, but told us that Public Health England and the FSA had recognised that this was the case.<sup>300</sup> Ian Wright explained that there was “a lot of work done in [the] first week [of social distancing]” to establish “how you could position people on the factory lines” in a safe manner.<sup>301</sup> He described this as “a process across the industry of learning by doing”.<sup>302</sup>

102. Ian Wright told us on 19 May that across food manufacturing, “ONS figures show that the number of reported deaths due to COVID19 are really quite small” and that “when you consider that 500,000 workers have been going to work seven days a week for eight weeks, it is quite encouraging that we have not seen major infection rates, although we have seen a couple of relative hotspots, which is to be expected”.<sup>303</sup> There were, however, several outbreaks in meat and poultry processing plants in the UK in June. For example, a 2 Sisters poultry processing plant in Anglesey was shut for two weeks after 217 coronavirus cases were found among the 560 staff.<sup>304</sup> Asda’s meat processing site in Yorkshire saw 150 workers catch the virus, and three workers died after a small outbreak at a meat processing plant in Barnsley in May.<sup>305</sup> Cold temperatures, poor ventilation and working in close proximity have been suggested as possible reasons for outbreaks.<sup>306</sup> The union Unite argued that there was a “link between migrant worker exploitation and Covid-19 meat processing outbreaks”, with a “direct correlation between the treatment of migrant staff as ‘disposable assets’ and the spread of the disease in such environments”.<sup>307</sup> Unite

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299 [Q105](#)

300 [Q105](#)

301 [Q102](#)

302 [Q102](#)

303 [Q102](#)

304 [“Coronavirus: Covid-19 outbreak meat plant to reopen”](#), BBC News, 3 July 2020

305 [“Meat processing plant Covid-19 outbreaks like at Kober in Yorkshire linked to canteens and car-sharing, says George Eustice”](#), Yorkshire Post, 25 June 2020

306 [“Coronavirus: Why are there so many outbreaks at meat factories?”](#), The Independent, 23 June 2020

307 [“Link between migrant worker exploitation and Covid-19 meat processing outbreaks ‘must be addressed’”](#), Unite the Union, 30 June 2020

stated that meat processing factories “do not provide staff that need to self-isolate with company sick pay or any other form of financial support” which “increases the danger of individuals with Covid-19 going into work because they cannot afford to take time off”.<sup>308</sup>

103. On 25 June, the Secretary of State told the House that:

We have heard now of three outbreaks linked to meat plants. They have been picked up through the testing and tracing approach that has been adopted and we are reviewing the guidance. We suspect that these outbreaks might have been linked either to canteens or, potentially, to car-sharing arrangements in those plants. We will be revising guidance to ensure that businesses have the approach that they need to prevent further outbreaks in future.<sup>309</sup>

On 30 June, David Kennedy, Defra, told us that:

Four or five factories have had to be closed. Most of those have been voluntary; only one was forced to close. There have been a few more outbreaks, but we are talking about a population of 5,000 food manufacturers with over 50 workers in England, and 8,000 factories across the UK. That is not to diminish the importance. This has been my focus, with my team, working with Public Health England, the FSA and the Health and Safety Executive over the last week or so. We already have new guidance out to cover these situations in terms of what happens when there is an outbreak.<sup>310</sup>

104. In the previous Chapter we looked at the reopening of the hospitality and foodservice sector. It is too early to tell what impact reopening might have on the safety of staff and customers, but following the first weekend of reopening, it was reported that at least three pubs had closed after customers tested positive for coronavirus.<sup>311</sup>

**105. While there have been some outbreaks in meat and poultry processing plants in England and Wales, these have been in the minority, which is a testament to the efforts of the industry to keep workers safe. *Further investigations should be carried out by the Government and industry on the reasons for these outbreaks.* We are concerned that factors such as a lack of statutory sick pay may discourage workers from self-isolating if they develop symptoms. *The Government should gather data from industry and unions on how many workers could be disincentivised to self-isolate by their employment terms. The Government and industry should also evaluate whether migrant workers face other issues that increase the risk of outbreaks, for example language barriers and living and travel arrangements.***

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308 [“Link between migrant worker exploitation and Covid-19 meat processing outbreaks ‘must be addressed’”](#), Unite the Union, 30 June 2020

309 HC Deb, 25 June 2020, [col 1437](#)

310 [Q260](#)

311 [“Coronavirus: Three England pubs close after positive tests”](#), BBC News, 7 July 2020

## 5 Food resilience and security

106. A resilient food system is often defined as one that is robust, able to recover quickly after disruption and reorient towards more sustainable outcomes.<sup>312</sup>

107. The 2017 edition of the *National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies* lists pandemic influenza as having a moderate to high likelihood of occurring in the next five years and high “impact severity”.<sup>313</sup> Other emerging infectious diseases are categorised as having similar likelihood of occurring but lower impact severity.<sup>314</sup> Both were considered likely to cause disruption to essential services and economic disruption.<sup>315</sup> Food is considered by Government to be one of the UK’s thirteen Critical National Infrastructures (CNI), with Defra identified as the Lead Government Department (LGD) responsible for producing Sector Security and Resilience Plans.<sup>316</sup> The 2018 public summary of the annual resilience plan for the food sector (published in 2019) stated that:

The UK food sector has a highly effective and resilient food supply chain, owing to the size, geographic diversity and competitive nature of the industry. Although there is recognised dependency on other critical services, the resilience of the sector has been demonstrated by the response to potentially disruptive challenges in recent years.<sup>317</sup>

The *Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans* further explains that this resilience had been “demonstrated in the response to events such as the 2015 flooding, and disruption to cross-channel transportation, the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic, the 2010 Icelandic volcanic ash clouds, the 2012 potential industrial action by fuel tanker drivers and severe winter weather experienced over the years 2010–2014”.<sup>318</sup> It also stated that “like many industries, the food sector operates just-in-time supply chains which require sophisticated logistics operations and contingency plans to respond rapidly to potential disruption”.<sup>319</sup>

108. However, others had a different view. Professor Tim Benton, Chatham House stated that “our food systems are fragile” and explained the tensions between resilience and efficiency:

Resilience typically arises through two conceptual notions: functional redundancy and diversity. The first typically would arise from having spare capacity (e.g. food stores for supplies, or decentralised processing—so there is no single point of failure). The second would include diversity in food suppliers, geographies and products. Both notions are typically antithetical to standard notions of “efficiency”—which rely on just-in-time supply chains, from preferred suppliers, highly specialised with no scope for substitution of products. Resilience, is thus, and necessarily, an excess cost to the current way our food systems are constructed.<sup>320</sup>

312 *A resilient UK food system*, POSTnote [POST-PN-0626](#), Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, June 2020

313 Cabinet Office, [National Risk Register Of Civil Emergencies: 2017 edition](#), September 2017, p 9

314 Cabinet Office, [National Risk Register Of Civil Emergencies: 2017 edition](#), September 2017, p 9

315 Cabinet Office, [National Risk Register Of Civil Emergencies: 2017 edition](#), September 2017, p 34

316 Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans 2018](#), February 2019, p 17

317 Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans 2018](#), February 2019, p 17

318 Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans 2018](#), February 2019, p 17

319 Cabinet Office, [Public Summary of Sector Security and Resilience Plans 2018](#), February 2019, p 17

320 Chatham House ([COV0156](#)) para 10

109. He stated that “the pandemic is a demand-side shock and not a supply-side shock affecting production” but that “in addition to previous ‘food crises’ it highlights a range of issues” including that “economically and medically vulnerable people have struggled to access food during the crises, which has led to an increase in the scale of food insecurity in the UK”; and that “super-efficient, highly centralised, food systems are fragile, because if they go ‘wrong’ they fail”.<sup>321</sup>

110. Henry Dimbleby, National Food Strategy, stated that:

The reason why the food supply chain responded so well to this crisis is that the restrictions on activity were Government-led. Government decided to close down parts of the economy and, therefore, Governments around the world were able to decide to keep food moving. We had enough food and it continued to get to where it wanted to be.<sup>322</sup>

However, he added:

A climate food crisis, where there is not enough food, is a very different kind of crisis. In that context, across a whole range of things, we need to be thinking about where we want to have surplus. [...] That is absolutely something that I will be looking at for the [National Food] strategy.<sup>323</sup>

111. Food supply in the UK relies on supply chains that cross borders: in 2018, 28 per cent of food consumed in the UK came from Europe.<sup>324</sup> Ian Wright, FDF, told us he had been “astonished” at the “resilience of the supply chain from out of the UK”, and pointed out that “we have seen very low levels of disruption to supply chains from Europe”.<sup>325</sup> Nick Allen, BMPA, also highlighted that we should “not underestimate the fact that we have kept the nation supplied and fed because we import a lot of food and those borders have not closed”.<sup>326</sup> He stated that “we are still very dependent on a lot of imported food, and we should not forget that in the various negotiations that are going forward”.<sup>327</sup> Andrew Opie, BRC, raised the end of the transition period in December 2020 and warned that:

If we get a disorderly Brexit, we potentially face a bigger challenge than the food supply chain faced in COVID. The reason I say that is that we had no problem getting food to this country at any time because the borders were flowing. In fact, Italy increased its pasta production during its worst time and sent more to us. If we see the borders disrupted in January from a disorderly Brexit, we have a big problem. Then we do not have the food in the country to move around, which is the bit we did really well in this crisis.<sup>328</sup>

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321 Chatham House ([COV0156](#)) para 6

322 [Q270](#)

323 [Q270](#)

324 GOV.UK, ‘[Food Statistics in your pocket: Global and UK supply](#)’, accessed 15 July 2020

325 [Q114](#)

326 [Q125](#)

327 [Q125](#)

328 [Q177](#)

112. He stated that “while we are incredibly resilient and we have a brilliant workforce in this country, we cannot do anything if we cannot get the food into the country”.<sup>329</sup> He pointed out that in January, around “90% of our lettuces, 80% of our tomatoes and 70% of our soft fruit” comes from across the Channel.<sup>330</sup> The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology stated that “the widely-used ‘Just-in-Time’ (JIT) supply approach used within the food industry brings benefits such as improved efficiency and freshness, but some are concerned that it may make the system more vulnerable to disruption”, meaning that “when shocks do occur, the system may only have a buffer of a few days’ or weeks’ worth of supply”.<sup>331</sup>

113. The Secretary of State told us that “our lesson from this [pandemic] is that our food supply chain is remarkably resilient”.<sup>332</sup> He stated that “generally speaking, we are more confident than ever that we need not worry too much about the end of the transition period”.<sup>333</sup>

## Conclusions

114. **The COVID-19 pandemic was unanticipated, and yet the Government had been preparing for an influenza pandemic for many years; this too could have resulted in lockdowns, self-isolation and closures of businesses, with knock-on effects on food. We consider that Defra mounted an excellent and commendable response to the food system disruptions caused by COVID-19, but we are surprised that the Government appeared to be so unprepared in the first place. It is particularly surprising because some other countries were ahead of the UK in terms of lockdowns and school and business closures, and therefore provided a clear indication that extraordinary measures were likely to be required.**

115. **The measures put in place by Government to control the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly had a significant and disruptive effect on food systems in the UK. The food supply chain was, with time, Government support and the efforts of key workers, able to keep providing food to those who could afford and were physically able to go to shops and supermarkets. In addition, significant efforts were made by Government to ensure that Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people who had to shield at home received food, albeit not always adequate in quantity or nutrition. Therefore, the food supply chain for retail consumers and CEV people was shown to be resilient. However, it remains to be seen how the food system will reorient to a new normal, a key test of resilience, particularly where foodservice and hospitality are concerned. The longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our food supply resilience remain to be seen.**

116. **It is clear that before the pandemic, many people were already unable to have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that met their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. This was evidenced by the already-increasing demand for food banks over the past decade. The pandemic**

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329 [Q177](#)

330 [Q177](#)

331 *A resilient UK food system*, POSTnote [POST-PN-0626](#), Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, June 2020, p 3

332 [Q268](#)

333 [Q268](#)

exacerbated these existing food insecurities and we have heard warnings that the situation is likely to worsen. Going to back to the pre-pandemic “normal” will not be good enough. *The National Food Strategy must address national and personal food security and the Government must show clearer leadership on tackling the causes of insecurity. The Government must respond to the National Food Strategy within six months of its publication, as it has promised, including clear proposals for tackling food insecurity. This response should also set out what the immediate priorities for a Minister for Food Security should be.*

117. The Government cannot afford to be complacent; even though the supply chain ultimately proved to be resilient, for several weeks shoppers were faced with empty shop shelves and (in effect) rationing of staple goods. This disruption largely came from changing patterns of demand caused by Government action, which is an unusual situation. Disruptions that reduce the supply of food to the UK, for example because of a disorderly end to the transition period or climate change effects, will pose different, and potentially greater, challenges altogether. There also remains the possibility that further waves of COVID-19, or another future pandemic, may still lead to the disruption of cross-border supply chains. We welcome the Secretary of State’s confidence about the end of the transition period, but seek reassurances that food supply disruptions have been factored into contingency planning across Government. *Defra must review the annual Sector Security and Resilience Plans for the food sector in light of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the extent to which consumer behaviour can disrupt supply chains. It should also be clearer about the difference between resilience and efficiency, and assess the extent to which our dependence on multi-national just-in-time supply chains affects resilience. Given the industry’s concerns about the potential impact of a disorderly end to the Brexit transition period, and other potential risk factors, this should happen as a matter of urgency.*

118. The food industry had, in 2018 and 2019, asked the Government to consider a relaxation of competition law in order to help the food industry to cope with the effects of a no-deal Brexit.<sup>334</sup> If the UK leaves the transition period provided for by the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU at the end of 2020 without a clear trading arrangement with the EU, the relaxation of competition law may again be called for. *The Government should explain whether another relaxation of competition law may be required in the event of a disruptive exit from the transition period, based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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334 [“UK food sector seeks rules waiver in event of no-deal Brexit”](#), Financial Times, 7 August 2019

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Shops and supermarkets

1. We consider that, once the crisis hit, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) worked well with industry to put in place measures to help retailers to deal with significantly increased consumer demand. (Paragraph 15)
2. However, it appears that the Government had not anticipated how much retail demand would increase and that it would have a disruptive effect on food supply to consumers via retailers. Given that empty shelves were already being reported in other countries that were ahead of the UK with regards to COVID-19 cases and responsive measures, this is surprising and disappointing. (Paragraph 16)
3. It is entirely reasonable and predictable that consumers would want to buy more food in anticipation of a lockdown, the need to self-isolate if they developed COVID-19 symptoms; or school closures and changed working patterns resulting in more meals eaten at home. The Government and retailers, including convenience stores, failed to develop an effective joint communications plan in anticipation of increased consumer demand. At a time when the public was looking to the Government for advice on how to live safely, we consider that the Government could have made more effort to provide reassurances. *In the event of further lockdowns or restrictions, the Government should ensure that more emphasis is placed on reassuring the public that there will be enough food and essential supplies for everyone.* (Paragraph 17)
4. We heard concerns about the relaxation of competition law on smaller retailers and their suppliers. Smaller retailers played a vital role in providing food to people during the pandemic, particularly where they were unable to get to supermarkets, and we suggest that in future, the Government must ensure that small retailers are well supplied and supported. While the relaxation has helped retailers manage a period of unprecedented demand, the longer the exclusion orders are in place, the greater the risk of detriment to consumers. *The Government should clarify the conditions to be met in order for the exclusion orders relating to the COVID-19 pandemic to expire. The Government and Competition and Markets Authority should review whether the relaxation of competition law has been detrimental to consumers and suppliers to large retailers during the pandemic.* (Paragraph 18)
5. The spike in demand for online grocery shopping and home delivery was an obvious consequence of measures designed to stop the spread of COVID-19. We commend the efforts of supermarkets and convenience stores in ramping up their capacity to offer online shopping throughout the pandemic. The Government's temporary relaxation of rules around drivers' hours also helped. (Paragraph 27)
6. There is no reason why the Government should have had any misconceptions about the capacity of online retailers to cater for the increased demand from consumers shopping from home. Online accounted for a small proportion of the market before the pandemic and retailers were advising Defra on their capacity to increase the service. In encouraging people to shop online without acknowledging the limited capacity of retailers to cater for that demand, the Government set the scene for public

frustration and for blame to be placed at the door of the retailers. We are concerned that there may have been a failure of communication between Government and the public, and across Government. *The Government should clarify how it intends to manage the mismatch between demand and capacity for online food shopping in the event of a second wave of COVID-19 infections. There should be better communication across Government and between Government and the public about online capacity.* (Paragraph 28)

7. The significantly increased demand for online shopping, combined with in-store measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and limit excessive buying, have had a negative impact on people who are not shielding but struggling to access food, despite being able to afford it. We accept that some mistakes and compromises were inevitable and that retailers, on the whole, responded well to the unprecedented situation, although they will need to adjust to different needs more quickly in future. *However, we urge Defra to consult with retailers and charities to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for this group of people as the pandemic continues. Ensuring that the necessary steps to contain future pandemics or other crises do not result in disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities or other vulnerabilities should be built into the Government and industry's emergency planning.* (Paragraph 35)

### Food insecurity

8. Use of food banks was increasing before the pandemic and has effectively doubled during the pandemic. It is likely that the situation will get worse before it gets better. Food bank use is normally a symptom of, amongst other things, a lack of sufficient income and social support, rather than a food supply issue and we note the June 2020 report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which addresses these matters and calls for flexibility in Universal Credit advance payments. (Paragraph 47)
9. During the early stages of the pandemic, however, supply to food banks and food aid organisations was disrupted. At the same time, a significant amount of food is still being wasted in the supply chain. Food waste must always be reduced, but, at a time of such critical need, it is particularly abhorrent. We commend Defra for providing £16 million of funding for the redistribution of food to vulnerable people. *However, we recommend that Defra continues to provide the £5 million annual funding for FareShare to redistribute surplus food from the farmgate and across the supply chain to frontline food aid providers, for a further two years. As well as helping those who struggle to afford food as the effects of the pandemic continue, it would also reduce food waste at the farmgate. Over the next two years, Defra should evaluate whether the scheme has been successful and whether it should continue or be expanded as part of its efforts to reduce food waste. The Government should evaluate the impact of the £63 million provided to local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and consider whether further support is necessary.* (Paragraph 48)
10. With the need to quickly provide children with a substitute for free school meals after schools closed, the Department for Education (DfE) designed a national voucher system. The speed with which it was set up was commendable and some teething problems were inevitable. However, the system has been beset by significant problems, ultimately leading to about a third of children experiencing greater food

insecurity in the first month. A particular problem was the Government's immediate reliance on the larger retailers to participate in the scheme, with discounters and convenience stores excluded for technical reasons, even when they were able to offer workable voucher schemes which would have helped more children. There was a need for closer collaboration on the part of both Government and retailers. The Government did not sufficiently consider the realities of where families dependent on free school meals were most likely to shop for food. We note that vouchers can be used during school holidays. Children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to experiencing insufficient nutritious food during the school holidays, so it is important such schemes have universal reach. Penalising some schools that use voucher systems outside the problematic national scheme ignores the fact that the ultimate priority, as recognised by those schools, should be keeping children fed. Although more retailers were added to the scheme, we consider that this took too long. We are disappointed at the apparent lack of willingness to quickly adapt the scheme in response to the issues that emerged. (Paragraph 57)

11. *The Government should now be more flexible and recognise the importance and success of most community-led responses to the provision of free school meal substitutes. Schools should be allowed to provide vouchers for whichever retailers serve their community best, without financial penalty. In addition, schools should be encouraged to continue catering directly for their pupils without being put in a financially worse situation than those using the national voucher scheme.* (Paragraph 58)
12. The distribution of food parcels to people who were Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and without other means of support was a valuable way of ensuring that those people had access to basic foodstuffs. We accept that many of the complaints about the contents of parcels were likely to relate to the early food parcels made from the emergency bulk food offer from Government to local authorities. Once the centralised system was in place, it appeared to operate very well. *However, if the Government repeats such an endeavour in future, such as during a second wave of COVID-19, it should make greater efforts to ensure that nutrition and dietary needs are given higher priority from the start.* (Paragraph 64)
13. One of the key questions for our inquiry was what the COVID-19 pandemic had shown about our food system, not just in terms of food supply, but also demand. There are clearly millions of people whose ability to afford sufficient, nutritious food has been severely disrupted or worsened. Lessons must be learnt from the experience in all four nations on how best to avoid and respond to food insecurity. We are very concerned that this situation will be exacerbated as the economic impacts of the pandemic continue to unfold. We are aware that a combination of ending furlough and a potential second wave of coronavirus may conspire to make the level and severity of food insecurity significantly higher. Therefore, the Government urgently needs a sustainable plan to mitigate the possible growth of food insecurity through a combination of financial and food supply strategies. Following the publication of the National Food Strategy, we recommend that the Government consults on whether a "Right to Food" should be given a legislative footing to ensure the Government has a reference point for action to tackle and measure food insecurity, with the flexibility to meet that commitment using different measures. *Following the publication of the National Food Strategy, we recommend that the Government consults on whether a*

*“Right to Food” should be given a legislative footing to ensure the Government has a reference point for action to tackle and measure food insecurity, with the flexibility to meet that commitment using different measures. This should happen as a matter of great urgency, in anticipation of increasing challenges to the food security of the nation post-COVID-19. (Paragraph 72)*

14. *The Government should amend the Agriculture Bill so that food security assessments should take place yearly, rather than every five years. (Paragraph 73)*
15. Responsibility for food falls across several Government departments, but there is a risk that food insecurity falls between the cracks with no clear lead. The establishment of a cross-Government taskforce looking at food insecurity during the pandemic indicated that Defra recognised the value of coordination across Government. However, the national voucher scheme for free school meals would certainly have benefitted from a faster and more joined-up approach between the DfE and Defra. We consider that Defra has made a good effort to tackle the issue, but it alone cannot tackle the causes of and solutions for food insecurity. *The Government should measure and report levels of food insecurity across the country. We recommend that the Government appoints a Minister for Food Security, empowered to collect robust data on food insecurity and draw together policy across departments on food supply, nutrition and welfare in order to deliver sustainable change. (Paragraph 74)*

### Foodservice sector

16. The closure of foodservice and hospitality businesses was a huge shock for their food and drink suppliers, particularly those providing perishable goods who were unable to find alternative markets quickly. The Government could have done more to anticipate problems that would arise, particularly as it was necessary Government health measures, rather than market forces, that caused severe economic disruption. This was particularly demonstrated by the crisis in the dairy sector, which we are examining in a separate call for evidence. (Paragraph 90)
17. We cautiously welcome the decision to allow foodservice and hospitality businesses to reopen with reduced social distancing, as this will increase the likelihood that they and their food suppliers will survive the economic impact of the pandemic. The Government must ensure that foodservice and hospitality businesses that were thriving before the pandemic remain economically viable. We welcome that extra support for the sector was announced in the Plan for Jobs 2020. In addition, every effort must also be made to minimise the risk of infection and protect customers and staff. (Paragraph 91)
18. *The hospitality and foodservice sectors may take over a year to recover from forced closure and further financial difficulties are likely. The Government should work with producers, processors and wholesalers to understand their concerns and monitor the health of food and drink suppliers, particularly SMEs, over the next 18 months as supply chains restart. In its response to this Report, the Government should include a plan for how it intends to support food and drink suppliers to the hospitality and foodservice sector during this turbulent time. (Paragraph 92)*

### Key workers in the food sector

19. We would like to put on record our unreserved thanks to all the key workers in the food supply chain whose efforts and sacrifices have meant that the nation is being fed during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Paragraph 94)
20. Guidance on measures that businesses should take to protect workers, such as guidance on how to introduce social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment, was not issued quickly enough. We commend the processors, manufacturers, retailers and trade unions that developed and implemented COVID-secure working practices before the Government had issued satisfactory guidance. It is disappointing that guidance on social distancing in the workplace was only published in April. We recognise the pressure the Government, and in particular Public Health England, was under at the time. However, yet again, it appears that the Government was somewhat slow to react and support food businesses in dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 prevention measures. *The Government should ensure that improved co-ordination mechanisms are in place between government departments, public bodies and with the devolved administrations to ensure that in any future disruption, guidance can be developed, cleared and issued more rapidly. This may mean better resourcing of critical specialist functions, so they have the capacity to meet unexpected surges in demand.* (Paragraph 100)
21. While there have been some outbreaks in meat and poultry processing plants in England and Wales, these have been in the minority, which is a testament to the efforts of the industry to keep workers safe. *Further investigations should be carried out by the Government and industry on the reasons for these outbreaks.* We are concerned that factors such as a lack of statutory sick pay may discourage workers from self-isolating if they develop symptoms. *The Government should gather data from industry and unions on how many workers could be disincentivised to self-isolate by their employment terms. The Government and industry should also evaluate whether migrant workers face other issues that increase the risk of outbreaks, for example language barriers and living and travel arrangements.* (Paragraph 105)

### Food resilience and security

22. The COVID-19 pandemic was unanticipated, and yet the Government had been preparing for an influenza pandemic for many years; this too could have resulted in lockdowns, self-isolation and closures of businesses, with knock-on effects on food. We consider that Defra mounted an excellent and commendable response to the food system disruptions caused by COVID-19, but we are surprised that the Government appeared to be so unprepared in the first place. It is particularly surprising because some other countries were ahead of the UK in terms of lockdowns and school and business closures, and therefore provided a clear indication that extraordinary measures were likely to be required. (Paragraph 114)
23. The measures put in place by Government to control the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly had a significant and disruptive effect on food systems in the UK. The food supply chain was, with time, Government support and the efforts of key workers, able to keep providing food to those who could afford and were physically able to go to shops and supermarkets. In addition, significant efforts were made by

Government to ensure that Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people who had to shield at home received food, albeit not always adequate in quantity or nutrition. Therefore, the food supply chain for retail consumers and CEV people was shown to be resilient. However, it remains to be seen how the food system will reorient to a new normal, a key test of resilience, particularly where foodservice and hospitality are concerned. The longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our food supply resilience remain to be seen. (Paragraph 115)

24. It is clear that before the pandemic, many people were already unable to have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that met their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. This was evidenced by the already-increasing demand for food banks over the past decade. The pandemic exacerbated these existing food insecurities and we have heard warnings that the situation is likely to worsen. Going to back to the pre-pandemic “normal” will not be good enough. *The National Food Strategy must address national and personal food security and the Government must show clearer leadership on tackling the causes of insecurity. The Government must respond to the National Food Strategy within six months of its publication, as it has promised, including clear proposals for tackling food insecurity. This response should also set out what the immediate priorities for a Minister for Food Security should be.* (Paragraph 116)
25. The Government cannot afford to be complacent; even though the supply chain ultimately proved to be resilient, for several weeks shoppers were faced with empty shop shelves and (in effect) rationing of staple goods. This disruption largely came from changing patterns of demand caused by Government action, which is an unusual situation. Disruptions that reduce the supply of food to the UK, for example because of a disorderly end to the transition period or climate change effects, will pose different, and potentially greater, challenges altogether. There also remains the possibility that further waves of COVID-19, or another future pandemic, may still lead to the disruption of cross-border supply chains. We welcome the Secretary of State’s confidence about the end of the transition period, but seek reassurances that food supply disruptions have been factored into contingency planning across Government. *Defra must review the annual Sector Security and Resilience Plans for the food sector in light of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the extent to which consumer behaviour can disrupt supply chains. It should also be clearer about the difference between resilience and efficiency, and assess the extent to which our dependence on multi-national just-in-time supply chains affects resilience. Given the industry’s concerns about the potential impact of a disorderly end to the Brexit transition period, and other potential risk factors, this should happen as a matter of urgency.*
26. If the UK leaves the transition period provided for by the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU at the end of 2020 without a clear trading arrangement with the EU, the relaxation of competition law may again be called for. *The Government should explain whether another relaxation of competition law may be required in the event of a disruptive exit from the transition period, based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.* (Paragraph 118)

# Annex A

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## Public survey on access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic

To help inform us of the impact of the pandemic and the measures taken to contain it on how people could access food, we launched an online survey which ran from 9 April to 23 April 2020.

We received over 5,500 responses to the survey, although those who responded to the survey were self-selecting. It would therefore not be appropriate to use our data to make assumptions or generalisations about the experiences of the wider population.

Respondents were given the opportunity to enter free text for some of the questions - a small selection have been published below to illustrate the range of views and experiences of respondents.

We are very grateful to everyone who took the time to complete the survey.

### *Summary of key points*

- There was some appreciation that the food supply chain was adapting to the crisis.
- Most people had found it difficult to get the food they need, especially dry and tinned food.
- Three in ten people said they had bought more food than usual since February.
- More than half of people had ordered food to be delivered, but 83% had found it difficult to get what they needed.
- 70% of vulnerable people rated the efforts made by supermarkets and online grocery services as somewhat or very unhelpful.
- Many people felt the definitions of “vulnerable” customers were not inclusive enough.
- Most people shielding found food parcels did not meet their needs.
- 6 per cent of survey respondents had used a food bank or signed up for Universal Credit recently.

### *Food supply chain adaptation*

There was some appreciation amongst survey respondents that the food supply chain was adapting to the crisis:

- “Well done to the entire food industry for keeping us fed in trying conditions.”
- “I think the supermarkets have done a good job responding to an unprecedented and difficult situation.”

- “Staff in the shops have been superb.”
- “With the exception of the peak-panic in mid-March, I’ve broadly been able to buy what I needed on my weekly visits to the supermarket.”
- “Small producers and farm shops have turned out to be a godsend!”
- “The local Co-op has been within walking distance for my husband to access milk and bread, fresh veg. It has been a lifeline. A true corner shop.”

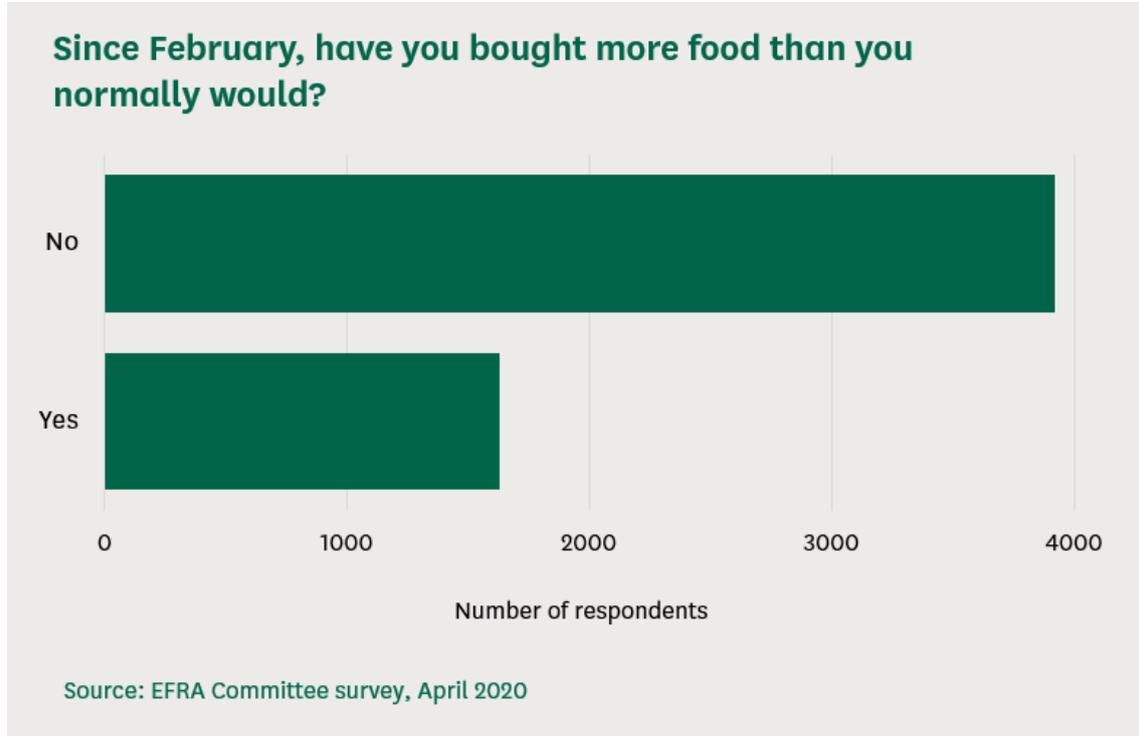
### *Difficulties finding food in shops*

Most people found it difficult to get the food they need, especially dry and tinned food:



- “It’s very difficult to buy essentials such as dispensable soap, toilet rolls, flour, cleaning products, certain tinned food, and even pasta.”
- “I don’t think there was any helpful guidance in respect of the likely effect of the lockdown on food supplies. There was a sudden flurry of news reports about people buying loo roll and pasta like it was going out of fashion, which scared us.”
- “I refused to panic buy but then was shocked when I couldn’t get loo roll, hand soap, flour, pasta, tinned tomatoes, it was stressful. You have to shop differently. Previously I’d plan a menu, then shop. Recently it’s more go shopping now do the planning based on what I could buy.”
- “Disgusted by the panic buying at the beginning e.g. toilet rolls, pasta, tinned tomatoes, fresh meat and chicken.”

Three in ten people said they had bought more food than usual since February. Some people reacted to seeing empty shelves by buying more themselves. Increased buying was seen by some as meaning fewer trips out, so reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19, while another factor was that almost all meals were consumed at home:



- “Whilst you try to shop responsibly, when you see items flying off the shelf, you can’t help buy additional items yourself before it runs out.”
- “I initially panic bought during the week where the government began recommending we stay at home. As time progressed I found myself over-buying items that can be difficult to find at times, such as pasta or meats.”
- “I have bought slightly more than usual - not hoarding - but rather just ensuring we can go a bit longer between shops when I can’t get a delivery slot or someone to shop for me.”
- “I have had worries about running out of particular foods so have tended to buy items when I see them, rather than waiting until I have run out as I normally would.”
- “I am terrified of going to the shop so buy more to stop going to shop too often, but then it goes off.”
- “Eating at home more as working at home, and prioritising good quality food and drink in the absence of being able to go out to eat.”
- “My children, my partner and I are now at home for all meals. Usually, we would be at school or work for breakfast and lunch Monday-Friday.”

### Online shopping

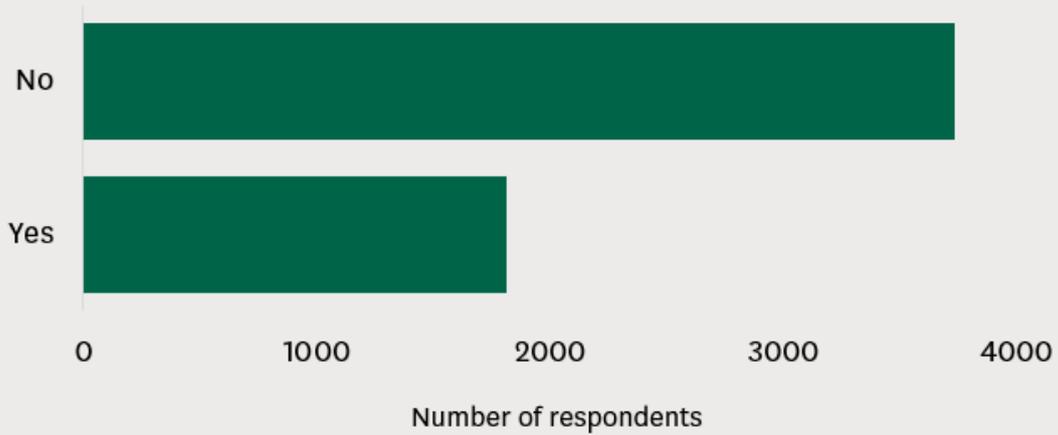
More than half of people had ordered food to be delivered, but 83% had found it difficult to get what they needed. Many people reported it was difficult to obtain an online delivery slot or use click or collect, despite having done so in the past. For those who did get a slot, deliveries were often missing some of the items they had ordered. Other issues with online delivery, such as minimum order amounts and limited ranges, also caused issues for some people.

- “It very much feels as though remote communities have been forgotten during the pandemic. We live in a small rural community where only one supermarket delivers to the area, and only to a central location not to people’s homes. [...] Since ‘lockdown’ the delivery slots have been reduced, meaning it has been almost impossible to book a slot.”
- “I have been using online deliveries with Sainsburys for the past 20 years so it’s my normal shopping mode. Now when I need it more than ever, I can’t get it. I’ve had the odd slot from Sainsbury but am also trying Asda, Tesco etc - getting up at 2am to try to get slots.”
- “I am asthmatic so not going out to supermarkets although I am not in the shielding category. It has been hard to shop online - some supermarkets taking no new customers, delivery slots several weeks away and queues to actually get on the websites.”
- “Online shopping is like a lucky dip. You may or may not get what is ordered. Often says in stock and when you put it in the basket it says out of stock making online shopping very difficult to get exactly what you need.”
- “Online shopping variety is limited to higher priced items. This is particularly difficult when on low income and shopping is normally done on a tight budget. Because there is a minimum basket value it is impossible to shop economically across several shops.”
- “As a shielding person, supermarkets have been very helpful in setting up priority slots - but they are still very difficult to get. Another issue is that when we place orders online with the supermarkets ... when we actually get the order delivered, items are often missing/removed.”

### Support for vulnerable customers

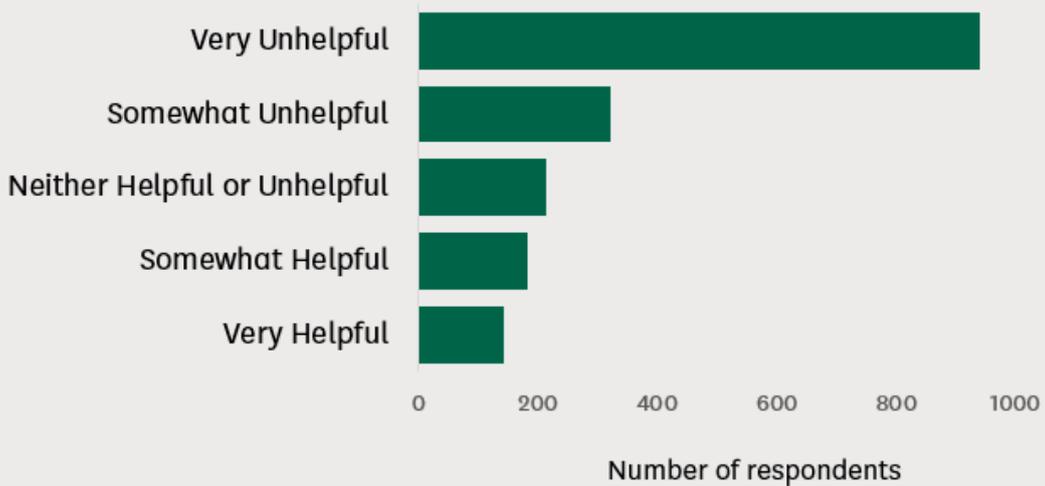
70% of self-identified vulnerable people rated the efforts made by supermarkets and online grocery services as somewhat or very unhelpful. While supermarkets made efforts to identify customers who might need online deliveries, some people found it difficult to contact them to register or to find available booking slots, despite having regularly used them in the past, including those who were disabled. Some blind people found that having to visit a supermarket was difficult because they were unable to socially distance and felt unsupported by staff, while those with anxiety found it a very stressful experience.

### Have you tried to register with a supermarket and/or online grocery service as a vulnerable customer?



Source: EFRA Committee survey, April 2020

### How helpful were the steps taken by supermarkets or delivery services to cater to customers registered as vulnerable?



Source: EFRA Committee Survey, April 2020

- “As someone who is totally blind [...] shopping at a supermarket in person has been off the agenda for me since the middle of March [...] Thankfully I have been able to register as a vulnerable customer with my online food delivery service which has made things somewhat easier.”
- “Supermarkets who say they want to help the vulnerable (in my case an 87-year-old mum) yet you can’t get through to anyone to sort out delivery or even click and collect. They don’t reply to emails, just automated replies. It is difficult to get that priority.”
- “Despite having received a Government text to say I have been placed on the ‘extremely vulnerable’ list passed to the supermarkets, Sainsbury’s have not allowed me access to their online delivery slots.”
- “I am completely blind and [...] have always shopped online [...] I could not go out alone in the current circumstances because I cannot social distance. I would need assistance in the supermarket which staff do not give me.”
- “I have been stopped from entering shops with my guide dog, and my guide dog has also been assaulted while trying to shop along with people stealing items from my shopping basket.”
- “Experiencing high anxiety levels when going to supermarket. There is no way to stay 2m from other people, as not everyone following the rules. Trying to go as little as possible.”

Many people felt the definitions of “vulnerable” customers were not inclusive enough:

- “There is very, very little support or consideration for mental health sufferers - including autism and other spectrum disorders. The ‘very vulnerable’ list is almost exclusively physical health, and provides no consideration for those for whom restrictions on routine have a severe impact.”
- “I am chronically ill, and predominantly housebound [...] but am not on the government’s ‘extremely vulnerable list’. I normally rely on supermarket home delivery but have not been able to get delivery slots with the supermarket I normally order from and have been unable to register an account with any other supermarket.”
- “I am nearly 92 living in North Wales and finding it hard to book my weekly Tesco shop as all slots gone, I am classed as vulnerable but not shielding, surely online slots should be reserved for people like me with no family?”
- “Very difficult to get online deliveries if ‘vulnerable’ but not ‘extremely vulnerable’. Only possible by trying at midnight when slots released.”

### *Food parcels for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people*

Most people who were shielding found that food parcels did not meet their needs. Some people criticised the fact that insufficient food was provided in the food parcels or they did not meet dietary requirements, while the quality and freshness of the food provided was also criticised.

### Very small proportion of respondents who are 'shielding' signed up for receiving food parcels



of people who are 'shielding' signed up to receive food parcels from their local council

Almost 2/3 of those people who signed up for food parcels have received them



Only 44% of those people who received their food parcels agreed that the food in the parcel met their needs

- “Not enough food for a family of 4, not fresh, no meat, nothing to make a meal with. Fine as an emergency for 1 day. But not a week’s shopping.”
- “The food parcel is insufficient for two of us, it does not accommodate my dietary needs and is not nutritionally balanced.”
- “There was no way the box would support an adult for an entire week. I assume it’s thought most people getting them would be elderly and inactive but that’s not the case.”
- “My son received a diabolical government food box that contained a bag [of] rotting, mushy potatoes, 3 tins of identical spicy soup, minimal hotel issue toiletries, 2 loo rolls cut from a four pack - and were then not covered over.”
- “It is not suitable for someone with coeliac disease. I have twice tried to cancel it. I am now having to pass on the rest of it to a food bank.”

### Food banks

Six per cent of people who responded said they had used a food bank or signed up for Universal Credit recently.

- “The normal cheaper items I buy are unavailable. Therefore, I have to go without because I only have £90 per week to pay all bills and buy food. I found that difficult before the Covid crisis. Now I am finding it impossible.”
- “My reduced pay from my work means I have less money to spend on food. Rent is still being asked of me so that contributes into having less money too.”

- “Called food bank: told I needed voucher given numbers to get voucher but nobody answered. I didn’t eat for 3 days as I had no money after my rent was paid out of Universal Credit. Universal Credit is not enough to live on. Doesn’t even cover my rent, bills or food.”
- “The food bank have been superb. We live in an affluent area, so those who have been able to go shopping have been donating more than usual [...] We are mostly able to get what we need from food bank but meals are having to be much more carefully planned than usual.”
- “Universal Credit food bank referrals, [through] being contacted by Local Councils with local welfare services, has taken a minimum of 5–6 weeks to implement.”

## Formal minutes

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The following declarations of interest relating to the inquiry were made:

Friday 15 May 2020

Ian Byrne declared a non-pecuniary interest as a co-founder of Fans Supporting Foodbanks.

Tuesday 21 July 2020

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Neil Parish, in the Chair

Ian Byrne	Robbie Moore
Geraint Davies	Mrs Sheryll Murray
Dave Doogan	Julian Sturdy
Barry Gardiner	Derek Thomas
Dr Neil Hudson	

Draft Report (*COVID-19 and food supply*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 118 read and agreed to.

Annex and summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 1 September at 2.00 p.m.]

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Tuesday 05 May 2020

**Minette Batters**, President, National Farmers' Union; **Tom Hind**, Chief Strategy Officer, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board; **Jack Ward**, Chief Executive Officer, British Growers Association [Q1–49](#)

### Friday 15 May 2020

**Emma Revie**, Chief Executive, Trussell Trust; **Lindsay Boswell**, Chief Executive Officer, FareShare [Q50–72](#)

**Caroline Abrahams**, Charity Director, Age UK; **Fazilet Hadi**, Policy Manager, Disability Rights UK [Q73–94](#)

### Tuesday 19 May 2020

**Ian Wright CBE**, Chief Executive Officer, Food and Drink Federation (FDF); **Nick Allen**, Chief Executive, British Meat Processors Association; **James Bielby**, Chief Executive, Federation of Wholesale Distributors [Q95–126](#)

### Friday 05 June 2020

**Andrew Opie**, Director of Food and Sustainability, British Retail Consortium; **James Lowman**, Chief Executive, Association of Convenience Stores [Q127–179](#)

### Tuesday 23 June 2020

**Kate Nicholls**, Chief Executive, UK Hospitality; **Andrew Kenny**, UK Managing Director, Just Eat [Q180–199](#)

**Professor Tim Lang**, Professor of Food Policy, City, University of London; **Anna Taylor**, Executive Director, The Food Foundation [Q200–216](#)

### Tuesday 30 June 2020

**The Rt Hon George Eustice**, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; **David Kennedy**, Director General, Food, Farming and Biosecurity, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; **Henry Dumbleby**, Lead non-executive board member, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Q217–280](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

COV numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Action for M.E. ([COV0024](#))
- 2 Age UK ([COV0034](#))
- 3 Age Verification Providers Association ([COV0020](#))
- 4 Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board ([COV0144](#))
- 5 AIC (Agricultural Industries Confederation) ([COV0097](#))
- 6 Anonymous ([COV0017](#))
- 7 Arla Foods UK ([COV0112](#))
- 8 Armstrong, Dr Beth, Reynolds, Dr Christian ([COV0128](#))
- 9 The Asplins Producer Organisation Limited ([COV0026](#))
- 10 Association of Convenience Stores ([COV0137](#))
- 11 Association of Independent Meat Suppliers ([COV0118](#))
- 12 Association of Labour Providers ([COV0093](#))
- 13 Barling, Professor David, Parsons, Dr Kelly ([COV0125](#))
- 14 Batstone ([COV0018](#))
- 15 Birmingham Food Council CIC ([COV0151](#))
- 16 Birmingham Food Council CIC ([COV0108](#))
- 17 Bite Back 2030 ([COV0069](#))
- 18 Boden, Mr Richard ([COV0016](#))
- 19 Bradshaw, Dr Carrie, Cardwell, Professor Michael ([COV0133](#))
- 20 Brakes UK ([COV0076](#))
- 21 The Bread and Butter Thing ([COV0077](#))
- 22 Brighton & Hove Food Partnership ([COV0116](#))
- 23 British Beer and Pub Association ([COV0157](#))
- 24 British Dietetic Association ([COV0096](#))
- 25 British Egg Industry Council ([COV0083](#))
- 26 British Meat Processors Association ([COV0042](#))
- 27 British Poultry Council ([COV0057](#))
- 28 British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), and Feed UK ([COV0082](#))
- 29 The British Retail Consortium ([COV0154](#))
- 30 British Retail Consortium ([COV0006](#))
- 31 British Veterinary Association ([COV0098](#))
- 32 Campbell, Lesley ([COV0058](#))
- 33 Carers Trust ([COV0146](#))

- 34 Centre for Food Policy ([COV0127](#))
- 35 The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health ([COV0136](#))
- 36 Chatham House ([COV0156](#))
- 37 Children's Food Campaign, School Food Matters, and Sustain ([COV0055](#))
- 38 City of London Corporation ([COV0041](#))
- 39 Coeliac UK ([COV0085](#))
- 40 Competition and Markets Authority ([COV0138](#))
- 41 Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health ([COV0147](#))
- 42 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership ([COV0073](#))
- 43 Country Land and Business Association ([COV0011](#))
- 44 The Country Trust ([COV0027](#))
- 45 Crisp, Mrs Marianne ([COV0007](#))
- 46 Crop Protection Association UK Ltd ([COV0036](#))
- 47 The Cystic Fibrosis Trust ([COV0053](#))
- 48 Deliveroo ([COV0086](#))
- 49 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0163](#))
- 50 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0160](#))
- 51 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0142](#))
- 52 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([COV0002](#))
- 53 Diabetes UK ([COV0122](#))
- 54 Disability Rights UK ([COV0056](#))
- 55 Disabled People Against Cuts ([COV0031](#))
- 56 Dorrat, Karen ([COV0141](#))
- 57 Edenred UK ([COV0161](#))
- 58 The Fairtrade Foundation ([COV0040](#))
- 59 FareShare ([COV0065](#))
- 60 Farmers' Union of Wales ([COV0117](#))
- 61 Federation of Wholesale Distributors ([COV0072](#))
- 62 Feeding Britain ([COV0158](#))
- 63 Feeding Britain ([COV0148](#))
- 64 First Steps Nutrition Trust ([COV0080](#))
- 65 Food and Drink Federation (FDF) ([COV0068](#))
- 66 Food and Drink Federation (FDF) ([COV0001](#))
- 67 Food Foundation ([COV0114](#))
- 68 Food Standards Agency ([COV0140](#))
- 69 The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission ([COV0019](#))
- 70 The Foodhall Project ([COV0048](#))
- 71 Fresh Produce Consortium ([COV0030](#))

- 72 Fry Law ([COV0113](#))
- 73 Gastronomy ([COV0033](#))
- 74 Getlink ([COV0062](#))
- 75 Global Feedback Ltd. ('Feedback') ([COV0014](#))
- 76 Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership ([COV0090](#))
- 77 Greenpeace UK ([COV0088](#))
- 78 Groceries Code Adjudicator (Christine Tacon, Groceries Code Adjudicator) ([COV0012](#))
- 79 Guide Dogs for the Blind ([COV0054](#))
- 80 Guy's and St Thomas' Charity ([COV0061](#))
- 81 Hawkchurch Community Shop ([COV0009](#))
- 82 Helen Bamber Foundation ([COV0021](#))
- 83 Hive Hope ([COV0107](#))
- 84 HOPS Labour Solutions ([COV0025](#))
- 85 Hubbub ([COV0022](#))
- 86 IKnowFood ([COV0129](#))
- 87 IKnowFood ([COV0075](#))
- 88 Independent Age ([COV0038](#))
- 89 Independent Food Aid Network ([COV0120](#))
- 90 Infant Feeding Alliance ([COV0109](#))
- 91 Institute of Food Science and Technology ([COV0110](#))
- 92 IVC Evidensia ([COV0130](#))
- 93 Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([COV0102](#))
- 94 Just Eat ([COV0124](#))
- 95 Landworkers Alliance ([COV0081](#))
- 96 Lang, Prof Tim, Marsden, Prof Terry, Millstone, Erik ([COV0023](#))
- 97 Leeds Emergency Response, and Leeds Food Aid Network ([COV0162](#))
- 98 Lidl ([COV0159](#))
- 99 LKL Services ([COV0015](#))
- 100 Local Government Association ([COV0091](#))
- 101 Jayawickrama, Dr Uchitha, Gallage, Dr. Samanthika ([COV0126](#))
- 102 Macmillan Cancer Support ([COV0070](#))
- 103 Magic Breakfast ([COV0094](#))
- 104 Manning, Professor Louise ([COV0029](#))
- 105 Marine Conservation Society ([COV0059](#))
- 106 McCourt, Mrs Lone ([COV0008](#))
- 107 Mind ([COV0074](#))
- 108 Money Mail ([COV0131](#))
- 109 Motor Neurone Disease Association ([COV0134](#))

- 110 MS Society ([COV0078](#))
- 111 National Autistic Society ([COV0063](#))
- 112 National Farmers Union ([COV0066](#))
- 113 The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations ([COV0150](#))
- 114 National Pig Association ([COV0043](#))
- 115 Newcastle City Council ([COV0052](#))
- 116 NFU Scotland ([COV0028](#))
- 117 Nundy, S ([COV0064](#))
- 118 Obesity Health Alliance ([COV0092](#))
- 119 Ocado ([COV0084](#))
- 120 Oliver-Bellasis, Mr HR ([COV0139](#))
- 121 Parkinson's UK ([COV0044](#))
- 122 Payhembury Provisions Community Shop ([COV0013](#))
- 123 Pearson, Professor Simon, Ross, Dr David ([COV0149](#))
- 124 Pepsico UK & ROI ([COV0071](#))
- 125 Plunkett Foundation ([COV0047](#))
- 126 Potato Processors' Association ([COV0145](#))
- 127 Provision Trade Federation ([COV0060](#))
- 128 Roodhouse, Dr Mark ([COV0079](#))
- 129 Royal National Institute of Blind People ([COV0123](#))
- 130 Royal Society for Public Health ([COV0046](#))
- 131 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds ([COV0105](#))
- 132 Sanderson, Mr Peter ([COV0049](#))
- 133 The School & Nursery Milk Alliance ([COV0095](#))
- 134 Scope ([COV0037](#))
- 135 Scottish Land & Estates ([COV0121](#))
- 136 Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation ([COV0087](#))
- 137 Shared Assets CIC ([COV0010](#))
- 138 The Soil Association ([COV0032](#))
- 139 SSTFC Food Network+ 2.0 ([COV0152](#))
- 140 Storehouse Foodbank ([COV0143](#))
- 141 Sustain Alliance ([COV0115](#))
- 142 Sustainable Fish Cities ([COV0100](#))
- 143 Sustainable Food Places ([COV0051](#))
- 144 Tenant Farmers Association ([COV0132](#))
- 145 Thornton, Mrs Catherine ([COV0035](#))
- 146 The Trussell Trust ([COV0153](#))
- 147 The Trussell Trust ([COV0003](#))

- 148 UK Fisheries Ltd ([COV0050](#))
- 149 UKHospitality ([COV0103](#))
- 150 UKHospitality ([COV0004](#))
- 151 Ulster Farmers Union ([COV0089](#))
- 152 Which? ([COV0135](#))
- 153 Wildlife and Countryside Link, and Greener UK ([COV0101](#))
- 154 WinVisible (women with visible & invisible disabilities) ([COV0106](#))
- 155 WRAP ([COV0104](#))
- 156 Young Women's Trust ([COV0067](#))
- 157 Zakharov, Ms Vera ([COV0119](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2019–21

First Special Report	Plastic food and drink packaging: Government Response to the Committee's Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 207
Second Special Report	Beyond the Common Fisheries Policy: Scrutiny of the Fisheries Bill: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19	HC 208
Third Special Report	An Update on Rural Connectivity: Government Response to the Committee's Seventeenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 228
Fourth Special Report	Coastal flooding and erosion, and adaptation to climate change: Interim Report: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 272
Fifth Special Report	Scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2017–19	HC 273