

A snapshot of Covid-19, food insecurity and community food initiatives

What happened and what can we learn?



About this snapshot

In March 2020, the community and voluntary, private and public sectors responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Community food initiatives either closed because of lockdown restrictions or rapidly changed their services to meet a rise in the need for food delivery or food aid services.

This snapshot attempts to summarise what happened, and focuses particularly on the responses of community food initiatives and others that may influence their work.

We also try to look forward – and consider how what we have learnt could be useful in the future.

Contents

Key messages.....	3
Where does our information come from?	3
Background – What do community food initiatives do?.....	4
What happened after lockdown?.....	5
Food insecurity research during Covid-19	8
Changes in shopping and eating habits.....	10
What can we learn? Challenges and solutions.....	11
And the future?	15

Key messages

What do community food initiatives (CFIs) do? Food is a popular medium for work with communities and takes multiple forms, but fundamentally CFIs across Scotland aim to ensure that people have access to affordable, acceptable and adequate food.

How did CFIs respond to Covid-19 and the lockdown? Many CFIs either closed or reconfigured their services. Many extended or began to deliver food aid services in their communities.

How did the public and private sector respond? The Scottish government provided funding for local authorities and communities to alleviate the impact of Covid-19. Local authorities worked with a range of partners including CFIs to co-ordinate services locally. Private sector food companies provided donations for CFIs and some worked with volunteers to provide grocery or meal deliveries.

Experience of food insecurity increased across the UK particularly for families with children, people with disabilities or long-term conditions, BAME populations, and those self-isolating or shielding. The Food Foundation uses UK-wide data to estimate that food insecurity was two and half times higher than before the pandemic.

Changes to shopping and eating habits. Published surveys and research showed that many people cooked from scratch more often and ate more fruit and veg. However, people also ate more cakes, biscuits and sweets. A smaller number of people started using local food suppliers and tried growing food.

What were the challenges and what can we learn?

Better co-ordination on many levels, both in the short and long term could help address food insecurity and reach those most in need. Better coordination could also apply to improving food systems.

Improving people's income is key to addressing **food insecurity**, however **more dignified and sustainable choices** can be available immediately or in the shorter term.

Where does our information come from?

We wanted to find out how communities were responding to Covid-19 and we needed to let our colleagues know about community food work via internal bulletins. Over 14 weeks, we produced 10 bulletins or 'snapshots'.

This snapshot summarises these and includes information from other published materials such as the Food Foundation and the Poverty and Equalities Commission reports.

In those first few weeks of the lockdown, we didn't want to add to the burden of organisations busy reconfiguring their work by contacting them. However, many organisations were busy posting on social media. Over 14 weeks, we collected around 650 pieces of information from a range of sources - mainly social media and website posts. We also spoke to people, read newsletters, emails and unpublished papers. Much of our data comes from social media or websites so we cannot guarantee the accuracy of this or claim that it represents the experience of CFIs across Scotland. However, most of the content from later published surveys and reports complemented the information we had picked up from social media.

Thank you to all the groups and agencies that have shared information, achievements, aspirations and frustrations, directly and indirectly, formally and informally.

Background – What do community food initiatives do?

Community food initiatives (CFIs) have a variety of aims and may work within a geographical community or a community of interest. Public Health Scotland's (or as previously part of NHS Health Scotland) community food work has focused on supporting CFIs that aim to address or mitigate health inequalities. Or, to use terms that have been embedded in food policies and discussion for many years – we have supported organisations that aim to tackle access, affordability, acceptability, availability and/or the adequacy of good food within their communities.

CFIs come in a range of shapes and sizes, but fall roughly fall into two main groups:

- those that run food activities as part of their wider work (e.g. youth clubs, Development Trusts), and;
- those whose core work is about food, e.g. lunch clubs, community cafes, community allotments, community shops, food or meal delivery, food-based-social enterprises.

A third type of food organisation are 'anchor' organisations that support community food activities locally by supplying food, outreach activities or providing facilities for other organisations and agencies (e.g. cooking classes, training, training kitchens). However, there are few of these 'anchor' food organisations across Scotland and no formal definition.

CFIs deliver activities for a range of reasons, including to:

- Address food insecurity (e.g. food banks, social meals).
 - Increase food access: fruit and veg barras, community shops, shopping or meal service.
 - Mitigate social isolation and/or promote good nutrition: lunch clubs, community cafés, social meals.
 - Develop individual skills and/or promote community development/environmental aims: food growing, cooking skills, community-led research.
-

What happened after lockdown?

Community food responses Initial reactions saw a number of CFIs, such as cafés, cease their normal food activity almost immediately, however, many reconfigured their work, for example by:

- Delivering emergency food aid in the form of a grocery parcel – this was the most common response.
- Some organisations delivered cooked meals.
- Some developing new or existing shopping services, including meal kits.
- Providing services online, such as tips and ideas, courses (such as food hygiene) or cooking sessions (these were developed later on).

Many other types of community and voluntary sector organisations reconfigured their services to deliver food activities more often, or for the first time.

Other more specific examples included:

- [Urban Roots](#) updated its food map to show where people could access emergency food and meals across Glasgow.
- The Food Train provides a shopping service across nine Scottish local authority areas. This service expanded in these existing areas and in June it launched the [Food Train Connects](#) service, which links volunteers with older people who require a shopping service.

Over April and May larger CFIs, national voluntary sector organisations and Third Sector Interfaces pulled together information about community services on their websites or began running webinars to discuss common issues.

Public sector responses

Funding

In March, the Scottish Government announced [£350 million funding](#) to support communities most effected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Funding strands included the Food Fund (which included funding for local authorities). Community food initiatives were encouraged to apply for funding via the Third Sector Resilience Fund, and the Wellbeing Fund, which had a funding round in April and another in May.

Local authorities were provided with guidance on using the Food Fund and were advised to work with local partners such as local resilience partnerships, businesses and CFIs to provide food services. They were encouraged to provide flexible solutions and consider providing cash or vouchers (in order to provide more choice and reduce pressure on delivery services) and consider dietary and cultural needs.

The Scottish Government produced a [map](#) showing where Covid-19 funding had been spent.

Co-ordination and partnership

By April, most local authorities had a single point of contact that people could refer themselves to, and from which they could be referred to other organisations, such as community resilience hubs and CFIs. By May most council websites had clear pathways or triaging in place and many had websites with Covid-19 dedicated pages listing support with shopping, food insecurity and help for those self-isolating or shielding, including welfare rights support. Some councils seemed to be working closely with CFIs/Third Sector Interfaces and/or were providing financial support to ensure the provision of such services.

Other Scottish Government or public sector responses

In late March/early April the Scottish Government launched [Scotland Cares](#). The [Ready Scotland](#) website provided advice for both those seeking help and those wishing to provide it, including advice about shopping for neighbours.

The Scottish Government sent a letter from the Chief Medical Officer to around 120,000 people who were at high risk of severe illness from coronavirus and required shielding. This scheme offered a weekly delivery of food, medicine and other essential items for those needing them. People who received the letter were advised to sign up to a SMS service to keep up to date with information. The shielding scheme is currently being evaluated by Public Health Scotland.

In April the Scottish Government also launched a National Assistance Helpline for people aged over 70 years who receive the flu vaccine for medical reasons, did not have any access to the internet, and did not have

anyone to help get essential supplies like food or medicine. The helpline put callers in touch with their local authority. By May the government encouraged any vulnerable person who was experiencing difficulties accessing or paying for food or medicines to use this helpline.

In early May, **Food Standards Scotland** published guidance for local authorities and their partners around diet and nutrition for those distributing emergency food aid as a result of Covid-19. Food Standards Scotland also provided general guidance for food businesses throughout the pandemic, and recently provided risk assessment templates for reopening businesses.

In May, **Public Health Scotland** worked in partnership with the **Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC)** to develop a webpage on the SCDC website. This provided links to resources and advice for the community sector, including advice for organisations carrying out food related activities.

Early in the lockdown, local authorities were given the responsibility of choosing whether and how to keep council owned allotments open. Some local authorities provided advice for allotment holders on their websites and many sites remained open.

Private sector responses

Supermarkets experienced issues with panic buying in the first few weeks and were unable keep up with an increased demand for home deliveries. Larger supermarkets quickly provided priority shopping opening times for vulnerable customers and separate slots for 'frontline' staff such as NHS workers.

Within a few weeks, UK governments provided supermarkets with information about people who would be advised to 'shield' in order that supermarkets could prioritise these customers registered with them for delivery services. Some supermarkets developed other home delivery services, such as 'food boxes' and 'essential range' phone order services for people not online. However, the expansion of delivery and other services took some time and organisations such as the consumer organisation Which and Scope (the disability charity) reported that vulnerable people were having difficulties accessing these services.

Smaller grocery or convenience stores made use of apps such as Snappy Shopper or worked with companies such as Deliveroo to provide delivery services. Some smaller shops, including some in rural or remote areas, provided phone order and collect services, carried out delivery services themselves or worked with local volunteers to provide these.

Early on in the lockdown some restaurants and cafes that closed donated their food to CFIs. As time went on partnerships emerged between some CFIs

and the private sector, working together to provide and deliver meals to people that needed them. Many companies and businesses provided community organisations with donations. Some larger producers or suppliers provided surplus food to Fareshare and some supermarket chains continued or extended their work with both Fareshare and the Trussell Trust.

Variations in responses

Many CFIs seemed to aim to reach particular groups, though this seemed to change over time. Support appeared to be focused on **families with school aged children** and **older** or more 'vulnerable' people. However, the [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) report showed that most organisations were providing support to a range of population groups. Local authorities provided support for families who would usually receive free school meals; this varied from cash payments, supermarket vouchers, food parcels or the option to pick up a meal from the school.

A few organisations provided more targeted support for **BAME** populations or asylum seekers. Faith groups seemed to play an important role (e.g. Sikh or Muslim groups). One example included providing tailored food parcels with African foods and another distributed emergency cash grants. Ramadan took place during the lockdown and some mosques ramped up or reconfigured their charitable food work in order to deliver meals to people in need in their local communities.

We were unable to get consistent information about how CFIs were responding from across all areas across Scotland – **urban, rural and remote**. However, the [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) report shows that partnerships worked in quite different ways across remote and rural areas. A search of island community Facebook pages early in the lockdown indicated that some local shops were arranging their own delivery services or were working with volunteers and resilience hubs to do so. Island Food Bank Facebook pages reported an increase in demand for their services, which fits with the national picture.

Food insecurity research during Covid-19

Food insecurity has been researched and discussed for many years in Scotland and across the UK. This section focuses on food insecurity research undertaken since the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 9% of households in Scotland reported experiencing food insecurity. A table that highlights further evidence and solutions to food insecurity, its impact on health and solutions both pre and post Covid-19 (as of May 2020) is available

[here](#). Food insecurity data from 2019 will be available later from the Scottish Health Survey and in future from the Family Resources Survey.

The [Food Foundation](#) collaborated with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission to carry out three YouGov surveys with all types of households across the UK that focused on food insecurity during the lockdown. These looked at the impact, one week, three weeks, and seven weeks into the lockdown. An additional survey focused on households with children five weeks into the lockdown.

The first survey carried out after one week of lockdown showed that 1.5 million households reported not being able to get the food they needed. Over half of households with children entitled to free school meals had not received an offer of alternative provision (this had reduced to a quarter by May and seemed to relate mainly to England).

The second survey showed that more than 3 million people reported going hungry in the first three weeks of the UK's Covid-19 lockdown; this estimated the number of adults who were food insecure in Britain had quadrupled under the lockdown. A lack of food in shops alone explained about 40% of food insecurity experiences since the Covid-19 lockdown. Thus making the distinction between people having problems with access to food and food insecurity (due to a lack of income).

In June the **Food Foundation** published research from its 4th UK survey (3rd survey with all types of households) since lockdown began. It found that food insecurity and debt were the new reality under lockdown, with 4 million adults borrowing money. Issues around food supply and access to food was less likely to be a problem compared to the first few weeks of the lockdown, however, food security was estimated to be two and a half times higher than before the pandemic across the UK.

Meanwhile, key food aid organisations reported an upsurge in demand: the Trussell Trust and Independent Food Aid Network reported huge increases in demand for their emergency food aid services (i.e. 81% & 59% respectively) in March, compared to March 2019.

People most at risk of food insecurity

Families with dependent children: The Food Foundation surveyed 2300 parents in the last week of April. This showed that five million people in the UK living in households with children under 18 had experienced food insecurity since the lockdown started. 1.8 million people experienced food insecurity solely due access to food. However this left 3.2 million people (11% of households) experiencing food insecurity due to other issues such as loss of income or isolation.

The reduction in income experienced by families with children during the pandemic was also found by [IPPR Scotland](#) in May. Their survey found that almost half of families in Scotland with dependent children were experiencing financial stress, compared to one third of all other households.

People with disabilities or long term conditions were two or three times more likely to experience food insecurity or food access issues, depending on how limiting their condition or disability was.

People from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic groups were around twice as likely to experience food insecurity as white population groups. (Food Foundation), however, people were more likely to be food insecure as a result of food access, food supply and isolation, rather than solely for economic reasons.

People who were self-isolating or in a shielding groups were around twice as likely to be food insecure compared to those not self-isolating. Food insecurity was most likely to be due to supply or food access issues and isolation. However, these groups were also more likely to be also food insecure due to economic reasons. (Food Foundation)

Changes in shopping and eating habits

Surveys by [Hubbub](#) and [Wrap](#) both reported people were wasting less food during the lockdown. The [Obesity Health Alliance](#) and [Obesity Action Scotland](#) both found that people were eating more discretionary foods like biscuits, sweets and cakes, this was particularly higher amongst young people. All the above studies showed that people were eating fewer take-aways or ready meals.

In terms of reports providing data that showed difference in sociodemographic/income groups:

- All income groups were cooking more from scratch, (reports vary between 38% and 50% (although more affluent groups may have been doing this slightly more often [Food Foundation YouGov survey](#)))
- Most people were eating more fruit and veg since the lock down, although a lower proportion of people managing on a lower income reported eating more compared to those on a higher income – 36% and 43% respectively. (Obesity Health Alliance)
- [However Northumbria University](#) carried out a study showing that children entitled to free school meals in Eland were eating more sugary

snacks and drinks, and unfortunately were also eating less fruit and veg compared to before the lockdown.

A wide range of other organisations have begun studies/research about diet but have not yet reported results, including Nottingham University, The Malnutrition Task Force (UK), The European Food Information Council, Queens University Belfast and the UCD Institute of Food and Health in Ireland.

Interest in growing and local food

The Local Government Information Unit reported that some Scottish local authorities had experienced an increase in requests for allotment plots. The [Food Foundation's](#) UK survey found a small increase: 3% of people surveyed had tried growing food since the outbreak of Covid-19. (There was no difference between income groups in the Food Foundation's data).

The Food Foundation found that 6% of people bought from local farms or suppliers during lockdown, with little difference between income groups. However, [Hubbub](#) shows (via various local food supply options) this was closer to 9%. (No details about income groups provided).

A blog posted on the [Nutrition Connect](#) website summarises the range of studies published since the lockdown - most of these are covered above.

What can we learn? Challenges and solutions

Several key challenges and concerns have emerged. Better co-ordination at local level, and around funding or developing longer term food system improvements could help reach those most in need and address issues around food insecurity. Improving people's income is key to addressing food insecurity, however more dignified and sustainable choices can be available in the shorter term.

Better co-ordination

At a local level

In the early stages of the pandemic, community food organisations seemed to be trying their best to respond to an increase in demand for their services, often using their own funding reserves to do so. In late March and early April, the Scottish Government provided Food Funding to local authorities for coordinating responses locally.

The [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) contacted six community organisations in early April. As well as an increase in demand, community organisations also experienced challenges with accessing food supplies, had

concerns about the safety and wellbeing of volunteers and were frustrated with co-ordination at local level and/or were being excluded from local co-ordination efforts. As a result, the Commission recommended more leadership and better co-ordination.

By mid to late May, the vast majority of the 211 community organisations surveyed by the [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) reported improvements in the previous month, including better co-ordination at a local level, and most were also in contact with their local authority: 41% said they had 'a lot' of contact with their local authority.

Some good examples of co-ordination and partnership working at local level emerged and may provide ideas for the future. For example, the [Local Government Information Unit](#) (LGIU) reported on how local authorities were responding to the Covid 19 crisis. Its Policy Briefing in mid-May highlighted the benefits of local authorities working closely with communities during the crisis and used examples from Edinburgh, Moray and East Renfrewshire.

The CFHS website featured a short case study from [Moray Food Plus](#), which worked with a wide range of partners in the first few weeks of the lockdown to try and ensure they reached people most in need of their services.

Funding

[Voluntary Health Scotland](#) surveyed 143 member organisations in late April. Some organisations had good experiences of negotiating with their existing funders, however, others were still confused about the availability of Scottish Government funding. By May, the Poverty and Inequality Commission report showed this had improved. However, as many organisations expect their food aid services to continue to be needed and possibly even increase in the future, organisations are beginning to consider how they can sustain food aid in the longer term or are considering alternative solutions.

Better co-ordinated food systems, more resilient communities?

Across the UK, various organisations have promoted the concept of 'building back better' or #buildbackbetter. Some are promoting a range of aims about a more sustainable and socially just society. In terms of food, this could include shorter food supply chains, more local food and improved workers' rights for those working in the food industry. As some of the above research shows, some people began using local food suppliers as the result of the pandemic and many have been consuming more home-cooked meals. Some of the campaigners hope to maintain and build on these new habits.

In Scotland the [Food Coalition](#) has been active in promoting a change to the food system in Scotland post Covid-19, building on its previous Good Food Nation Bill campaign whilst that Bill is currently on hold. It has been active on twitter promoting five calls in the wake of Covid-19 which focus on shorter supply chains, addressing food security by improving income, and healthier and more environmentally sustainable food. The Coalition has also begun to

gather evidence on the impact of Covid, looking at both the challenges to the food system and where there have been examples of food resilience.

Other key UK players in the discussion around better food systems include: [Sustain](#) - the alliance for better food and farming, the [Food Ethics Council](#) and City, University of London [Centre for Food Policy](#)

Reaching those most at risk

The [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) reported that 80% of the organisations they surveyed in May were concerned they were not reaching everyone who might need food support. The food insecurity section above indicates what population groups were most at risk of food insecurity and food access: people with disabilities/conditions. BAME populations, families with dependent children and people who are shielding or self-isolating.

Two thirds of organisations that undertook the Poverty and Inequality Commission survey were providing a service that wasn't aimed at any specific group, and just 10% of organisations were providing support for a specific population group. Our monitoring seemed to show some changes over time in how organisations targeted or tailored their support, sometimes in response to better co-ordination and partnership working.

The [Food Foundation](#) UK survey reported that many people may miss out because they don't ask for help or don't know how to get help. They estimated that 2% of the UK population was receiving food via a charity or public sector during the lockdown. However, half of the people who reported being food insecure had not been offered help, the majority of people who had not been offered help were reluctant to seek it and 16% had tried to get help but hadn't found it. Note that this survey is UK wide - local authorities in Scotland may have played a more central role in co-ordinating services compared to those in the rest of the UK.

Food access: other food or community food options

[Sustain](#), the alliance for better food and farming in the UK, and the Food Train in Scotland both suggested that former food services targeted at older people, such as Meals on Wheels would have been particularly useful and efficient for reaching older people during the pandemic.

Addressing food insecurity

Cash first options

There are no shortage of organisations pre-Covid that suggested the solution to food insecurity is to ensure people have an adequate income. Back in 2015 NHS Health Scotland issued a [Food Poverty position statement](#) stating that one of the key drivers to addressing food insecurity is to ensure adequate income.

During the pandemic these views have continued to be expressed, or even increased. Solutions offered include better and faster access to benefits, including sick pay or/and increased benefits or extending the UK Coronavirus job retention scheme:

- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's [briefing to MP's](#) in March reiterates that increasing child benefits is one solution to supporting families through these times.
- After reporting a large increase in demand for emergency food aid, the [Trussell Trust](#) worked with five other charities to call on the UK government to provide more help for those in financial hardship.
- [The Poverty Alliance](#) expressed concern that people new to the welfare system may find it challenging to access the benefits they are entitled to.

Nutrition, choice and dignity

Whilst carrying out surveillance on social media and other sources, it was difficult to find out details of what foods were provided and whether these were nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable or if a choice was offered.

The [Poverty and Inequality Commission](#) report, which surveyed 211 organisations in May, said little about what food these organisations offered, however, a small number of these did say they had to top up food provided from surplus food suppliers to try and ensure choice, or that they added fresh produce.

The Adequate Standard of Living group of [Scottish Human Rights Commission](#) provided a briefing that highlighted that some groups, such as those with disabilities could benefit from more support to access and buy food for themselves, such as through help with using online services. The briefing also raised concerns about ensuring that food aid considered cultural or dietary needs.

Early on in the lockdown, Nourish updated the [Dignity principles](#) to reflect Covid-19 responses. These principles aim to provide good practice guidance for emergency food aid providers to ensure choice and dignity. Nourish Scotland also posted a blog on [distancing](#) that included examples from CFIs on how they had found ways to make sure people using services feel involved and stay connected.

During the lockdown organisations grappled with the challenge of addressing issues around stigma and sustainability of food aid including [Eats Rosyth](#), which provided a blog for the CFHS website about stigma and food systems.

And the future?

For the longer term, some organisations have already, or are now beginning, to consider how they can provide alternative options for food aid. Of the 211 organisations surveyed by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, the majority of frontline organisations providing emergency food were also providing three or more forms of non-food based support. The most common forms of such support that were reported were signposting people to other sources of financial support (77%) and befriending and/or check-up calls (70%).

Ensuring that individuals are aware of what financial support they are entitled to is of course an important way to address food insecurity and ensure dignity and choice. Other organisations might consider offering food services that provide affordable food in less stigmatising ways. One option is the Food Pantry model, where people pay a membership fee and can then buy discounted foods supplied through surplus food distributors. Another option is 'pay as you feel' options such as social meals. Both of these models were being used pre-Covid and could be useful models for the future. [Greener Kirkcaldy](#) recently provided a case study for the CFHS website that includes ideas about moving towards encouraging people to use a Food Pantry.

Finally, back in September 2019 we worked with the Scottish Government to hold a CFI Summit focused on how to enhance the work of the sector. The summit concluded that more joined up working, more partnerships and stronger networks were needed. The pandemic has further highlighted how crucial good partnership working is in order to make the best use of what each partner has to offer and the importance of joining up across networks and sectors. As we transition towards recovery much is still to be learned about what types of models worked best or met the needs of different communities most effectively.