

Debate on food supply and security in the UK in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

House of Lords

14 May 2020



Key messages

- Councils are working hard supporting people with a range of vulnerabilities to continue to access food throughout the coronavirus pandemic. This includes assisting with the delivery of doorstep food deliveries, and to people outside the shielded group who are unable to access food or have issues affording it.
- This support has been delivered at pace, and in several instances, in response to a rapidly changing national response to the pandemic. The situation has posed a range of challenges to local government.
- Despite national government work on resolving issues relating to data on shielded individuals, there remain instances of inconsistent and duplicated data along with delays in providing updates. It means councils are spending a significant amount of time cleansing data and trying to identify means of contacting extremely vulnerable individuals.
- To ensure non-shielded vulnerable people are supported in the community, councils need access to volunteers who can shop and then deliver groceries to those who need it. There is a need to ensure that full access to the GoodSam app is granted to all local partners, including the VCS as well as councils.
- Prior to the pandemic, a significant minority of households were struggling to access healthy food and were therefore relying on food banks and other community-based food projects. These existing challenges have been compounded by social distancing measures. Many households are also likely to face straitened circumstances for some time after the initial effects of the pandemic are over.
- Councils remain concerned about their ability to meet the needs of some groups for whom they have new or ambiguous responsibilities, such as those who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) or rough sleepers. Funding to provide emergency accommodation has been provided on public health grounds, but the new requirement to provide food to these groups has not been funded, and the extent of councils' longer-term responsibilities towards these groups remains unclear.
- It is also unclear whether the funding made available to councils will be enough to reimburse them for the additional financial hardship and food poverty support that they are providing to low income households. Without sufficient funding and co-ordinated support, many low-income households will inevitably struggle to access good quality food both now and in the wake of the crisis.
- It is vital that as we work to rebuild our local economies, we have a joined-up cross-sector approach to ensuring that people from all backgrounds are able to access healthy, affordable food.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Support for the shielded group

We welcome the Government's action on ensuring that the most medically vulnerable are given priority within a nationally organised food-parcel scheme. As putting the national doorstep delivery system in place has taken a number of weeks, councils have provided emergency food drops to tide people over. To do this, they have been using the data on the shielded group provided by the NHS alongside their own records, to identify those in the shielded group who might be the most vulnerable so they can contact them and offer support. Additionally, they have provided social care and/or contact to those people in the shielded group who have registered such a need assistance through the national call centre or website.

Although there were issues with the food provided through the initial delivery of food drops to councils, we are not aware of many concerns being raised about the content of the food deliveries now in place. However, we are hearing from council leaders that they do remain concerned around those who require food to meet dietary requirements. Councils have voiced other issues relating to food deliveries including:

- Clarity on how individuals can transition on and off the deliveries list.
- Details on how those people receiving food parcels are prioritised for supermarket deliveries so they have access to a wider range of food.
- Instances where the shielded individual was not the only person in the household, and it was not clear how the other members of the household would be supported.
- Some local stores are still unable to take card payments so even if vulnerable people are able to access food earlier they may be unable to pay for it over the phone.

Some of these points have been addressed by guidance from Government, such as that issued by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 24 April for councils and Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) along with a set of frequently asked questions.

Despite Government work on resolving some issues relating to data, there remain instances of inconsistent and duplicated data along with delays in providing updates and poor quality, which means councils are spending a significant amount time cleansing this information and trying to identify means of contacting individuals. We have been working with Government on additional guidance and FAQs for councils on how the support to the shielded group works. However, these have become rapidly out of date in some instances, leaving councils without one place in which they can find all the relevant information they need.

Support for the non-shielded group

Councils are also assisting vulnerable people outside the shielded group who are struggling to access food, despite being able to afford it, due to the need to self-isolate or because they are at greater risk because of pre-existing health conditions and need to implement enhanced social distancing. As councils have already developed their own mechanisms, often working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and local communities to scale up existing arrangements, it is our view that any further support to vulnerable people outside the shielded group should be locally-led and managed, with the Government supporting councils.

Councils have highlighted that vulnerable people who can afford to pay should be able to access supermarket deliveries. However, this has been made more difficult by an overall increase in demand for deliveries and click and collect services. It is therefore likely that the future focus of support is likely to be on a range of measures including some access to supermarket deliveries, the role local convenience stores can play, and the use of volunteers to shop for people in this group and then deliver the shopping.

Councils have identified a number of areas where councils will need assistance from central government to ensure vulnerable people in the community are supported. This includes:

- The ability to build on existing proven local arrangements
- Continued assistance from MHCLG in joining-up engagement across Whitehall in supporting vulnerable groups
- On-going help from Defra to ensure councils have the engagement they need with supermarkets
- Clear and consistent messaging is also needed that vulnerable people should be prioritised in accessing delivery slots.

Access to volunteers

While access to supermarket delivery slots will be an important element to the non-shielded vulnerable group, councils will still need access to volunteers who can shop and then deliver groceries to those people who need it.

In councils' view there is a need for measures to improve alignment, coordination and interoperability between national and local volunteering schemes to support shielded and non-shielded group. The LGA has consistently highlighted how councils will work with the local VCS in supporting local vulnerable people, and that work at a national level must complement this, but there is a concern that the profile of some national initiatives may have stopped people from volunteering locally.

Of the national initiatives developed by Government, the GoodSam app has been successful in attracting resources and is the source of considerable volunteer capacity. There is a need to ensure this can be accessed by all local partners, including the VCS as well as councils, being able to refer into this resource.

Support for those in food insecurity

Prior to the pandemic, a significant minority of households were struggling to access sufficient healthy food and were therefore relying on food banks and other community-based food projects. These existing challenges have only been compounded by social distancing measures, with food banks under more pressure with fewer volunteers and donations, as more people find themselves facing financial hardship.

Many households are also likely to face straitened circumstances for some time after the initial effects of the pandemic are over. There already issues relating to the persistent need for food banks and food charity before the current crisis. Councils and local voluntary and community sector partners had already put in place a range of local welfare provision, and we have long highlighted the need for this provision to be properly recognised and properly resourced.

It remains unclear whether the funding made available to councils in the announcements on 17th and 18th April will be enough to reimburse them for the additional financial hardship and food poverty support that they are providing to

low income households affected by the social distancing measures. Without sufficient funding and co-ordinated support, many low-income households will inevitably struggle to access good quality food both now and in the wake of the crisis.

Councils also remain concerned about their ability to meet the needs of some groups for whom they have new or ambiguous responsibilities, particularly where these have been exacerbated by the requirements of lockdown. This is particularly the case for rough sleepers and people who currently have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Councils have been provided with funding to provide emergency accommodation on public health grounds, but the new requirement to provide food to these groups has not been funded, and the extent of councils' longer-term responsibilities towards these groups remains unclear.