



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

West Berkshire Case Study

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About this report

This report presents findings from local case study research undertaken as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project designed to map and monitor responses to concerns about food access during the COVID-19 pandemic across the UK. Details about the research and project outputs are available at <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>.

This report is one of eight area based case study reports examining local-level interventions put in place in response to risks of rising household food insecurity during the pandemic between March – August 2020. These are being published alongside a comparative report, *'Comparing local responses household food insecurity during Covid-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)'* looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive *'Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix'* for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Abstract

West Berkshire, a unitary authority, is situated in the county of Berkshire, in the south east of England, and residents live in a combination of rural villages and larger towns.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council did not have a food security strategy, but facilitated some income maximisation opportunities, such as local tax reductions and referral to advice agencies, for example, Citizens Advice. Some council departments also provided referrals to a local food aid provider.

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network operated five distribution sites. Meal projects were also in place that aimed to support people who were homeless. Newbury Community Furniture Project supplied household items in the case of sudden financial shocks and would provide an emergency food parcel for an interim period whilst households waited for other assistance with food provision.

At the beginning of the pandemic, through the local knowledge, relationship and combined efforts of the lead local funder, Greenham Trust, Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and the Council, a community support hub, encompassing statutory partners and third sector organisations was set up. From this wider hub, a Food Providers Group was created, involving the established organisations providing food parcels, community meals and meals for the homeless.

Most of these organisations continued to serve the populations they had served prior to the pandemic, for example the homeless population, older residents and people facing financial crisis. All providers made adaptations to the way in which their service was delivered, for example, changing from on-site meal provision to ready meal deliveries, from food parcel collection to home-delivery, and relaxing eligibility criteria. Across the area, hundreds of volunteers offered their services, not least to support the 90 community groups, many of which self-started, spontaneously as a result of the pandemic, to serve the needs of the local towns, villages and hamlets.

The shielding population were provided with the national food boxes arranged by Central Government. A central point for the distribution of community food parcels was established to support the collection and delivery of food parcels to residents newly encountering food insecurity. This operation was facilitated by the volunteers from a number of community groups which were established in response to the needs of their individual towns, villages and hamlets. New providers, previously not active in the area, as well as new locally-based groups, began to distribute food parcels in addition to those being provided by established organisations.

Children of key workers or vulnerable children, who were still attending school during the lockdown, continued to receive hot meals there, families of other children in need of support received either daily, or weekly food parcels, and schools maintained contact with students they considered vulnerable, but not attending school.

One third sector organisation offered food aid groups logistical support, by using their large capacity transport vehicles, and purchasing a further vehicle with a chiller body, allowing for the distribution of chilled and short-life foods, in addition to ambient food products. Whilst the Council contributed no funding for the direct food aid response, the providers received significant support from an active third sector organisation which not only provided direct financial support, but also facilitated matched funding and an online platform for individual donations.

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Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in West Berkshire

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in West Berkshire before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are summarised below and described in more detail later in the report.

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic West Berkshire had a number of actors supporting people with food access.

West Berkshire Council Revenues and Benefits Department provided support to people on low income or experiencing income crises, for example council tax reduction or financial help. Where appropriate they would also signpost people to advice agencies, such as Citizens Advice, or other organizations providing emergency food parcels. There were a number of organizations providing emergency food parcels prior to the pandemic.

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network, was established in 2013 as the first food bank in the area. The food bank operated out of five distribution centres which were open twice a week, each on different days and in different towns. The food bank estimated to have served 100 clients over the course of a week prior to February/March 2020. Additionally, the food bank provided food to five schools at the start of the six-week summer holiday school break which they could distribute to families. The schools chose how they would provide this food to the families.

Newbury Community Furniture Project is part of a wider organisation, Newbury Community Resource Centre, comprising 5 projects although not all in West Berkshire. They support vulnerable residents through a range of endeavours including horticultural therapy for adults and young people with a range of disabilities and health challenges, environmental projects and education. Although food provision was not their primary function, they provided hot meals for volunteers and service users, and emergency food parcels for financially insecure households, in particular in the event of them being re-housed.

There was also a number of meal providers operating in the area. Newbury Soup Kitchen supported members of the homeless and rough sleepers' community with food, as well as social and mental health support. Loose Ends provided a drop-in service for members of the homeless community, providing hot meals for breakfast or lunch, as well as offering food parcels, toiletries, and clothes to people in need. The Fair Close Day Centre offered its services to the older population, aged 65 plus. They provided social activities, physical health and grooming services, as well as cooked meals, for which they have a scale of charges for members and non-members. They described food as being central to their services, providing meals to their service users, in the community centre and also offering a Meals on Wheels service.

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire supported the voluntary and community sector and Greenham Trust is a social enterprise which provided assistance to charity, volunteer and community organisations including the provision of funding for the established food aid providers in West Berkshire.

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

The strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic was spearheaded the Community Support Hub, a partnership comprising the Council, and the Volunteer Centre together with the Greenham Trust as the funding source.

The Council implemented two hubs: a Community Support Hub, where Council staff and leaders together with members of statutory bodies met to resolve all emerging issues relating to COVID-19 and a central distribution point/hub, through which food distribution was coordinated. The community food distribution hub was set up by the Council at a local rugby club. Spotlight UK provided food parcels for the distribution hub. Spotlight operated in the neighbouring local authority area prior to the pandemic, providing support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. A member of the Council workforce was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from Spotlight and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups. Correspondence received suggests that 125 food parcels were provided weekly by Spotlight, distributed through the food hub. The Council also worked with Greenham Trust, who had established relationships with all of the food aid providers in the area, to facilitate regular meetings with those groups provide an opportunity to communicate on matters relating to food supply and use of food aid services.

Greenham Trust was central to the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in leadership, but in funding the organisations which were mounting the frontline activity. In addition to providing direct financial support for the food aid activity, they launched a local fundraising appeal, and they established the Food Aid Providers group, co-chairing the fortnightly meetings of this group. Volunteer Centre West Berkshire undertook a strategic co-ordination role, and provided practical input including the recruitment of 700 volunteers, linking them their local food aid provider. Furthermore, they delivered food parcels from the Community Food Distribution Hub, and from Spotlight for residents in Newbury Town, for whom they also provided a shopping service.

The established food aid providers continued to support their service users, although all made adaptations to their operations.

West Berks Foodbank lost the majority of the volunteers working there prior to the pandemic due to shielding requirements, posing immediate staffing challenges. These were overcome through a social media recruitment drive. They changed their model from clients collecting food parcels in person to a home-delivery method and increased the size of the food parcel from three days to seven days’ supply. In acknowledgement of the wider support food bank clients would previously have received during visits to the distribution sites, outreach was

conducted by the volunteer workforce, who had now been instructed to shield, who made phone calls to clients on a weekly basis to provide support and comfort.

Newbury Soup Kitchen moved their food preparation operation from a domestic kitchen to a commercial unit and increased their service delivery from two to seven days a week, delivering ready-meals to members of the homeless community who had been provided with hotel accommodation by the Council. To ensure that there was no duplication, nor omission, in terms of sites where food was provided, they coordinated with another charity Loose Ends, also serving homeless people. Loose Ends also adapted their service delivery mechanism from on-site meal provision to providing food parcels and ready meals for the homeless community.

Newbury Community Furniture Project used their own financial reserves to purchase a van with a chiller body and hired vans to add to their existing fleet of five vehicles, usually used for transporting furniture and household goods. This allowed them to collect food from FareShare for distribution to the food aid providers, and schools. In addition to the support provided to the various providers of food aid, they also continued to provide food parcels for individuals who had either been previous service users or referred to them through the Community Food Hub and other established partners.

The Fair Close Centre operated seven days a week, increasing their meal provision from 30 to 100 per week. Instead of on-site meal provision, they moved totally to a Meals on Wheels service. As the majority of their drivers were in the age group instructed to shield, they needed to replace them with new volunteers, for whom they had to undertake background checks, and inductions.

As well as these established food aid providers continuing to provide food aid many new local community groups were established spontaneously in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The grass roots approach facilitated communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, the Council and organisations who were able to meet the identified need. In addition to playing a role in making up and distributing food parcels, the volunteers in these community groups were also reported to have undertaken shopping services for people unable to leave their homes. Other actors such as Sovereign and Home-Start made welfare calls to their existing clients. If food insecurity was identified they would signpost and support people to access food aid. We also learned of new independent food banks which were established in some of the villages.

Data overview

The full methodology for the local area case study research has been published alongside this report in the *Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*. This is available on the project website. Details of the data collected for this particular case study is reported below.

The following case study draws from the following sources:

- Six interviews, three with local authority respondents and three with respondents representing three different third sector organisations.
- An on-line workshop was held with nine participants, one local authority respondent who had previously been interviewed, seven third sector respondents, one of whom who had previously been interviewed, and one from a school.

In addition to these participants a further six people were invited to participate in the research but did not do so. Including four third sector representatives, one council representative and one health professional.

In addition to the primary data collection through interviews and the workshop correspondence, desk-based research was undertaken to understand the characteristics of the area and to learn more about the nature of food aid activity. Some data on the extent of food aid provision was supplied in email correspondence. Written responses to specific questions were collected using Padlet and Mentimeter was utilised to establish levels of agreement to additional questions.

About West Berkshire

As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, areas that were either predominantly urban or rural, and evidence of economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. The claimant rate reflects people either receiving Jobseeker's Allowance or receiving Universal Credit and expected to be looking for work. West Berkshire was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly rural. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 186%.

West Berkshire is a unitary authority comprising 30 wards, situated in the County of Berkshire in south east England. In the 2011 census, 153,822 people were recorded as resident in the district, the majority, 98,933 living in the five main towns of Newbury, Thatcham, Calcot, Purley & Tilehurst, with Newbury being the largest of them, and home to

26% of the population (see Figure 1).¹ Approximately 39% of people in West Berkshire live in rural areas, which is more than twice the English average of 17.6%.² The working age population (16-64 years) represents 60.8%, and the proportion of households described as “workless” is low at 5.6%, compared to the English proportion of 13.3%.³ At 19.3%, the proportion of people aged over 65, is similar to that of the wider South East England (19.5%).⁴ The population is predominantly white, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups accounting for 5.2% of residents. A local authority respondent shared their description of the population:

“We do have predominantly a white community, we do have pockets of deprivation, and because we scan a broad range, from very economically sound to very economically disadvantaged, those disadvantaged communities tend to be quite hidden.” (Council staff respondent)

The risk of hidden insecurity is compounded by the geography of the area:

“You have already appreciated we are a vast area to cover for a small unitary authority, so people will be isolated because of the rurality of our district. So that in itself also presents some challenges.” (Council staff respondent)

Within West Berkshire there are 78 primary schools and 23 secondary schools and of these, 14% are private schools. Free school meal uptake is lower, at 6.3%, than the English average of 13.5%.⁵ Despite this, there are apparent pockets of income deprivation, as one respondent shared:

“We have one school that has 127 children on their register and 53 of those are entitled to free school meals.” (Third sector respondent)

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 93% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.⁶

¹ <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/population>, https://www.westberks.gov.uk/media/34859/Census-2011-Key-Data-and-Trends/pdf/130605 - Census 2011 - key data and trends - published_to_web.pdf?m=636733985636570000

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/88029/west-berkshire.pdf, <file:///Users/barbaragoldman/Downloads/rucoaleafletmay2015tcm77406351.pdf>

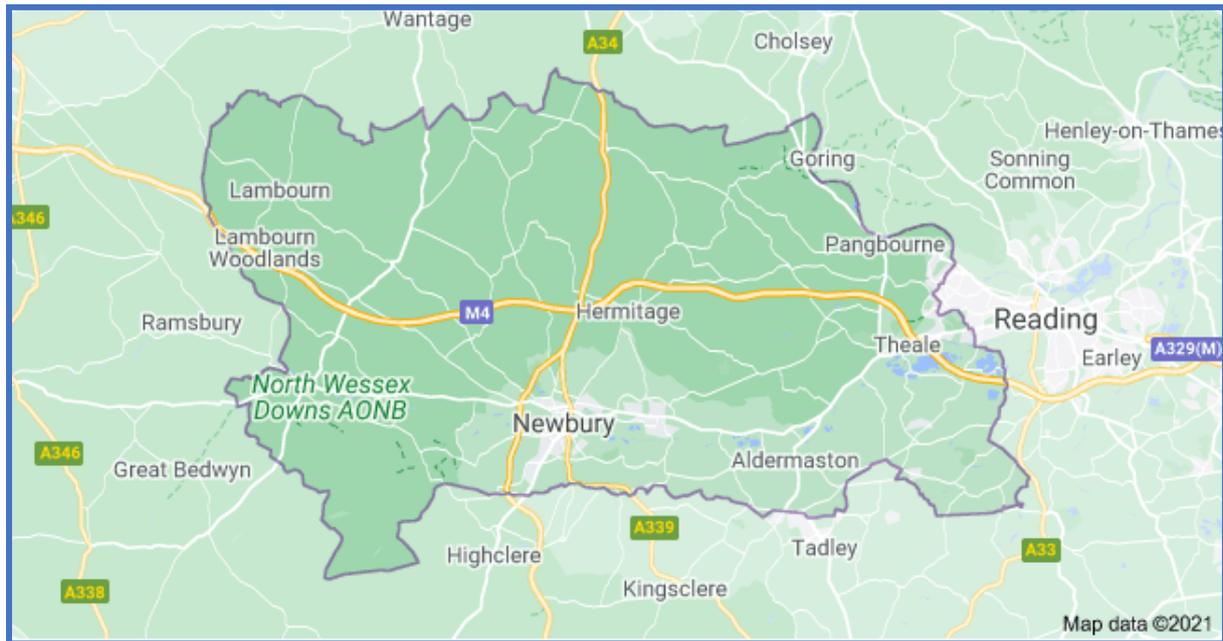
³ Source: Office for National Statistics, Source: Nomisweb.

⁴ <https://westberkshire.berkshireobservatory.co.uk/population/>

⁵ <https://admissionsday.co.uk/area/westberkshire#:~:text=West%20Berkshire%20schools%20and%20catchments,while%2029%20set%20their%20own>, <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/search/free%20school%20meals#page/0/gid/1/pat/6/ati/102/are/E06000037/iid/90632/age/34/sex/4/cid/4/tbm/1>

⁶ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

Figure 1: Map of West Berkshire



Source: Westberks.Gov.Uk

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic West Berkshire had a number of actors supporting people with food access. There was one food bank, with five distribution centres. Another organisation that provided furniture and white goods to households who had been re-homed, or suffered financial shocks, also provided emergency food parcels. Three other organisations were also providing meals in the area prior to the pandemic, two of these provided for the homeless community and one for older residents. Two charities offered hostel accommodation to homeless people, providing food in at least two of their venues. Other groups supporting vulnerable residents in the area, would refer people to the above organisations when they were working with people who needed help accessing food. These, and other actors that subsequently played a role in the response to the pandemic are described below.

West Berkshire Council

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council's Revenues and Benefits Department provided support to people on low income or experiencing income crises, for example council tax reduction or financial help and where appropriate, directed people to advice agencies such as Citizens Advice, as described to us:

“So the council's responsibility would be to make sure that anybody who was in financial hardship, for whatever reason, was able to access everything that they were entitled to, both through our easements, but also access to through agencies such as

Citizens Advice, any other easements or support that they were, they were entitled to.” (Council staff respondent)

Where appropriate the Revenues and Benefits Department would also provide referrals to West Berks Foodbank or another organisation, Newbury Community Furniture Project, who would be able to support with items such as white goods, and emergency food parcels. Although the respondent had no previous direct involvement with issues relating to financial insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they shared:

“...my instincts are that we [the Council] would respond with...would find a way we would never say we can't help you. We might not be able to help directly, but we would signpost them to somebody like the furniture project or to Citizens Advice so that they in turn could support them.” (Council staff respondent)

West Berks Foodbank

West Berks Foodbank, part of the Trussell Trust network, was established in 2013 as the first food bank in the area, and until 2020 was staffed by a volunteer workforce, recruiting their first paid employee in March 2020. The food bank operated out of five distribution centres which were open twice a week, each on different days, located in church halls in the towns of Lambourn, Hungerford, Newbury, Thatcham and the combined Burghfield & Mortimer.

Referral partners included schools, churches, community organisations and health professionals, although the food bank manager estimated that only 20% of clients came through referral agencies, of which the greatest number came through the registered social landlord, Sovereign and Home-Start, the charity supporting families with young children. A crisis line staffed by food bank volunteers enabled self-referrals. The food bank did not report any particular relationship with the Council, other than several departments were referral partners.

Food bank clients represented a mixture of short-term service users experiencing particular financial shocks, such as a large bill or an unexpected household cost, and those for whom food parcel access was longer-term, and described as “more complex”.

The food bank also offered a free table of items which would not ordinarily be included in a food parcel, items which may have had a short shelf life or those of which there was excess stock. These items were also made available to people unable to obtain a voucher with which to access a food parcel:

“For instance, when you walk into a distribution centre, there's a free table of all the things that you know don't fit into the Trussell Trust list of what goes into your food parcel, or the things that were going, were short, dated, or we have an excess of. People would come in. Maybe if they didn't have a voucher and help themselves to that and, and we would encourage that, if necessary.” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank estimated to have served 100 clients over the course of a week prior to February/March 2020. Additionally, the food bank provided food to five schools at the start of

the six-week summer holiday school break which they could distribute to families. The schools chose how they would provide this food to the families.

Spotlight

Desk-based research reveals that Spotlight UK is a national charity, founded in 2009, providing support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. Children from low-income households are offered the activities at low, or no cost, and their households might receive food or equipment to relieve financial pressures. Examples of the tangible support offered for low-income families includes food bank provision, Christmas toy appeals and birthday gifts for children living in financially insecure households.⁷ Although the organization was active in the neighbouring district of Basingstoke, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic they were not known to be active in West Berkshire, but as will be seen below, played a significant role in food parcel distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Newbury Community Furniture Project

Newbury Community Furniture Project is part of a wider organisation, Newbury Community Resource Centre, comprising 5 projects although not all in West Berkshire. They support vulnerable residents through a range of endeavours including horticultural therapy for adults and young people with a range of disabilities and health challenges, environmental projects and education. In Newbury, and its neighbour Basingstoke, they garner donations of furniture, white goods and household items which they provide to low-income households who have been re-housed or have an identified need for such items. Although food provision was not their primary function, they provided hot meals for volunteers and service users, and emergency food parcels for financially insecure households, in particular in the event of them being re-housed. They were also members of FareShare.⁸ Their activities were described to us:

“We run a whole host of activities and food was a very minor point of what we do. We prepare hot meals every day for our volunteers and adults with learning disabilities that we support. We’ve had supplies from FareShare over the years, and worked closely with FareShare. On an ad hoc basis, we’ve been supplying people for years. That would usually be where the social worker or a family support worker would come in, they’ve been on a family visit, they’ve needed food, and we’ve basically raided the cupboards and the fridges, put packages together and off it went. And that really was the extent of what we did on food, prior to COVID coming along.” (Third sector respondent)

Meal providers

Newbury Soup Kitchen

Newbury Soup Kitchen was established in 2016 by its founder and general manager, who maintains a hands-on role. The organisation supports members of the homeless and rough sleepers’ community with food, as well as social and mental health support. The organisation

⁷ <https://spotlightuk.org/who-we-are/>

⁸ <https://www.n-c-r-c.org/community-furniture-project/>

relied on public donations from supermarkets for their food supplies, using them to provide hot meals for up to 60 service users per week, and a hot take away meal for approximately 20 people on weekends, served out of the back of their van. In addition to meals, some long shelf life foods would be provided if necessary, as well as signposting to other organisations able to offer wider support, such as addiction recovery.

In order not to overlap with the other meal provider for the same population, Loose Ends (see below) they operate on different days of the week.⁹ A third sector respondent described the service offered:

“They gained lots of local support, business and community support. Lots of volunteers, no problems at all there. They interact with the statutory services very well, in as much as local GPs might go in there and talk to some of the visitors and talk to them about their health and encourage them to interact with the services where possible. So there’s quite a good relationship there with the local authority that they have.” (Third sector respondent)

Loose Ends

Loose Ends is described as Newbury’s oldest established homeless support charity. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic it provided a drop-in service for members of the homeless community, aged 18 plus. Approximately 20-40 people accessed the provision per day, which opened 5 days a week, providing hot meals for breakfast or lunch, as well as offering food parcels, toiletries, and clothes to people in need.¹⁰ Where appropriate, clients would be signposted to relevant support and advice services such as Citizens Advice, etc.

Their activities were described by a third sector respondent:

“...going back 24 years, a group called Loose Ends was established and that’s a Newbury based charity. And what it does is actually provide hot meals on certain days and times of the week in a place where homeless, rough sleepers, people living in a hostel go there for, again, hot meals. They get a change of clothes there. They’re given toiletries and those sorts of things.
It’s a very well-established organisation, well respected, reasonably well funded. They do okay. It’s wholly run by a volunteer team and an impressive track record really.” (Third sector respondent)

The Fair Close Day Centre

The Fair Close Day Centre offers its services to the older population, aged 65 plus, in West Berkshire. Opening in 1967, they provide social activities, physical health and grooming services, as well as cooked meals, for which they have a scale of charges for members and non-members.¹¹ The organisation describes food as being central to their services, providing meals to their service users, in the community centre and also offering a “Meals on Wheels” service.

⁹ <https://newburysoupkitchen.org.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://www.looseendsnewbury.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.fairclosecentre.org/about-us/>, <http://www.fairclosecentre.org/whats-on/>

Their service was described by a third sector respondent:

“We’re known really locally for running the Fair Close Day Centre, which, in normal times, is a thriving social hub for the elderly, providing an extensive range of services.” (Third sector respondent)

“The Fair Close centre is food, fun and friendship is at the heart of what we’ve always done. So, running a community hub and a restaurant, people would be coming in here physically, elderly people, and enjoying the company of others. There is an extensive range of other services, but food is really at its core, in terms of the effort put in, the staffing around it and the contributions to earned income. Before COVID, we were probably doing around 50-odd meals a day, half of them delivered out into the community.” (Third sector respondent)

Other actors supporting older people

During our workshop, we learned that there was one other, commercial organisation, Wiltshire Farm Foods providing a ready-meal delivery service to the older population. In addition, Age UK West Berkshire provided a shopping service, called Easy Shop, using volunteers to assist people who were housebound with online supermarket shopping.¹²

Other actors

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire

This organisation’s role was described as supporting the voluntary and community sector. They work with statutory partners, including the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), town and parish councils, health and wellbeing boards, and advise voluntary organisations in matters such as sourcing funding streams, recruitment, safeguarding and background checking. Additionally, they operate as a volunteer recruitment organisation, providing the public with information as to how, when and where they can volunteer across West Berkshire. They also offer advice as to how a prospective group can establish whether there is a local need for a particular service and consulted with the founder of the West Berks Foodbank before that charity was established. In addition to the work undertaken to support other charities, they offer direct provision to the population, for example running a suicide prevention group, operating community transport services and run a Shopmobility service, using electric scooters.

The organisation is funded from different sources including Big Lottery, the local CCG, a local funder (Greenham Trust – see below) and receive occasional donations from legacies. Further funding is provided by the local authority contributing to the rental costs, as well as the Shopmobility scheme and transport services provided an income stream. The Council provided capital funds for the community transport vehicles.

Greenham Trust

Greenham Trust is a social enterprise, established in 1997 to provide assistance to charity, volunteer and community organisations within West Berkshire and North Hampshire. Income

¹²<https://directory.westberks.gov.uk/kb5/westberkshire/directory/service.page?id=43RrDHgMask&adultchannel=2-23>

generated from commercial rentals provides funding of £3-5million for community projects. They collaborate closely with the Council, including jointly funding Citizens Advice and provide funding for the established food aid providers in West Berkshire. The extent of the financial support provided is described in the following quotes:

“For the 20 odd years we’ve been in existence, we’ve been supporting just about every charitable cause you can think of. Food providers have formed a big part of that, whether it’s the food bank, whether it’s a soup kitchen, whether it’s Loose Ends, we help fund...” (Third sector respondent)

“The food bank, they have a unit on the business park which we fund. We support them in annual grants for various initiatives as well as their steady state of supporting those in food poverty. Then you’ve got the homeless entity which is Loose Ends and the Soup Kitchen and you’ve got- Those are the people in need which Newbury Community Resource Centre, [...] we help support. We provide funding support for them as well. We have a hardship fund so it goes beyond food. It might be white goods or a bed or a carpet, and that sort of stuff as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Sovereign

Sovereign is the lead social housing landlord in the district. In addition to providing affordable housing, it supports charities by funding initiatives which aim to reduce the symptoms of food insecurity, such as West Berks Foodbank, and funds a national campaign led by Accent Housing, called More Than Homes which also raises funds for the Trussell Trust.¹³

Sovereign was also described as one of the agencies providing West Berks Foodbank with the greatest number of referrals, which they estimated to be “five or so a month”.

West Berkshire Council does not own its own housing stock, however, in 2018 it entered into a joint venture with Sovereign to provide 1,000 new affordable homes by 2020.¹⁴

Other organisations supporting the homeless

We also learned of other organisations providing support to the homeless community, including West Berkshire Homeless and Two Saints.¹⁵

Home-Start West Berkshire

Home-Start is a charitable organisation supporting families with counselling, signposting and advocacy, focusing particularly on households experiencing social, health, or financial challenges. Prior to March 2020, they estimated themselves to be the fifth/sixth largest referral partner of the food bank moving to second place during the pandemic.¹⁶

School Support

A representative of one primary school responding to our request to participate, estimated that 22% of their student roll were eligible for free school meals. Their work to reduce food

¹³ <https://www.sovereign.org.uk/press-release/sovereign-supports-a-hunger-free-future>, <https://morethanhomes.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.sovereign.org.uk/press-release/west-berkshire-council-and-sovereign-lay-foundations-for-new-partnership>

¹⁵ <https://westberkshirehomeless.co.uk/>, <https://www.twosaints.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <https://www.home-start.org.uk/pages/category/things-we-can-help-with>

insecurity among their students included: referrals to the food bank in the Trussell Trust network, running a breakfast club, and where necessary, providing an emergency food parcel from stocks held on site. When needed, wider support might include a school uniform “bank” and providing the family with nappies and other hygiene items. During the school holidays before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that 25 families would be provided with food parcels provided by the food bank, as well as donations garnered from parents, staff members, and the church to which they are affiliated.

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

One of the earliest signs of food access issues was seen in changes to the volume, and type, of food donations provided to food aid charities. Shortages seen on the supermarket shelves were reflected in the donations:

“It was interesting because the [collection] bins, a bit like Christmas, the initial response was people started filling the bins up with shopping, with tinned food, ambient food, so that was flooding in. But [then] the supermarket donations almost disappeared and/or became very erratic. Because of public shopping change – as you said, the toilet rolls, pasta, beans, flour, rice – you couldn’t get stuff on the shelves.” (Third sector respondent)

Another sign of the challenge which lay ahead was seen in the volume of calls being received by the Fair Close Day Centre. Having anticipated an increase in demand, based on what was being seen in other countries, they received calls not only from the service users themselves, but also the families who had previously been supporting their elderly relatives:

“So, we anticipated that there would be a real hike in demand for our Meals on Wheels service, which is exactly what happened within hours and the days after we went into lockdown. So, there were a few enquiries just before, and then the phone went off the hook for a week or two, after lockdown started in the middle of March” (Third sector respondent)

“It never stopped ringing. So, we could see it coming, people could see it coming, but it suddenly - “My God, my mum is at home, how are we going to feed her, because I can’t go and see her?” (Third sector respondent)

The Volunteer Centre also reported having received calls for help, whether as a result of physical, or financial barriers to food access:

“We were getting calls from people that were just desperate for food and irrespective of their means, they were just still in lockdown, we can’t go out, elderly people, vulnerable people, people who had been told to shield and so forth.” (Third sector respondent)

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

The strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic was spearheaded the Community Support Hub, a partnership comprising the Council, and the Volunteer Centre together with the Greenham Trust as the funding source.

Food access interventions across the area during March to September 2020 included the delivery of food parcels, meals, and volunteers supporting households with essential shopping. Food parcels were provided by the food bank, by Spotlight UK, by schools, and by Community Furniture Project, which also provided logistical support, such as some distribution of surplus food, warehousing, and transport. Hot meals were delivered by the Fair Close Day Centre to their elderly service users, and by Loose Ends and Newbury Soup Kitchen to the re-housed homeless community.

New actors providing food aid in the community included Spotlight UK who provided food parcels. In addition, community groups formed within “parishes, villages and hamlets”, providing a conduit between beneficiaries in the local communities and third sector food parcel providers.

West Berkshire Council

The Council implemented two hubs: a Community Support Hub, where Council staff and leaders together with members of statutory bodies met to resolve all emerging issues relating to COVID-19 and a central distribution point/hub, through which food distribution was coordinated.

The Community Support Hub was established, once it became apparent that local groups were being set up spontaneously, in an effort to establish some structure to harness the community spirit which was evolving.

“Everything was entirely spontaneous. That weekend when it all just stood and you could see it all happening on Facebook and community noticeboards etc. Everybody was saying that we just want to help. We just need to know what to do.” (Council staff respondent)

Accordingly, they collaborated with West Berkshire Volunteer Centre and Greenham Trust, attempting to coordinate the anticipated supply and demand of support, identifying the categories of need as likely to be food, medicine, and welfare.¹⁷

“So I talked to the leader of West Berkshire Council. I also talked to many other charity heads, and said, “Look, I think we need to come together to create an organisation that can support whatever is needed, whether it’s food, mental health...You know, whatever it is, we need to do this, we need to do it in a

¹⁷ <https://www.newburytoday.co.uk/news/coronavirus-community-support-hub-launched-in-west-berkshire-9187430/>

coordinated manner. In effect, what came out of that was the Community Support Hub for West Berkshire.” (Third sector respondent)

The homeless community were provided temporary accommodation in hostels and hotels, and their nutritional needs were met by the third sector, and in some cases were provided microwaves by the Council to facilitate food preparation. The Council also provided funding to Newbury Community Furniture Project to allow them to purchase white goods or furniture for residents experiencing sudden need for these items which may have compromised their ability to purchase food:

“We have used the Emergency Food Grant to support the Furniture Project, to provide white goods so that people don't have to have that difficult decision between buying a fridge, putting down carpets and a bed or putting food on the table.”
(Council staff respondent)

Promotion of support

The Council contact centre took calls for the Community Support Hub which was staffed by council staff. Together the Contact Centre and Community Support Hub signposted callers to the community groups providing food aid now operating in their local communities. The support available to the public was promoted through the local newspaper, which published a new and dedicated telephone number for calls linked to the Community Support Hub.

Calls that could not be addressed at the first point of contact with signposting to the relevant community group were assigned to a Hub Response Officer whose role was to provide additional support and advice. If further needs were identified, for instance from an existing service user, the Response Officer was able to refer the caller for additional support, as a local authority respondent described:

“... a member of the public would phone the Council and say, "I need help", or phone the hub, sorry, and say that they needed help. Their need would be expressed on the platform as a 'job', the response officer's job today, still today, is to go and pick that up off of the platform and try and solve that problem. So by the information that had been articulated by the person that was in need, work out what they needed, then make the call to them to help them. But if they thought that this was somebody, from what was described, who might already be in contact with adult social care, before they did that they would then look on the care package to see what was there or make a contact call to somebody in adult social care to say, "Mr Jones has come through. He said he needs help in respect of his government food parcel, but what else can we do to help him?" (Council staff respondent)

Community Food Distribution Hub

The community food distribution hub was set up by the Council at Newbury Rugby Club working with the charity Spotlight to distribute food parcels. A member of the Council workforce was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from Spotlight and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups.

“We set up Newbury Rugby Club as a kind of food hub, so that we would go and collect...Spotlight had a building in Thatcham at the time and they would using their volunteers make the food parcels up there – our transport team would go to Thatcham, load a minibus up bring it back to Newbury Rugby Club put it all in to different areas and then the volunteers would turn up during a set hour and we would hand the food parcels over and they would go off” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to the volunteers from the community groups, other volunteers supported the distribution effort within the food hub.

“I’d say we probably had at Newbury Rugby Club probably a team of ten/twelve volunteers, on the 2 days that the food parcels would come in and help out then” (Council staff respondent)

The role of the seconded council staff member overseeing the logistics and liaising with the range of organisations providing the response was described:

“So the logistics role was very much about keeping in touch with all of those community groups that set up, knowing what their capability was, knowing what their offer was, really, and who the key point of contact was. Over time, liaising with the food banks who were also needing to work collaboratively with the community groups in getting food parcels out there.” (Council staff respondent)

“Their role was also liaising with our transport team, who were offering transport services. So if a community group didn't have somebody who could drive for them, for whatever reason, then our wonderful team on the transport team were doing some of that driving for us.” (Council staff respondent)

The provision through this hub was designed for people who were not being supported by any of the other local food aid providers (see below). Once the referrals had been collated, and the provision organised according to local geographical area, the logistics officer would liaise with the person leading each local group to arrange for food parcels to be collected from the community food distribution hub and delivered to the residents in each town or village. The process was described as follows:

“So they would – the community [group] would ring up our community hub and say “I need a food parcel” ...so we would then do a referral across to Spotlight for that for the food parcel, then they would send me a list every Thursday for the following week on who was on their list for food and in what area. So I would break that down into areas and I would then send an email out to the lead of the community group and say I’ve these people in this area who need a food parcel, are you able to find someone who can pick it up and take it and drop it off and they would say yes and then...” (Council staff respondent)

The need for these food parcels began to diminish once residents were able to access supermarket slots.

“I think it was when people were allowed to start going back out then you had the DEFRA scheme where we could get people who were shielding but could afford food and they were getting priority supermarket slots so the need for the food parcels weren't as big so we were able to pass them on to different ways, because that was the thing with Spotlight, they were getting lots of You could afford to buy food but you couldn't go out and get the food and you couldn't get a supermarket slot so that's where Spotlight came in.” (Council staff respondent)

Systems were established to try to ensure no-one was financially exposed when expenditures were incurred on behalf of someone else, for example when volunteers shopped for people unable to leave their homes or shop online:

“We set up systems where cash wasn't really needed so that we gave one or two community groups what I called a community purse. So there was a pot of money that they were given so that they could reimburse the volunteer whilst the person who had received the service could write a cheque and it could be banked. Now, most of our community groups didn't even need that. They just worked it out for themselves, how they were going to- They set up a volunteers' pot and things like that.” (Council staff respondent)

DEFRA scheme for priority supermarket slots

The shielding population were provided with the national food boxes arranged by Central Government and delivered by their central contractor up until the end of July 2020. The Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) worked with supermarkets to make priority shopping slots available for people unable to go out, but able to pay. Prior to the end of the National Food Box Scheme, the Council contacted residents who had been receiving them, and were eligible for the priority supermarket slots, to take up that offer. People who did not have the ability to pay for food were referred to the food bank.

“So, we did that very proactively, because it ended in July, didn't it? So from the end of June, all the way through July, we were phoning up everybody who was receiving a government food parcel and enabling them, in whatever way they needed help, to get a supermarket slot. If they couldn't afford food, then we were enabling them to get food through other provision.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council also worked with Greenham Trust, who had established relationships with all of the food aid providers in the area, to facilitate regular meetings with those groups provide an opportunity to communicate on matters relating to food supply and use of food aid services.

“We wanted to make sure that there was food going to be in plentiful supply because there was lots of stuff going around about food shortages. We wanted to make sure that there was the right criteria being adopted in terms of making sure people did really need some food assistance.” (Third sector respondent)

Greenham Trust

This organisation was central to the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in leadership, but in funding the organisations which were mounting the frontline activity.

Once the consequences of COVID-19 became apparent, not least through reports in the print media, Greenham Trust, the Council, and the Volunteer Centre discussed the need for a local coordinated response, resulting in the Community Support Hub being established with a view to identifying the sectors in which the greatest need was likely to be seen, and the organisations best placed to meet those needs.

“Really, the idea of that was to just draw together the key voluntary and charity organisations that would be needed to support those who were having serious issues because of the pandemic. Obviously food being, probably, one of the most significant parts to that but, you know, there’s mental health, there’s domestic abuse. There was schooling, all kinds of things.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to providing direct financial support for the food aid activity, the organisation launched a local fundraising appeal. Altogether, £400,000 was available to support the charities:

“In the same week we created the hub, Greenham Trust launched for the first time we’d ever done this, we launched the coronavirus appeal fund. We put in £200,000 of our own trust money as matched funding to attract public donations, other charitable donations, and corporate donations. We raised, pretty much, another £200,000 through doing that. We got high net worths, we got charitable organisations locally, we got the general public donating. You know, anything from £10 to £10,000 from individuals to corporates to you name it. They put money into this. We used this, to deploy, to support the various food agencies and other people who needed support during- You know, whatever need throughout it. So that was running at the same time.” (Third sector respondent)

A Food Aid Providers group was established by Greenham Trust, comprising all the relevant established organisations. Meetings were held fortnightly, chaired by the Council and by Greenham Trust, as one respondent shared:

“We had a number of meetings specific to the food providers because we saw that as being one of the most important areas, just to make sure they were all talking to one another because they’re all dealing with the same sorts of clients or people who use them. We wanted to make sure that food was going to be in plentiful supply because there was lots of stuff going around about food shortages. We wanted to make sure that there was the right criteria being adopted in terms of making sure people did really need some food assistance because there were one or two charities who just sort of knee-jerked into providing food for people who probably didn’t really need it.” (Third sector respondent)

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire

The Director of this organisation provided part of the strategic leadership of West Berkshire’s third sector response.

“As a charity, there is myself and [name] at the Greenham Trust, it was our idea to actually establish a community [support] hub with the local authority. So we

established a community [support] hub and then about a fortnight after that the government said to council, “You’ve got to have a community hub.” So the local authority, West Berks, then took on the central call centre, if you like, to the public as the hub.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as this strategic co-ordination role, the volunteer centre provided practical input to the response including the recruitment of 700 volunteers, linking them their local food aid provider. Furthermore, they delivered food parcels from the Community Food Distribution Hub, and from Spotlight (see below) for residents in Newbury Town, for whom they also provided a shopping service.

Established food aid providers

The established food aid providers continued to support their service users, although all made adaptations to their operations (see below). In some instances, there appears to have been some informal geographical division of responsibility, with the residents of the larger towns supported by the established organisations, and the smaller villages and hamlets relying instead on the community groups which were established in response to the pandemic (see below).

“We predominantly found that we were dealing with people in the towns of Newbury and Thatcham and that, in the surrounding villages, local people at a village level and a smaller town level, initiatives were kicking off and helping people.” (Third sector respondent)

West Berks Foodbank

West Berks Foodbank made a number of adaptations to their service.

Adaptations

The food bank lost the majority of the volunteers working there prior to the pandemic due to shielding requirements, posing immediate staffing challenges. These were overcome through a social media recruitment drive:

“One of our first key challenges was we lost 74% of our volunteers because they were vulnerable. But we literally put it out on social media that we needed support and we were inundated. So, that was one of our key challenges right at the start. To be brutally honest, it has been amazing, it’s been absolutely amazing. From volunteers coming in and working to my volunteers talking about staying in bubbles, and we knew that, if we stayed in bubbles, it would mean that everybody would have to work set weeks, or set days in a week, we’d have to work harder than we expected to. Everybody committed to that.” (Third sector respondent)

One of the first adaptations made to the food bank operation was the change from clients collecting food parcels in person, to a home-delivery method. Notably, implementing a delivery service had been part of the organisation’s future planning prior to the pandemic, to overcome the challenge of the distance to reach the more rural communities, but implementation was hastened in response to the pandemic. In addition, they increased the

size of the food parcel from three days to seven days' supply when they started the delivery method of distribution, in order to reduce the required number of journeys.

They also relaxed the restriction to food parcel access, previously three vouchers in a six month period (which was a standard provision of the Trussell Trust before the pandemic).

In acknowledgement of the wider support food bank clients would previously have received during visits to the distribution sites, outreach was conducted by the volunteer workforce who had now been instructed to shield:

“So, we put in process a welfare call system. So, our volunteers- It tended to be our older volunteers that were shielding, who couldn't come and help anymore and were desperate to help, making phone calls to our clients weekly. Not offering them food – offering them support, offering them comfort. And that is something I'm incredibly proud of. Because a lot of those clients were only talking to one of our volunteers once a week, and they hadn't spoken to anybody since then. For safeguarding purposes, we very quickly gathered the information of lone males and females, and made sure that we did contact them weekly. And if we hadn't got hold of them, we kept trying, until we did get hold of them.” (Third sector respondent)

Sources of food donations

The owner of Dream Doors, a local kitchen company, was prompted by the empty supermarket shelves to become a new local partner. A scheme was established called 'Food Bank on Your Doorstep', providing not only a delivery service, but a novel means of garnering food donations.

“She decided to contact the food bank and say, “What can I do to help? My shop is shut but we are going to sit in our shop every day, just in case, for any mad reason, somebody wants to come in and buy a kitchen because we don't know what else to do. Can we help you?” So, they became a delivery hub. So, we would literally make up the boxes for Thatcham, take them over to [name], and her and her husband would deliver them out in the afternoons, in their Dream Doors van. And then she turned around and she said, “What else can I do?” And I said, “We need donations.” So, she set up Food Bank on Your Doorstep. So, she asked for volunteers to mailshot the road that they lived in, putting their telephone number on there, saying, “Contact me to tell you that you've left two cans of beans on your doorstep and a lovely volunteer will come and collect them for you.” And they were bringing in probably- I think their first month, they brought in over a ton. And then I think, in total, they've done probably 18- 20 tons of food to us.” (Third sector respondent)

To put this into context, the food bank respondent reported that, at its peak, they were distributing 15-18 tons of food per month, a five-fold increase on the volume distributed prior to the pandemic.

Another source of food donations came from people who were receiving the national food boxes despite not needing them:

“...we used to collect about 40 - We called them Boris boxes. We used to collect about 40 Boris boxes a week, from donors that were being sent them and they didn't need them, so they donated them to us. So, we had Sky engineers, because Sky engineers, as we all know, were stood down the first time around. They used to go out in their vans and collect the Boris boxes and bring them to the food bank” (Third sector respondent)

Levels of need

The food bank has maintained its eligibility criteria of financial barriers to food access, however, at the start of the pandemic, they were providing one seven-day emergency food parcel, at the request of the Council, to overcome physical barriers to food access.

“At the start, obviously, we were covering households that had gone into isolation, for a one-off, an emergency parcel for a one-off, because we were asked to do that by the Council. And that was so the Council could get them in contact with their local community group. But we had said, right from the start, that we were only going to feed people that were in financial crisis.” (Third sector respondent)

They estimate that they have received four to five times the number of referrals compared to those received prior to the pandemic, thought to be a consequence of reduced household income, resulting from reduced working hours, people being furloughed, or marriage breakdowns. The increase also arose out of partnerships with new referral agents, such as schools and churches, many of which had previously been reliable sources of donations.

During the early months of the pandemic, the food bank witnessed increase levels of need from families eligible for free school meals and experiencing increased vulnerability, as shared with us:

“During COVID, obviously when free school meals during the first lockdown wasn't organised, we had a huge uptake. And that was obviously something that the families were saying – “We are entitled to free school meals, can you help us?” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank now has a volunteer ‘Schools Manager’, whose primary focus is to work with schools. They contacted the schools, building relationships and offering support for vulnerable families. In addition to delivering food parcels to families, they also provided parcels to schools for them to distribute as they saw fit.

Newbury Soup Kitchen

Newbury Soup Kitchen moved their food preparation operation from a domestic kitchen to a commercial unit and increased their service delivery from two to seven days a week, delivering ready-meals to members of the homeless community who had been provided with hotel accommodation by the Council. They estimate that they provided 5,000 meals during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that there was no duplication, nor omission, in terms of sites where food was provided, they coordinated with another charity Loose Ends, also serving homeless people (see below).

“So, we, initially, were feeding two days a week, as I said, pre-COVID. We then went up to seven days a week because people were being housed in accommodation in and around Newbury. We delivered seven days a week, we’ve got a transit van that’s been donated to us, so we were preparing meals and delivering them to various places the two days a week that Loose Ends didn’t. Or Loose Ends did some hotels, we didn’t. So, between the two of us, all the hotels were covered. Six of us fed and prepared and delivered 5,000 meals in that initial lockdown. I can’t remember how many weeks it was now. And that was seven days a week. So, they would have hot vegetarian meals.” (Third sector respondent)

Loose Ends

This organisation also adapted their service delivery mechanism from on-site meal provision to providing food parcels and ready meals for the homeless community who had been provided with temporary accommodation by the Council. It is estimated that they provided 350 individuals per week with meals.¹⁹

“But of course, homeless people were put into hotels in the area, so we then were working with the hotels. They were providing the accommodation, but they were not providing any food. So, in our repurposed call, we began this takeaway service for the clients that come to us, plus we were making up food parcels that would be delivered to, I think it was four hotels, maybe five, in the end, who were putting up the homeless people. So, we went from just being a ‘come and join us for food’ building, to being a full takeaway service. People working not exactly around the clock, but certainly doing a lot of hours, to ensure that the people who had the greatest need were fed.” (Third sector respondent)

The particular challenge for both of these organisations was providing food in a way that it could be utilised, as the accommodation they had been provided had no food preparation or storage facilities.

“And often some of the hotels, it had to be left outside their doors. And we were going through into the summer months, and it was quite difficult, you couldn’t guarantee meals were going to be consumed straightaway, so we did vegetarian meals so they were a bit safer. But in that package, they would have an extra meal, so they would have a sandwich made or something. They didn’t have cooking facilities, but a lot of the hotels did have kettles, so they could use Pot Noodles and make porridge. But then the Council did start providing microwaves to some of the people. But there was no other food provision, other than Loose Ends and ourselves, with regard to the hotels, the emergency accommodation.” (Third sector respondent)

Another challenge with this particular community was matching their needs with the type of products with which they were being provided. In addition to lacking food storage and preparation facilities, many people lacked food preparation skills:

“And that was quite interesting on the food side of it as well, because an awful lot of the people that we rehoused hadn’t really been catering for themselves for some

¹⁹ Email correspondence from West Berkshire Council.

considerable time, so there had to be some other things put in. Because a lot of the foods we were supplying, I think the classic line was, “No, when I said I wanted some food, mate, I meant ‘food’ food.”

So, essentially, we were trying to supply fresh fruit and everything else and, in a way, there was a bit of a mismatch between what people wanted out of the ‘food’ food and what we were actually supplying, from our point of view being a balanced diet as best we could make it, with a lot of fresh produce. Whereas an awful lot of the people we were supporting, who had been long-term, either in temporary accommodation or had been homeless, whether it be street-homeless or whatever, didn’t actually have the skill set to do that. So, at the time, we did have to do an awful lot of ready meals, which is not exactly what we set out to do. So, that of course meant that we had to go and try and source different items as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Newbury Community Furniture Project

In addition to supporting service users with whom they had engaged previously, the Newbury Community Furniture Project also received referrals for food parcels from established referral partners and the Community Food Hub. This was in addition to the logistical support for other food aid providers, which they had anticipated would be their primary function. Data received from the logistics manager of the Community Food Hub suggests that they were providing food parcels for 450 families per week, and for 6 schools.¹⁸

Adaptations

Drawing on their experience in logistics, the Newbury Community Furniture Project used their own financial reserves to purchase a van with a chiller body and hired vans to add to their existing fleet of five vehicles, usually used for transporting furniture and household goods. This allowed them to collect food from FareShare for distribution to the food aid providers, and schools, as they shared:

“We noticed pretty quickly, if we were going to be able to make use of this stuff that was coming through, we were going to have to put a cold chain in place, so we went out and bought a chiller van, pretty sharpish. We also started hiring in large refrigeration trailers.” (Third sector respondent)

“What we were doing was, when the chiller van went up to Didcot, to collect it from FareShare, we’d first of all go to a number of schools on different days. We were going up every day at one point. So, we’d go up, we’d go to a school, we’d have lots of yoghurts, we’d have an awful lot of dairy, cheese, yoghurts and everything. We’d just say to the school, “Depending on what you’re doing for your day, just take what you need out of the van.” So, we were trying to get rid of it before it ever got back to us, and we were visiting different places.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to the support provided to the various providers of food aid, they also continued to provide food parcels for individuals who had either been previous service users or referred to them through the Community Food Hub and other established partners.

¹⁸ Email Correspondence from West Berkshire Council

Fair Close Centre

Adaptations

The Fair Close Centre operated seven days a week, increasing their meal provision from 30 to 100 per week. They initially moved their food preparation area to Newbury Racecourse, to allow for social distancing, returning to their own premises after three months, by which time they felt they had safe practices in place. Instead of on-site meal provision, they moved totally to a Meals on Wheels service. As the majority of their drivers were in the age group instructed to shield, they needed to replace them with new volunteers, for whom they had to undertake background checks, and inductions.

New actors in food aid provision

Spotlight UK

Spotlight UK was an organisation with limited experience in food aid provision rather, as noted above, they provided support for young people in the form of “fun and stimulating activities”, in addition to providing emotional and practical support. As food access issues became more prevalent in the area they became a key actor in food parcel provision. Receiving initial funding from Greenham Trust for 10 weeks they worked closely with the Council and the Community Food Hub, distributing food parcels to the community groups operating in the villages and towns. Correspondence received suggests that 125 food parcels were provided weekly by Spotlight, distributed through the food hub.¹⁹ This arrangement was described,

“They were working in partnership with the Council, the Council Transport Team were doing their deliveries. So, they had set up a hub at Newbury Rugby Club and Spotlight would deliver food there. And volunteers and community volunteers from the community support hubs that sprung up in all the different places, they all came there. And also, there were drivers from the Council.” (Third sector respondent)

Prior to the pandemic Spotlight provided services in the neighbouring area of North Hampshire but were not active in West Berkshire. However, they offered their services to West Berkshire Council at time when the need for food support was high. For example, when people who were self-isolating, but not shielding, were unable to delivery slots with supermarkets and were not eligible for support from other food aid providers.

“What I didn’t know about was Spotlight, they were new to me, and they literally turned up when we needed them, which was just as everybody was getting to that critical point of trying to meet demand and finding it hard to meet demand. Plus, the demand was changing. It was increasing, but it was also people who were needing help who had never historically needed help, and the traditional avenues were not those that they had rehearsed. So we needed something that was a little bit more nimble, and that is when Spotlight came into the family, as it were, to help us do that.” (Council staff respondent)

¹⁹ Email Correspondence from West Berkshire Council

Once the initial funding stream was exhausted and no further funding for their food provision in the area was obtained, Spotlight ceased their food aid operation in West Berkshire.

Community Groups

The Council estimates that as many as 90 groups were established spontaneously in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by 3,000 volunteers, many of whom had never previously undertaken any volunteering role.

“So a lot of the physical response, the actual going out and helping people, was geographically based, and those were stand-up [spontaneous] groups. Those were groups that didn’t exist at the beginning of March and they were there to do things. So they were very new and they were very COVID-focused.” (Council staff respondent)

The grass roots approach facilitated communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, the Council and organisations who were able to meet the identified need.

“Everybody just came together and said, “We have got this. We can help people. We know who the vulnerable people are in our community. We will deploy one community champion per street and one person to manage all of those, and that is the person the hub [The Council’s food distribution hub] can be in contact with regularly.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to playing a role in making up and distributing food parcels, volunteers were also reported to have undertaken shopping services for people unable to leave their homes:

“The burden of the actual supporting communities was taken by those voluntary groups who were going out and doing the shopping and picking up the prescriptions and delivering them.” (Council staff respondent)

This local approach enabled grass roots communication between the members of the community who were in need of support, and the groups who were able to meet this need. It also offered the prospect of limiting the risk of hidden, unmet need through the very granular nature of the response:

“West Berkshire is quite thin and quite rural, one part is way out in the sticks and then you’ve got other parts that are quite near Newbury or Thatcham – big towns - but the ones that are out in Lambourne, which is out in the sticks have always been like “oh we don’t get anything, we get no support ...” but the community groups, I think now are really helping bring it all together so they’re not feeling out on their own, so there would always be able to get a food parcel, or support.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to the Community Support Hub number promoted by the Council in the local press, the community groups communicated through various medium, including social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and leaflet distribution. Some of the various processes were described as follows:

“There were two ladies in one of our villages, and it was literally two ladies on Facebook. Because it was a small little hamlet, they kind of knew everybody and they decided to go out and literally put leaflets through everybody’s door to say, ‘If you need help, this is a number. Let us know, and we will find what it is, whether it is walking your dog or getting your food or whatever help you need, we are there’. Then there was a guy in Hungerford who got himself 12 volunteers, gave each of those volunteers a patrol patch, and they went and found out who was on their patch. Then he coordinated those volunteers, and he was the link then to us in the hub. He connected also with the food bank and made sure that food parcels were getting over there as well. So every locality did it in a slightly different way, but commensurate with what they had, the resources that they had.” (Council staff respondent)

School support

Following the closure of schools to most pupils, the respondent from this sector reported reaching out to families directly to find out if they needed help with food, and of receiving calls from families for help:

“So, what we started doing was phoning, from a safeguarding and welfare point of view. But what we did find also was that other families, that weren’t known to us, were coming to us, asking for help with food and things, because of redundancies and all manner of things. And equally, some of our staff members, we were supporting as well.” (School Respondent)

Children who were eligible for free school meals were provided a hot meal if they were eligible to attend school, for example children of key workers and those considered to be vulnerable, while families of those being home-schooled were provided with a daily “grab bag” or a weekly food parcel. The food parcels provided the schools with an opportunity to engage with families.

“So, we decided that we would go down the food parcel route, so they could collect a food parcel once a week. And all of our families receiving free school meals did engage with that, whether the child was in school or not, which made us able to have contact at least some face-to-face contact and see what was going on.” (School Respondent)

Other Actors

Sovereign

Sovereign staff made welfare calls to their residents at the start of the pandemic. When food insecurity was identified, they would refer to organisations who would be able to offer meals or food parcels. Additional support was offered in the form of food vouchers.

“One thing that we introduced at Sovereign, as a direct response to COVID, was a support fund, which looked to- It was with our frontline officers, that were already working with residents that had been negatively impacted by COVID. And it offered them access to a voucher for up to £50 for either Tesco, Amazon or Asda. It wasn’t completely said that that had to go on food provision, but when we asked people at

the end what it was spent on, I would say 90%, if not more than 90% of people spent that on food.” (Third sector respondent)

Home-Start

Home-Start adopted a similar approach to other organisations by proactively calling their service users to establish their needs, which included concerns about food insecurity,

“We contacted all of our families at the start of this and we were very aware of what was going on and what families said they needed now, and that’s how we designed the support that we provided. And it was a range of things, other than just food. With the children at home, that had a big impact, having additional mouths to feed, and the fact that they were always home as well, and bored, and always eating.” (Third sector respondent)

Independent food banks

We learned of new independent food banks which were established in the villages of Hermitage, Chieveley and Lambourn Junction. Two of these were previously distribution sites for the food bank in the Trussell Trust network prior to it moving to a delivery, rather than client-collection service. The new food banks did not impose any eligibility criteria, nor offer signposting to wider support services. Existing food aid providers offered these independent operations their support.

“So, these are very, very community-focused, and tend to be without criteria and tend to be without any of the signposting or the long-term. So, we’ve had conversations with all of them regarding food dependency and creating food dependency. Some of them get it, some of them don’t. Because they just want to help. So, we have very much stood back and have turned around and said, “If you need support, we are here. If you get a complex case that you are worried about, let us know.” We have, obviously, all the safeguarding, training and connections...” (Third sector respondent)

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in West Berkshire

Below, we summarise some key themes we identified in our interviews and the workshop.

Limitations of the national food box scheme

Distribution of the national food boxes provided by central Government, though welcomed, presented some challenges in their own right. Initially, the data flow as to who would be receiving the boxes was perceived to be slow, and there were difficulties with the delivery mechanisms and in people being able to opt out of deliveries.

“What didn’t work well initially was some of the information that we were receiving from the government in respect of who was clinically extremely vulnerable or, in the first phases of this, called shielding. Some of the data that was coming out that we

needed to use to help our communities to know who would be getting a government food parcel, etc., some of that data flow was not good.” (Council staff respondent)

“They [food boxes] didn’t arrive quick enough. There was a bit of a delay from it starting. There’s a food crisis, these people need a food box. Then there was a bit of a delay from them deciding that to actually them coming out.” (Council staff respondent)

When the Government food box contents were inappropriate for the recipient, adaptations were made in collaboration with local community groups who would purchase culturally sensitive products. Additionally, opting out of receiving the food boxes presented challenges:

“...there was a person who had declined on numerous occasions and the darned thing kept being delivered. He kept declining it and it kept getting delivered.” (Council staff respondent)

“If we were contacted on the hub, that the boxes weren't culturally sensitive, for example, then we would work with our local food providers to see if we could change it in any way, but we didn't receive that many comments about them being culturally insensitive or, indeed, not meeting the needs of people who had medical conditions. We received a few and we got round it. We would contact the local community group and ask them to help buy some different products, which they were happy to do, but it did happen. We did get some calls saying, "I can't eat this. I am on a very restricted diet." (Council staff respondent)

In the absence of being able to opt out of the national scheme, the boxes were often donated to food aid providers, as one respondent shared:

“We did get quite a few where the food bank was getting donations of those food boxes, they [recipients of the boxes] didn’t actually need those food boxes because they were still going out to the supermarket. But because they were on a list that was drawn up, it seemed to be they just got food parcels.” (Council staff respondent)

Funding

Funding for the West Berkshire food aid effort was extensive, and received from a range of sources, including Greenham Trust, some of the smaller town councils, as well as donations for individual groups made by local residents. This was helped by The Good Exchange, the on-line fundraising platform operated by Greenham Trust to allow organisations to crowd fund for specific projects. Whilst this platform was not established in response to COVID, it allowed the public to donate to all of the organisations listed above as having participated in the food aid response.¹⁹

There was widespread recognition for the role Greenham Trust played in supporting the food providers group financially, as one respondent shared:

¹⁹ <https://thegoodexchange.com/>

“We are all a lot closer to the Greenham Trust, because without Greenham Trust, there isn’t one charity in West Berkshire that would have been able to do what we did without their financial support. None. None of us” (Third sector respondent)

The existing food aid providers noted that the additional financial donations offered more financial security than they would previously have had.

Despite the widespread funding, although West Berkshire Volunteer Centre received some funding from Greenham Trust, and from a local donor, they estimate that they will have experienced a financial shortfall of approximately £35,000 due to reduced income previously earned through the paid-for services provided to the public, such as the Shopmobility scheme.

Volunteers

Volunteering was already a feature in West Berkshire, prior to COVID-19, and the volunteer response underpinned much of the response to food insecurity in the area, including the community groups mentioned above.

So they were very new and they were very COVID-focused, but there was already a strong history of volunteering in West Berkshire...” (Council staff respondent)

“Back in March, I think we recruited something like 700 volunteers in about 8 or 9 weeks, something like that, I think, which we then refer to the most appropriate organisations across the district. So, people are ready, willing and able to help out.” (Third sector respondent)

Food donations

Workshop participants shared their experiences of changes experienced in the volume and nature of food donations. These included a reduction in the amount of short life fresh food donations from supermarkets and an increase of catering surplus from FareShare.

“We found that the fresh stuff was not being donated because people were panic-buying, people were very quickly being put on furlough, etc., and were short of money, so they were buying reduced items, which is usually what we’re donated, that hasn’t been sold by the supermarkets.” (Third sector respondent)

“...we noticed that the types of food coming through were different. Because obviously the hospitality sector was closed, so we were getting huge catering packs of all kinds of stuff, which we then had to split out and repackage. So, there was a rapid change in the type of food.” (Third sector respondent)

Surplus food donations were unpredictable, and in some cases finding the appropriate destination for the donated food was a challenge, requiring a flexible approach:

“But it was a very rapid change in the type of food that was coming out through FareShare. And it was a bit of feast or famine. Suddenly, we were offered eight pallettes of cucumbers on a Friday afternoon. Well, there’s not a lot you can do with that really.” (Third sector respondent)

Following the closure of the sector, the hospitality industry became a significant source of food donations. These donations were important when supermarket donations were reduced but they also provided some logistical challenges:

“It’s happened after every lockdown initially, that hotels and restaurants contacted us because they had fridges and freezers and cupboards full of food that they couldn’t use. So, that actually supported a lot of our food provision, when the supermarkets weren’t” (Third sector respondent)

“We were getting 2kg rolls of goat’s cheese, which doesn’t go down very well with food parcels, so we were trading them with top-end restaurants for tins of chopped tomatoes and the like. It was about trying to find the right mix of food that you needed, to supply a particular type [of food provision].” (Third sector respondent)

Established sources of donations, including food surplus distribution organisations provided much of the food stocks being used:

“We get our donated food from Neighbourly and FareShare, so we rely heavily on donated food from supermarkets and obviously the public purse. We have donation bins around various supermarkets around Newbury and Thatcham and Hungerford.” (Third sector respondent)

Food providers also reported sharing food donations between themselves, swapping items for which one organisation had a surfeit, and others a dearth (see Reflections section below).

Triaging & needs assessment

Different approaches to triaging and needs-assessment were adopted, and to different extents. Although the food bank initially relaxed its eligibility criteria, this changed during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the most part retained a focus on food parcel distribution to those in financial crisis. Conversely, Spotlight adopted no eligibility criteria, nor did some of the established organisations with specific service users, such as the homeless community or the elderly, as shared with us:

“We go on the basis that, if somebody tells us they need food, we give them food. If we get conned, so what? It’s food.” (Third sector respondent)

“...a lot of our clients could afford food, albeit a lot of them are on a very tight budget. There were isolated, scared, often not able to cook for themselves, but we did have occasions, we have quite a lot of people who live in Sovereign housing and we would get calls, saying, “People have slipped through the net, they need feeding, can you help?” And we’ve always said yes, we’ve just fed them.” (Third sector respondent)

There was acceptance that some residents may have been accessing support from more than one food aid provider and reflections around the outcomes of not having eligibility criteria were shared:

“I would more than likely say there was a risk of duplication, there were probably people getting double [food] boxes.” (Council staff respondent)

“I remember taking one particular parcel and we tried three times that day. And eventually I found my way into this flat and the young woman there said, “Oh, just leave it there.” I decided to tell a bit of white lie and said, “I think this is going to be ending this week,” and she said, “Oh, we don’t really need it anyway.” So, I said, “Okay, I’ll just leave it.” So, I think there was a lot of that. There was no test as to their actual need, so people were just taking stuff.” (Third sector respondent)

In the early weeks, little distinction was made between financial and physical barriers to food access, but over time people were able to put alternative support systems in place.

“I think the issue was that some people were making a plan and there was a very short period where they couldn’t get access to food, they couldn’t get delivery slots, they couldn’t get other things in place, and they couldn’t put their support in. I would say, in the first four to six weeks, quite a lot of the people we supported initially then had already put their support mechanism in place. That particular group, who had an access issue, it wasn’t a financial issue.” (Third sector respondent)

By the time the priority supermarket slot scheme was established, however, closer attention was paid to the needs assessment before food parcels were delivered from the community food hub:

“It [lack of needs assessment] kind of came to an end, I think, when the Defra scheme, the supermarket priority slots, came in. And that way, from the Council point of view, you could work out a triaging system of who actually needed the food boxes and where they would go. And it did come- I think we had a few volunteers who would come back and say, “X wasn’t in. This person doesn’t need it,” etc., etc.” (Council staff respondent)

From responses to our Padlet data collection, lack of needs assessment was cited as one of the features of responses enacted over the pandemic which should not be continued into the future.

Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

Collaboration

When asked about what worked well during the months of March to September 2020, respondents expressed an appreciation for the way in which people worked together, and for a common purpose.

“And that’s one thing that I want to say at this point, is the collaboration between the charities in West Berkshire has been incredible. We have all stepped up. We have all built relations where they maybe weren’t as strong before. They are strong relationships, and I am very proud of the relationships that we have, sat here today. It has been amazing. And we’ve all done damned well at it. I’m so proud of us all, it’s been brilliant, how we’ve worked together.” (Third sector respondent)

As mentioned above, organisations collaborated by sharing food donations between themselves, as shared by a workshop participant:

“So, I had to work very carefully with [name of another food aid provider]. We swapped food quite regularly, if you had too much of something. But we had to really because we work so closely.” (Third sector respondent)

The Food Aid Providers Group meetings, and the relationships that were established as a result of the collaboration between them all was felt to have contributed to a coordinated response:

“It beautifully came together really that every... We, just, were able to corral the whole group together, whatever they were doing in the food provider space, get them talking, get them sharing food in terms of the various sources of food that were available. You know, whether it be restaurants that had closed or whether it be FareShare or whatever it was, we got this collective really working together in different parts of the community whether it was those in general food poverty families or whether it was those living on the street or, by then, in hostels because that’s what the government... You know, wanted everybody to be under a roof.” (Third sector respondent)

Using a Mentimeter poll, there was strong agreement (score 4.3/5) with the statement that responses to threats to food insecurity in West Berkshire were well coordinated between different actors, however, based on the contributions made using Padlet, there appears to have been some hesitation about the extent to which all organisations worked together, as “siloes” working practices was cited as a feature of the food aid response which should not be continued in the future.

Relationships

Some of the existing food aid providers in the area reflected that they were not clear how or why Spotlight became involved in the response given they were not active in the area prior to the pandemic. One respondent said,

“We had no idea where they came from or why they came.” (Third sector respondent)

However, as noted above, the rationale for their involvement was increased capacity in a time of need.

A Food Providers group was initiated by Greenham Trust and included all the established community organisations. The initial meetings were described as adopting a “top down”

approach, however, in time the organisations individually, and collectively, felt able to be more forthcoming, as one third sector respondent shared:

“The first Food Providers’ Group was obviously chaired by the Council and the Greenham Trust. And the first meeting was very much the Council telling us what we needed to do, which we all found quite surprising, as we’re all charities and that – thankfully, we could do it, and we were doing it. But we all came away from that meeting feeling slightly uncomfortable. Because they were asking us to do things that, actually, for duty of care for our volunteers...because a lot of that involved rough-sleepers, and to deliver to hostels and hotels, for middle-aged women potentially, was quite concerning. So, we actually got together – and I think this is where we’ve all built this amazing community, as charities now – and turned around and said, “Actually, we are the guys doing this, so we have got to have a voice.” So, at the meetings thereafter, we were very much- We felt empowered, I think, enough to say, as a group, “No, actually we can’t do that, but this is the provision that we can provide.” (Third sector respondent)

Established relationships were strengthened as a result of the organisations’ response to the crisis presented by COVID-19. The historical relationship between the funder, Greenham Trust, and the charities it supported was seen as central to the coordinated response:

“I think the level of intelligence we had on what was happening on the street was phenomenal. That’s back to the relationships we had. I think, you know, that’s where I did become pivotal because, you know- That’s why I ran- I brought together the Food Providers Group because the Council didn’t have the same relationships with them. We did because we were the funder, and had done a long time before I was at the trust as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Relationships between the different, established food aid providers were also cemented as a result of their combined efforts throughout the pandemic, as one respondent shared:

“The knowledge that we all have now, regarding the other agencies in our area, that we have all, as I say, come together, we talk more, we communicate more. (Third sector respondent)

The new relationship between the West Berks Foodbank and Dream Doors, described above, was said to enable many more people to support the organisation than might ordinarily have been possible. This benefitted not only the food bank in terms of food stocks, but seemingly the benefits felt by members of the community in being able to make a contribution:

“Everybody wanted to help and, actually, people got quite frustrated when you couldn’t let them. And ‘Food Bank on Your Doorstep’ was this amazing initiative that allowed so many people to help. And because it was the area that you lived in, the streets that you lived in, we were able to get so many people involved. And it was their sense of happiness to be able to do something and to get out and support the community...” (Third sector respondent)

Factors which enabled responses to concerns about food insecurity access

Using the Padlets, a number of items were listed as having been positive in the food aid response in West Berkshire, these were: effective senior leadership team; knowledge sharing and signposting ability; pooled resources; budget management; building on established relationships; agile adaptation to service delivery; and collaborative working

One respondent reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic had reduced the emotional barriers to food bank access, acknowledging that some people are resistant to accessing the support because of the perceived stigma:

“There is a stigma about coming to food banks, we are trying to change it, and I think COVID has changed it, I think people are more willing to come to us. But there still is that stigma, and there still is that very- Especially the working parents or the parents that were working are just so embarrassed to come to us.” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Managing the voluntary response

The coordinated response of established third actors in food aid and in volunteer activity was seen as a strength in the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the spontaneous efforts of the public, were sometimes seen as a challenge:

“I’d say the biggest challenges...I think one of the biggest challenges became managing... You know, lots of people wanted to volunteer and then got very upset because they didn’t have a volunteering role. You ended up with challenges like that. You ended up with lots of groups forming on Facebook. We got this Coronavirus Support Group that just grew exponentially on Facebook with all these do-gooders that were just going off in all kinds of different directions with all kinds of information being shared that shouldn’t have been. People wanted to help but people...Obviously, the potential for scams and stuff like that, you know...” (Third sector respondent)

Safeguarding volunteers

There were discussions within the Community Food Hub assessing which protective measures were appropriate to implement in terms of volunteers and their role in distributing food parcels, or medicines:

“We had to spend a whole load of time talking about safeguarding and did we need to DBS check everybody. We didn’t because most of our volunteers were not crossing the threshold. They were never going to be alone with an individual. They were posting things through kitchen windows. So where people were going over the threshold, that was generally through community care and through adult social care, so those systems were already in place.

Any of our volunteers, we were saying, “You should not be putting yourself or anybody you are supporting in a situation of safeguarding concern.” (Council staff respondent)

Inability to anticipate levels of need

One council respondent suggested that the biggest challenge they faced was not being able to plan for whatever was ahead of them during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the delay in being able to draw on past experience to inform planning.

“...it was all new, so it’s the unexpected, so not taking a step back and going “what do we need to do” you were just always on the front foot, just trying to meet the need without thinking of the next thing that was going to come along , it’s the unexpected was probably the biggest challenge and it still is now, you still don’t know what’s going to happen.” (Council staff respondent)

Present and looking ahead

At the time of the data collection during, February/March 2020, the Community Food Hub remained in operation, maintaining contact with the community groups, identifying and meeting (virtually) with community champions. There was a recognition that the financial vulnerability arising as a result of COVID-19 was likely to be an enduring feature in the area and, that this would inform the Council’s future planning:

“we are very, very attuned to the fact that an enduring legacy of COVID-19 is going to be financial hardship. We need to be attuned to that, and it features very strongly within our recovery plan as to how we are going to seek to meet those needs because it will be an enduring legacy, I believe, with worklessness in families that have never experienced worklessness before.” (Council staff respondent)

The community groups remained active as of March 2020. Their efforts during the early months of the pandemic were particularly celebrated, and the extent to which they became increasingly self-sufficient.

“...lots of them were so resilient, I think again they did such a good job, the community groups of working themselves and it helps now so that we ‘ve not had a mass amount of calls in – I think within the Community Hub now we get phone calls every time there’s a Government release on something, or they just want clarification we get about 10 people ringing who want clarification of a rule, or something, we don’t tend to get any phone calls in needing food and I think that’s probably down to the community groups as well because they have a good handle on who within their community group needs that support and those who need that support know where to go to – so their first port of call is that person within the community group – or volunteer.” (Council staff respondent)

The Volunteer Centre estimated that approximately 20 of the 90 community groups remained active. The other organisations that participated in the research talked about their continuing provision. The organisations supporting the homeless population were continuing off-site food provision in the form of food parcels:

“I just wanted to say that we are still feeding people in hotels, so that is ongoing. So, it was food parcels. Hot food we’ve stopped doing, because we did want a different thing, so we were doing what you might call a ‘picnic parcel’ for them.” (Third sector respondent)

Sovereign residents continue to be supported with referrals to food aid providers, and to be provided with food vouchers for major retailers, however now this support was also linked with longer term processes, such as debt advice, budgeting courses, and skills building for roots to employment:

“Before, we were just sending through a voucher, whereas now, everyone that’s put forward for a voucher actually gets a phone call. A proactive phone call from one of our team, that talks through all the other areas of support that we can help with. So, it tries to link them into our longer-term support, such as our employment and training team, our debt advice schemes, our budgeting courses, our digital courses, everything. So, we’re actually trying to not just offer that emergency help, we’re actually trying to link residents into something that can provide a longer-term solution for them.” (Third sector respondent)

Newbury Soup Kitchen was intending to extend the use of their commercial kitchen unit to other service providers. They were also in the process of expanding their street food provision, and returning to serving meals on-site:

“...we have a beautiful commercial kitchen, that other charities can use at any time, that is sat here, that is not used every day. But it’s just given us way more flexibility of what we can do.” (Third sector respondent)

“we’re also in the process of looking for a food provision van, a catering van, because our safeguarding - because we’re out in the streets, feeding out of the back of a van some days. So, we’ll be expanding the food provision, once we’ve got that too. So, we’ll carry on with the takeaways more, as well as, hopefully this autumn, getting back to doing our sit-down meals.” (Third sector respondent)

The Fair Close Centre had found transportation an issue, presenting a barrier to providing on-site meals once it became permissible. They continued to provide welfare checks by phone calls, and had found that their service users were lacking confidence to return to external provision:

“...we have a welfare service, we’re speaking to people on the phone, to check in and check they’re okay. They just didn’t feel confident going out and about, in the round. And I think going forward, giving people the social confidence to come out and about, even if we are approaching the end of the tunnel, will present its own challenges” (Third sector respondent)

As a result of the work undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emphasis of the activities of Newbury Community Furniture Project has shifted from one where food was a small part of the operation, to increasing capacity in terms of food distribution to food aid providers. Newbury Community Furniture Project now has an established temperature controlled supply chain using the vehicle they purchased with a chiller body, and their relationship with FareShare has strengthened; the once-weekly food delivery they had

previously received has now changed to a food collection from FareShare several times a week, as needed:

“So, things that have remained in place are, for example, now we have a cool chain. Previously, we were very much tinned and dry goods on a lower scale, but now we can deal with a lot more volume, if we need it. We’ve got about 12 vehicles up to 7.5 tons, so we can move a lot of kit quickly, if we need to.

Also, our relationship with FareShare has changed a lot, from FareShare doing one delivery to us on a Monday, to deal with our own demands, now to the fact that FareShare will contact us at various times during the week and say, “We’ve got a surplus,” of whatever, “Can you deal with it?” And we do a same-day collection from them, in order to clear their stocks. But it’s something we can switch on and off now, which we didn’t have before.” (Third sector respondent)

“...we’re looking more to support other groups, rather than be a direct distributor. So, in a way, becoming a kind of hub, to supply other organisations locally that need it, but trying our best to focus as much as we can on things that are not easily donated by the public, in particular fresh foods and chilled foods. That’s what we’re trying to work towards.” (Third sector respondent)

New projects

Community Fridges

West Berks Foodbank was continuing its collaboration with schools, providing food parcels for school staff to distribute as needed:

“So, we’re talking a lot more to the schools about them setting up their own little food cupboards, that they can give to even just the children, they can take it home with them, if they comment or they look like they’re hungry. Or they can speak to the school and the school can just hand it out there and then. So, we’re talking to a lot of schools about offering that provision.” (Third sector respondent)

A community fridge had been established, which they intend to offer their referral partners enabling them to provide their service users with chilled products:

“We now have a fridge that we are going to open up to our referrers. So, people like Home-Start specifically, health visitors, family support workers, to provide full fat milk that’s fresh, for the children, and yoghurts and cheese. So, we won’t provide milk, so we will provide very much the dairy side of things.” (Third sector respondent)

We also learned that Sovereign had plans to develop a community fridge.



The research project **Food Vulnerability during COVID-19** is funded by the ESRC through the UKRI COVID-19 research and innovation fund. To contact the project team please email foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk