



# Access to food in emergencies: learning from Covid-19



**“We get calls daily from people who have just one day’s worth of food left in the house. Sometimes people tell us they haven’t eaten for a couple of days.”**

**(Support Line Team, British Red Cross)**

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# 1. Foreword

The Covid-19 crisis has had a profound effect on our society, and overnight turned people's lives upside down. Throughout the emergency millions of people have been advised to stay at home, and many others have chosen to do so. Many people are also experiencing, or at greater risk of, financial hardship.

The British Red Cross knows from its 150 years' experience responding to emergencies both in the UK and abroad that humanitarian needs evolve throughout a crisis. At the beginning of the pandemic, people flocked to the supermarkets to bulk buy stocks of food; driven by a natural, primal fear of going hungry. Although these anticipated food shortages never came to pass in our supermarkets, millions have nevertheless struggled to access the food they need.

While food insecurity in the UK existed before the Covid-19 crisis began, increased poverty and isolation have exacerbated the issue. National social distancing and lockdown measures are now starting to ease, but without concerted efforts to prevent it, food insecurity among the more vulnerable in our communities could remain. In the coming months, depending on whether and how there is a resurgence of the virus, people may still be advised to isolate and shield, and as a consequence struggle to access food.

Food insecurity inevitably looks different in every emergency and tackling it can be complex. Even as lockdown eases, many of the issues people are facing will remain. As well as preparing for future emergencies, we need to be ready for the next stages of the current situation, such as local lockdowns, and individual isolation due to test and trace.

Continued efforts to better understand vulnerabilities and identify those most at risk is essential. Achieving this requires strong collaboration between all parts of society: the Government, local authorities, local resilience forums, local health and care systems, the voluntary and community sector, and the business community. Each of these parts of the system hold unique insight into local need, as well as access to communities, and by working together can ensure a more holistic, person-centred emergency response.

We've witnessed an immense collective effort during this pandemic to get emergency food parcels to people in need. We've learnt a lot, both about what works and where the gaps are, and what practical steps can be taken to keep improving response in the future.

As part of this, to support a more consistent, clear approach to humanitarian assistance for future UK crises going forward, we would like Government to consider reviewing the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its corresponding guidance to include provision accessible, nutritious food.

Meeting people's practical and emotional needs in an emergency, particularly those in the most vulnerable situations, should be central to any effective crisis response. Ensuring no one goes without without essentials including food because of an emergency is a critical part of that.

## 2. Our research



This report focuses on the UK government approach to addressing food insecurity caused by Covid-19, with a focus on England's policies and initiatives.

This report draws on findings from the following collection of polling, insights and evaluations recently gathered by the British Red Cross. This includes:

- Commissioned polling on lived experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, conducted by Opinium between 12-14 May 2020, with a UK representative sample of 2,000 UK adults and a sample of 203 respondents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.
- Qualitative and quantitative insights from a range of British Red Cross services including:
  - Our UK Emergency Response services. Between March and July 2020, we delivered almost 4,000 deliveries of medicine and more than 50,000 food deliveries to people who have been shielding at home, recently left hospital, refugees and people seeking asylum, and others.
  - Our Hardship Fund programme which gives cash grants to the poorest people facing financial hardship because of the Covid-19 emergency, many of whom could otherwise not have afforded food.
  - Insights from our Coronavirus Support Line,<sup>1</sup> set up to provide support to communities and people in need during the Covid-19 emergency. The support line offers people without a support network someone to talk to, and can help people access food, medicine and emotional support.
- Key insights from voluntary and community sector organisations providing food support, including the Food Foundation and Fareshare.
- Insight and analysis from the British Red Cross and the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership.

<sup>1</sup> British Red Cross' Coronavirus Support Line can be found here: [www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/support-line](http://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/support-line) or 0808 196 3651

### 3. An overview of emergency food provision during Covid-19

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**No single agency has a specific statutory duty to provide food in an emergency** and food is not consistently and explicitly included as an essential part of Humanitarian Assistance under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

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**The Covid-19 emergency has increased food insecurity in the UK.** 16.2 per cent of adults experienced food insecurity after lockdown, compared to 7.63 per cent in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

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**There are two main reasons for this increase in need:** more people are unable to afford food because of the financial impact of Covid-19 and more people have been unable to access food because they have been shielding, unable to leave their homes and unable to order food online.

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**People particularly at risk of food insecurity in today's context** include those with specific health conditions, which make them more vulnerable to Covid-19, alongside people who are unable to afford food.

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**The causes of food insecurity are complex** but key factors include, isolation, poor physical or mental health, lack of employment, financial hardship and insecure accommodation, all of which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. Throughout the emergency, a range of agencies have provided support to people at risk of food insecurity. Yet, people continue to fall through the gaps.

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**Voluntary and community sector organisations have been providing food** in communities by working in partnership, and through utilising new technology and innovative approaches. However, at the same time as donations, access to food and workforce capacity have reduced, demand has increased.

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**Government has provided food box deliveries, vouchers for children who receive free school meals, and worked with businesses to prioritise commercial food delivery slots to those unable to leave their home.** Local authorities in England have received central government funding to deliver this support, including an additional £3.2 billion funding and £63 million specifically for local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials.

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**National and local government support, funding and guidance has prioritised those who are unable to access food because they are on the government's official shielding list.** However, this report identifies many others also in need.

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**Food provision during the course of the emergency is not always tailored to meet needs.** For example, it has often not met people's dietary or accessibility requirements.

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**Food provision looks different across the country.** There is a lack of consistency of approach in either identifying those most vulnerable or in delivering food assistance resulting in a postcode lottery.



## 4. Our recommendations

- 1. Identify those most at risk so that support can be targeted and reach those most in need.** The Government, local resilience forums and local authorities should work with voluntary and community sector organisations to identify people who may struggle to access food, using insights such as the British Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index to develop a better understanding of who is at risk. This nuanced understanding of vulnerability should be incorporated into planning at a local and national level.
- 2. Consider making the provision of accessible, nutritious food a statutory requirement in emergency response.** To ensure a consistent, clear approach to food provision for future crises, the Government consider reviewing the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its corresponding guidance. We need to ensure there is a clear statutory responsibility for national government and Category One responders to fully meet the humanitarian needs of their communities. This should clearly include providing accessible, nutritious food which meets personal requirements. This change should be supported by guidance, training and funding to help relevant organisations deliver this support.
- 3. Ensure food provided in an emergency is suitable and meets people's needs as far as is practical.** The Government should provide clear guidance to make sure food is provided in a way that suits individual needs, setting out recommended pathways of support for all groups who are experiencing food insecurity due to Covid-19. The guidance should outline who is responsible for providing this support, alongside information on how best to identify and meet people's personal requirements as efficiently and effectively as possible, such through emergency cash provision.
- 4. Utilise the strength and insight of the voluntary and community sector to help tackle food insecurity in local areas.**
  - Local resilience forums and local authority hubs should take advantage of the unique insights of voluntary and community sector organisations to help tackle food insecurity in their local areas, as well as ensure a coordinated approach. This could be achieved through mechanisms such as the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership Multiagency Cells. In the longer term, the Government should review the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to legally incorporate the role of the voluntary and community sector into emergency response.
  - The Government should support voluntary and community sector organisations financially so that they can continue to provide food and other essentials throughout the Covid-19 response and in recovery. This should build on existing measures, such as the £750 million government charities fund announced in April 2020.
- 5. Put in measures to tackle the longer-term causes of food insecurity to help prevent people reaching crisis point in the future.** As part of the recovery from the Covid-19 outbreak, practical policy solutions should address the longer-term causes of food insecurity such as health and housing. This will help to build and support resilient communities so that they are better able to prepare effectively for, and recover from, future crises.



## 5. Who is experiencing food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis and why?

Access to food is one of the most basic human needs and is key to ensuring people can cope and recover in an emergency. There are lots of factors behind why someone might need help and support to get the food they or their family need, including their socioeconomic status, pre-existing health conditions, support network, prior experience of trauma, disability or age.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, many people have found it more difficult to get food. The Government and local authorities may not have identified all these people as being at risk of food insecurity, and they may not have a clear way to access support.

“The people who call us are often the ones who are quietly struggling and don’t want to make a fuss. They’re not obviously vulnerable. The impact of something like Covid-19 is so varied, you need to look at the unintended consequences. We need to think outside the box with our planning and response.”

**(Psychosocial Support Team and Support Line Supervisor, British Red Cross)**

We’ve developed the British Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index to help identify which groups are at higher risk of food insecurity. These include lone parents, large families, those with disabilities or health problems, those who are or were self-isolating, free school meal recipients, people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME), and unemployed people.

A number of different factors seem to have increased the likelihood of food insecurity during the Covid-19 outbreak, and there is some crossover between them. Many factors can cause food insecurity, including poverty, poor physical or mental health, accommodation or lack of it, education and employment. Some of these underlying issues have been particularly exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, for example the social and psychological impact of Covid-19 has increased the risk of anxiety, depression and self-harm.<sup>3</sup>

### Groups at a higher risk of food insecurity include:

- lone parents
- large families
- those with disabilities or health problems
- those who are or were self-isolating
- free school meal recipients
- people from BAME backgrounds
- unemployed people



<sup>3</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (June 2020) Financial support for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to respond to coronavirus (Covid-19) [www.gov.uk/guidance/financial-support-for-voluntary-community-and-social-enterprise-vcse-organisations-to-respond-to-coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/financial-support-for-voluntary-community-and-social-enterprise-vcse-organisations-to-respond-to-coronavirus-covid-19)

## People unable to access food

### People who have been shielding or self-isolating

Some people have found it difficult to get the food that they need due to the constraints of shielding or self-isolation. These include people who are:

- Clinically extremely vulnerable and have been advised to 'shield'. They may have been identified by central government or may subsequently have been placed in this category by their GP or hospital care team. There have been challenges around who has been identified within this group, including regional differences over which conditions are included, and some people have found themselves removed or added from the list without prior warning. People who are shielding have been advised to stay at home and have therefore been entitled to a specific package of government support, including food (currently up until 1 August 2020). This group's needs will evolve in line with government guidance on shielding.
- Clinically vulnerable, such as those who are 70 or older, have a specific condition, are taking medicine that can affect their immune system, are obese or are pregnant.<sup>4</sup> Clinically vulnerable people have been advised to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside their household, and many have chosen not to leave their homes.
- Self-isolating because they or a household member have Covid-19, or have recently been in close contact with someone who has. In the coming months, more people may be asked to self-isolate ahead of hospital appointments and under the new Test and Trace scheme.

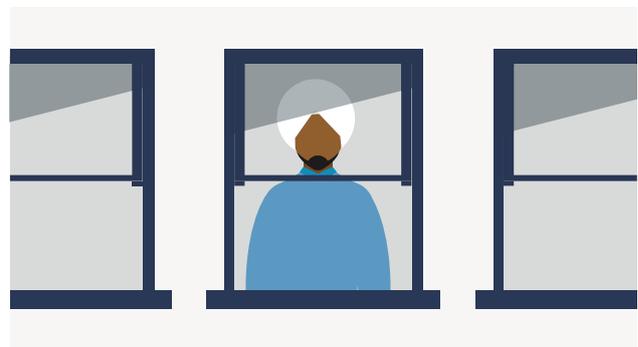
- Disabled people. Forty-five per cent of disabled people have reported being worried about their access to groceries, medication and essentials during the Covid-19 outbreak, compared with 21.9 per cent of non-disabled people.<sup>5</sup>

“We speak to people who have underlying health conditions that previously hadn't limited their lives too much. But shielding brought their life to a standstill.”

(Support line worker, British Red Cross)

### People who lack support networks

Being unable to access food is compounded if someone is socially isolated and unable to seek informal support from friends, family or neighbours. Before the Covid-19 emergency, loneliness affected as many as one in five people across the UK.<sup>6</sup> Over the last few months, our lives and daily interactions with friends and loved ones have changed in unprecedented ways. Polling commissioned by the British Red Cross carried out in mid-May found that 41 per cent of UK adults report feeling lonelier since lockdown, and 31 per cent of UK adults reported often feeling alone, as though they have no one to turn to.



4 Lancet Multidisciplinary research priorities for the Covid-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science Lancet Psychiatry 2020; 7: 547–60 Published Online April 15, 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30168-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30168-1) [www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpsy/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30168-1.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpsy/PIIS2215-0366(20)30168-1.pdf)

5 NHS England (June 2020) Who's at higher risk from coronavirus [www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus)

6 Office for National Statistics (May 2020) Coronavirus and the social impacts on disabled people in Great Britain: May 2020 [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsondisabledpeopleingreatbritain/may2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsondisabledpeopleingreatbritain/may2020)

## Black, Asian and minority ethnic people

Our polling found that 20 per cent of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds would find emergency items like food helpful, compared to 11 per cent of the UK adult population as a whole. This reflects the fact that ethnic minority adults are nearly twice as likely to be food insecure as white and mixed ethnicity adults.<sup>7</sup> People from BAME backgrounds are also more likely to live in the most economically vulnerable areas.<sup>8</sup>

## Households with children and young people

Households with children are more commonly affected by food insecurity. Our polling found that 19 per cent of households with children under the age of five would find support or information related to emergency items helpful, compared to 9 per cent of those without children. This is consistent with findings released by the Food Foundation in May 2020, which showed that the number of people experiencing food insecurity in households containing children doubled to 3.2 million during the first five weeks of lockdown.

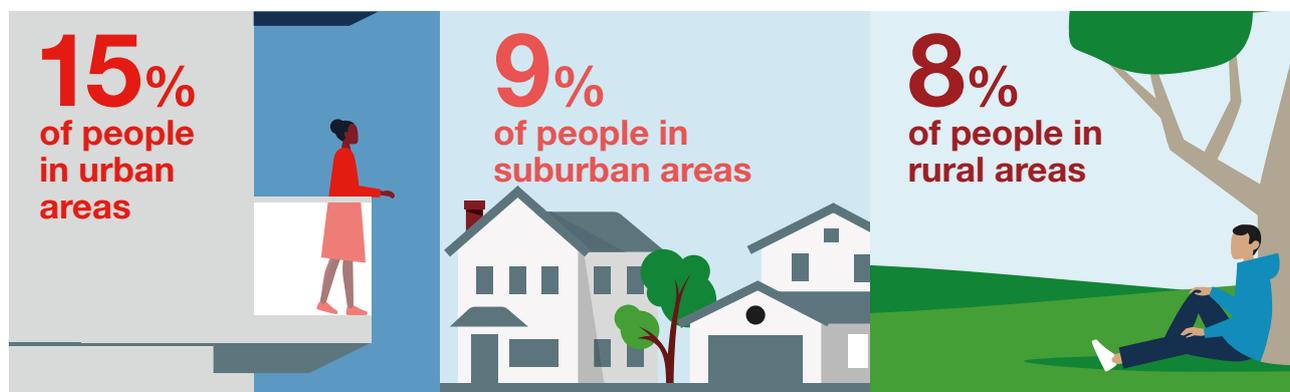
## Geographical variation

Our recent polling found that food insecurity is more common in cities. Fifteen per cent of those who lived in urban areas said that they would find support with emergency items (including food, water, clothes or toiletries) helpful, compared to 9 per cent in suburban areas and 8 per cent in rural areas.

When broken down by region, London had a higher level of interest in emergency items such as food, with 19 per cent indicating they would want this support. This aligns with findings from the Food Foundation, which showed that the highest levels of food insecurity are within London, along with the North West and East of England.<sup>9</sup>

Geographical variation around food insecurity is linked to rates of stable employment, financial insecurity, and numbers of low-income households with dependent children as well as older people living alone.<sup>10</sup> Major towns and cities tend to contain the most vulnerable communities and have experienced higher rates of Covid-19.

## People who would find support with emergency items, such as food, helpful



7 British Red Cross (2016) Trapped in a bubble An investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK [www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/co-op-trapped-in-a-bubble-report.pdf](https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/co-op-trapped-in-a-bubble-report.pdf)

8 B Franklin et al Exploring mediators of food insecurity and obesity: a review of recent literature. J Community Health. 2012;37(1):253-264. doi:10.1007/s10900-011-9420-4

9 Steve Garner and Gargi Bhattacharyya (May 2011) Poverty, ethnicity and place <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poverty-ethnicity-place-full.pdf>

10 Food Foundation (May 2020) The Impact of Coronavirus on Food: third survey – five weeks into lockdown <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-five-million-people-living-in-households-with-children-have-experienced-food-insecurity-since-lockdown-started>

## People facing financial hardship

Increasing numbers of people cannot afford food due to the economic impact of Covid-19. In an April 2020 survey by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), 23.6 per cent of adults reported that Covid-19 was affecting their household finances,<sup>11</sup> and figures in early May suggested 8.6 million people had seen their incomes fall. There has also been a large increase in unemployment; 856,500 people registered for Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance benefits in April 2020, representing an increase of 69 per cent in a single month. Of the 3.1 million households in the most serious difficulty due to the pandemic, 41 per cent were receiving either out of work benefits or Working Tax Credit.

At the same time as more people are facing financial hardship, food is becoming more expensive. Prices of everyday items increased by 4.4 per cent between 16-22 March and 6-12 April,<sup>12</sup> and an April 2020 report from the Work and Pensions Select Committee found that some people were struggling to make ends meet.<sup>13</sup>

Food insecurity due to financial hardship will likely continue to be a critical issue as we move from the immediate response to the Covid-19 emergency towards recovery, with most economic scenarios predicting a more severe financial impact than the recession in 2008.

“The knock-on effects of Covid-19 created a new group of vulnerable people – those who were unemployed for the first time, and applying for benefits for the first time. Young people in their first flat, or in their first job. I don't think anyone was ready for the volume and the economic impact. There was a bottleneck on benefits.”<sup>14</sup>

**(Independent Living Service  
British Red Cross)**

Financial insecurity during the Covid-19 outbreak particularly affects:<sup>15,16</sup>

- social care workers
- men in the lowest-paid occupations
- renters
- homeless people
- those without bank accounts, such as ex-prisoners or those with insecure immigration status
- self-employed people
- families and lone parents
- those with no recourse to public funds
- people with long-term health conditions/ disabilities
- people living in debt or without savings
- people working in vulnerable sectors including accommodation, hospitality, arts, entertainment, recreation and retail.

11 IBID Food Foundation (May 2020) The Impact of Coronavirus on Food third survey – five weeks into lockdown [https://foodfoundation.org.uk/vulnerable\\_groups/food-foundation-polling-third-survey-five-weeks-into-lockdown](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/vulnerable_groups/food-foundation-polling-third-survey-five-weeks-into-lockdown)

12 Office for National Statistics (April 2020) Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 30 April 2020 [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/30april2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/30april2020)

13 Office for National Statistics (April 2020) Coronavirus, the UK economy and society, faster indicators: 16 April 2020 [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronavirustheukeconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/16april2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronavirustheukeconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/16april2020)

14 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (April 2020) What we learned from our survey into people's experiences of the benefits system during the coronavirus outbreak

15 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (April 2020) Covid-19 is a greater health risk to people on low incomes: we can give a life-line [www.jrf.org.uk/blog/covid-19-greater-health-risk-people-low-incomes-we-can-give-life-line](http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/covid-19-greater-health-risk-people-low-incomes-we-can-give-life-line)

16 Maja Gustafsson & Charlie McCurdy (May 2020) Risky business Economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis on different groups of workers [www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/risky-business](http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/risky-business)

## Refugees and people seeking asylum

Among the groups that have often struggled to afford food are refugees and people seeking asylum. As the UK's largest provider of support to refugees and people seeking asylum, the British Red Cross sees how hard it is for those seeking asylum to live off only £37 a week. Five pounds a day means people are forced to choose between buying food, mobile data, or hygiene products.

While malnutrition was already prevalent among these communities before Covid-19,<sup>17</sup> the current crisis has compounded the issue. Food poverty has been identified as a growing need among those who use our own and our partners' refugee services, alongside other needs such as isolation, loneliness and digital exclusion – which also can limit someone's access to food.

**“Some people have tried to get help but they are on a waiting list or are waiting for benefit payments to come. Or maybe the person who had been helping them is now ill or shielding themselves. We're used to thinking 'some people are one pay packet away from losing their home' – we need to consider how close any of us are to one break in our chain of support meaning we can't get hold of food in an emergency.”**  
(Independent Living Services Manager)



## 6. What support is available in England?

### Support for clinically extremely vulnerable people

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) provides a weekly box of basic supplies for those identified as clinically extremely vulnerable who have registered for support, as well as priority supermarket deliveries and help meeting basic care needs. At the end of May 2020 over two million boxes of food had been delivered to people in England through this scheme. From 31 July, due to the guidance for shielding for clinically extremely vulnerable people changing, the government food box scheme will end.

### Support for clinically vulnerable people

Those who are clinically vulnerable or have no other means of support can request help from their local authority. The Government has provided an overview of how local authorities can signpost people to commercial support such as telephone or online supermarket services, food box delivery, prepared meal delivery and other non-supermarket food delivery providers.<sup>18</sup> DEFRA has also launched a service allowing local authorities to refer non-shielded vulnerable people for reserved grocery delivery services.

### Support for children and young people

The Department for Education has developed a national voucher scheme to help schools continue to provide food for pupils who would normally be eligible for free school meals, including some children who have no recourse to public funds.<sup>19</sup> This scheme has been extended to support people over the school holidays as part of the Covid Summer Food Fund.

“They didn’t always know whether they had slipped through the net, but had had problems getting through to services due to reduced staff and remote working etc. As a result, they were left feeling in limbo, not sure what was happening behind the scenes, so they called the support line to try to make sure they would receive a food delivery.

**(Support Line Volunteer, British Red Cross)**

### Support for financially insecure people

Local authorities have been providing support to a range of people who are experiencing food insecurity. The support provided varies across local authorities. For example, in Hackney, people who need urgent food supplies but are unable to afford them can apply online for urgent delivery of basic supplies.<sup>20</sup> York City Council provides lists of businesses who are delivering food, and details of how to contact their Covid-19 Helpline if someone

17 British Medical Association (2020) Unique Health Challenges for Refugees and Asylum Seekers <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/refugees-overseas-visitors-and-vulnerable-migrants/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-patient-health-toolkit/unique-health-challenges-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

18 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (June, 2020) Food for Vulnerable People: commercial food access options <https://bit.ly/food-delivery-services>

19 Department for Education (May 2020) Coronavirus (Covid-19): temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to NRPf groups [www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups)

20 Hackney Council Coronavirus – food deliveries <https://hackney.gov.uk/coronavirus-food-delivery#food>

does not have any money to pay for food or if they're vulnerable and don't have internet access or anyone who can help.<sup>21</sup> Examples of best practice can be seen on the Local Government Association's website. The Government supported local authorities to do this through a £63 million local welfare assistance fund.

The Department for Work and Pensions has increased the basic element of Working Tax Credit and rates for Child Benefit and the Guardian's Allowance, alongside other tax credit rates and thresholds. The Government has also introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (enabling people to be furloughed) and a Self-Employment Income Support Scheme to help protect jobs and businesses.

**Yet there are significant challenges to these initiatives, programmes and policies which should be considered when developing future recovery or lockdown plans.**

- Government initiatives are **not being fully implemented or delivered**. For example, half of children on meal vouchers have experienced a significant drop in their consumption of fruit and vegetables since the Covid-19 lockdown began,<sup>22</sup> and the vouchers cannot be used in all supermarkets.
- **Food provision is approached differently within and between local authorities**. For example, the national voucher scheme requires each school to apply for vouchers, creating local variation in support available to the most vulnerable. Without a statutory duty to provide this support, or consistent funding

or guidance setting standards about access to food for the most vulnerable, a postcode lottery is difficult to avoid. Local authorities have raised concerns about their capacity to source and deliver food.<sup>23</sup> They are also forecasting budget shortfalls and in extreme cases bankruptcy, which may prevent them from being able to address food insecurity in their communities going forward.

- **These initiatives are time or fund limited**. For example, food boxes for the clinically extremely vulnerable are due to discontinue at the end of July, and the free school meal voucher scheme only covers the period up until each school's summer term and while the Covid Summer Food Fund will support people throughout the summer period, it is not clear what will happen during future holidays. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is due to end in October.
- **Support has often been limited to those who are shielding**. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has only produced guidance for food provision for clinically extremely vulnerable people during Covid-19.
- **Support provided often doesn't meet people's immediate needs**. For example, new Universal Credit applicants must wait five weeks for a first payment, meaning they may not be able to afford essentials in the interim.
- **Support often doesn't address the root causes of food insecurity**. Food insecurity can have a long and lasting impact. Children who have experienced food insecurity are likely to have poorer health as adults.<sup>24</sup>

21 City of York Council Covid-19: Accessing food [www.york.gov.uk/CovidAccessingFood](http://www.york.gov.uk/CovidAccessingFood)

22 Local Government Association (June 2020) Covid-19: FAQs [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-faqs#suplocal](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-faqs#suplocal). See Emergency food provision

23 Professor Greta Defeyter & Dr Emily Mann (June 2020) The Free School Meal Voucher Scheme: What are children actually eating and drinking? <https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/news/documents/pdf/covid-19-free-school-meal-vouchers-final.pdf?modified=20200605160553>

24 Local Government Association (June 2020) Covid-19: FAQs [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-faqs#suplocal](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-faqs#suplocal). See the 'supporting local communities' section



**“Most people are pretty stoic and used to getting on with things. But we’re hearing from people who find they’re struggling and didn’t expect to be, and by the time they call us, they’re desperate. Some people have tried to help themselves – they’ve made arrangements with neighbours or family to pick up food, but when their support network goes down with Covid, they’re suddenly on their own”**

**(Psychosocial Support Team and Support Line Supervisor, British Red Cross)**

## 7. A snapshot of approaches from across the UK

This report focuses on the UK Government approach to addressing food insecurity caused by the Covid-19 crisis. However, each devolved government has undertaken a significant programme of food support tailored to population needs.

### Scotland

A £70 million Food Fund was put in place by the Scottish Government to support those who would otherwise be unable to access food.<sup>25</sup> This comprised £30 million for food deliveries for the 'shielded' groups at highest clinical risk and a further £30 million was made available to local authorities working with local resilience partnerships to deliver food support for older people, those with long-term health conditions and pregnant women, as well as free school meals support.<sup>26</sup> The remaining £10 million was allocated for voluntary and community sector organisations responding to needs at both the national and local level. In addition, the Scottish Welfare Fund was doubled, increasing the volume of crisis grants available to people on low incomes to meet their immediate living costs for food and heating costs. Underpinning this is the Scottish Government's cash-first approach which aims to preserve dignity and agency, enabling people to buy the food and essentials they need. In mid-June the Scottish Government announced a £27.6 million package of additional funding for local authorities to continue the provision of free school meals to children in low income families over the summer. The latest data from local authorities shows that around 175,000 children and young people are currently receiving free school meals, vouchers or cash payments to buy meals, an increase of 53,000 since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>27</sup>



Photo © Patrick Cruywagen/BRC

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education (June 2020) Providing free school meals during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak [www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools)

<sup>26</sup> Trussell Trust (November 2019) The State of Hunger Introduction to a Study of Food Poverty and Food Insecurity in the UK [www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SoH-Interim-Report-Final-2.pdf](http://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SoH-Interim-Report-Final-2.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Scottish Government (April 2020) Coronavirus (Covid-19): Food Fund guidance for local authorities [www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/pages/the-food-fund](http://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/pages/the-food-fund)

## Wales

The Welsh Government made £15 million available in April for the direct delivery of food to the 80,000 people asked to shield for up to 12 weeks and who did not have family members, friends or neighbours able to support them.<sup>28</sup> The food boxes contain essential foods in packages and tins, designed to provide food for one person who is shielding for one week. By the end of May, 50,000 food boxes had been delivered.<sup>29</sup> An additional £11.5 million was available for the Discretionary Assistance Fund for families facing hardships.<sup>30</sup>



## Northern Ireland

The Department for Communities provided £6.3 million funding to local government and the voluntary and community sector to support the most vulnerable through the Covid-19 Food Parcel Service, from 6 April to 26 June 2020.<sup>31</sup> This weekly support, distributed through local Council Distribution Hubs, in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, could be accessed by people notified to shield by their GP and who could not access food through online shopping, family, friends or local support networks. The scheme also supported people who were not shielding, but in critical need of food. The Department for Communities has extended the food parcel programme until 31 July.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Department of Education put in place a system to pay families on a fortnightly basis £2.70 per child per day to support almost 97,000 children entitled to free school meals.<sup>33</sup>

28 Welsh Government (April 2020) First food boxes delivered to the homes of people shielding from coronavirus <https://gov.wales/first-food-boxes-delivered-homes-people-shieldingcoronavirus>

29 Nation.Cymru (May 2020) Senedd roundup: Covid-19 deaths and new cases in decline as ministers review lockdown <https://nation.cymru/news/senedd-roundup-covid-19-deathsand-new-cases-in-decline-as-ministers-review-lockdown>

30 Nation.Cymru (May 2020) Senedd roundup: The £2.4 billion coronavirus bill facing Wales <https://nation.cymru/news/senedd-roundup-the-2-4-billion-coronavirus-bill-facingwales>

31 Department for Communities (June 2020) Food Parcel Service to be extended for those medically shielding [www.communitiesni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-thosemedically-shielding](http://www.communitiesni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-thosemedically-shielding)

32 Department for Communities (June 2020) Changes to how we will help you access food during COVID-19 from 26 June [www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-covid-19-letter-changesto-how-we-will-help-you-access-food.pdf](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-covid-19-letter-changesto-how-we-will-help-you-access-food.pdf)

33 Department for Communities Free School Meals Payment Scheme [www.education-ni.gov.uk/free-school-mealspayment-scheme](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/free-school-mealspayment-scheme)

## 8. The role of the voluntary and community sector

### Case study: Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership Multiagency Cells

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCS EP) aims to bring together expertise from across the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to improve the coordination of efforts before, during and after emergencies, while promoting a human-centred approach throughout. The VCS EP is an important mechanism for the sector and government to coordinate efforts to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak in England.

The VCS EP has established five multiagency cells across England to provide support to people in vulnerable situations who can't get help locally. Each cell includes experts from across the voluntary and community sector, including the British Red Cross, Muslim Charities Forum, St John Ambulance, Salvation Army, Team Rubicon and Victim Support. These multiagency cells will consider local requests for support and arrange help from an appropriate organisation.

#### The key responsibilities of the multiagency cells are to:

- identify the unmet needs of people in vulnerable situations
- manage and mobilise resources to respond to that need
- escalate the need to the VCS EP or the government if it's not possible to meet the need at a regional level.

In addition to informal networks providing food to tackle food insecurity in their communities, voluntary organisations like the British Red Cross have been working hard since the outbreak of Covid-19 to ensure people have food. We've been trying to put more food into the system by providing logistical support and volunteers for more than 50,000 food deliveries.<sup>34</sup> We have partnered with existing food networks such as FareShare to reach people at scale in urgent situations, joined forces with organisations such as Tesco to access food and everyday essentials, and set up a personalised shopping scheme, which utilises new technologies such as the Huggg app.

Our Hardship Fund provides short-term financial help for vulnerable people who cannot afford essentials including food.<sup>35</sup> As of June our Coronavirus Support Line has helped 3,448 callers with advice, practical help and a listening ear over the phone.<sup>36</sup> More than half were in need of urgent practical help, such as food or medicine, 60 per cent of whom said they would have run out of food within just one day without help.

Through providing food, voluntary organisations can also empower people to access other forms of support, such as addiction services, accommodation or mental health support. These services can help build community resilience, leaving communities in a stronger position to deal with future crises.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has provided valuable support for VCS organisations during the Covid-19 outbreak. It has given up to £16 million to charities to provide food, alongside £3.25 million to help cut food waste and redistribute up to 14,000 tonnes of surplus food.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Government-

<sup>34</sup> Between 1 March and 13 June 2020

<sup>35</sup> British Red Cross Hardship Fund <https://brc-wp-cashcard.azurewebsites.net>

<sup>36</sup> Between 2 April to 13th June 2020

<sup>37</sup> Government [online] Cash support for food redistribution during coronavirus outbreak

[www.gov.uk/government/news/cash-support-for-food-redistribution-during-coronavirusoutbreak](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/cash-support-for-food-redistribution-during-coronavirusoutbreak)

led volunteering initiatives such as the NHS Volunteer Responders programme have been mobilised to deliver food.<sup>38</sup>

However, voluntary and community organisations face significant challenges. Numbers of staff and volunteers have dropped due to illness or vulnerability, while demand for food has increased. For example, the number of people accessing foodbanks in the last two weeks of March 2020 was up 81 per cent on the same period in 2019.<sup>39</sup> Foodbanks have also seen donations drop, or have had difficulties buying supplies, and while foodbanks are not the right solution for everyone, many people rely on them. Charities in the UK are also reporting a 48 per cent drop in voluntary income.<sup>40</sup>

### How digital innovation can help

The British Red Cross and Huggo have launched a new digital shopping service to support those who are self-isolating or shielding but who don't qualify for food parcels or online delivery services as they are not extremely clinically vulnerable. People can use the service to purchase a digital supermarket voucher, fill out an online shopping list, and request support from the Red Cross volunteer network, who will assign a volunteer to buy and deliver the shopping within 24 hours. It's a personalised, choice-led way of increasing access to food.



Photo © Patrick Cruywagen/BRC

38 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (April 2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19): Accessing food and essential supplies [www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-accessingfood-and-essential-supplies](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-accessingfood-and-essential-supplies)

39 Trussell Trust (May 2020) Food banks report record spike in need as coalition of anti-poverty charities call for strong lifeline to be thrown to anyone who needs it [www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call](https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call)

40 Institute for Fundraising (March 2020) Coronavirus Impact Survey Results: Charities Cannot meet the surge in demand for services without urgent funding from the Government [www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/news/coronavirus-impactsurvey-results-charities-cannot-meet-the](https://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/news/coronavirus-impactsurvey-results-charities-cannot-meet-the)

## 9. A human-centred approach to tackling food insecurity

The British Red Cross believes that emergency food provision should be personalised. It should meet dietary and medical requirements, considering factors like religious beliefs, allergies, eating abilities or availability of cooking equipment.

However, the Covid-19 response to tackling food insecurity has not always been shaped to meet individual needs. The food boxes provided by government for the extremely clinically vulnerable are generally standardised. Though their contents are reviewed by nutritionists from Public Health England and measures are in place to ensure the food quality is consistent, this does not necessarily reflect individual requirements. To enable personalisation each box now includes a note outlining what to do if the food is not suitable.<sup>41</sup> However, some people have not been able to understand or act on this information, due to language barriers, for example. As far as practical, personalisation should be built into all emergency support and pathways.

“Worrying about food can make people depressed or anxious. Sometimes people are expecting a food parcel and it doesn’t come. They’re left with little to no food and the uncertainty of who is bringing this parcel, and when it will arrive.

“Others find the lack of control over their food supply upsetting. We heard from a woman whose son was helping her out, but he wasn’t able to get a big shop in, she was reliant on whatever he could manage to get, and it was only a couple of day’s food each time.”

**(Psychosocial Support Team and Support Line Supervisor, British Red Cross)**

### Access to support

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Any support to tackle food insecurity needs to be fully accessible, which might differ from person to person. For example, government-provided food parcels are mostly delivered to recipients’ doorsteps, yet some people might not be able to carry the box into their home. Additional food delivery slots from supermarkets may not be helpful for those with lower levels of technological literacy or access, including many older people. Adjustments to enable social distancing in supermarkets, such as one-way systems, queuing or only allowing one person from a household to enter may not reflect the needs of those who are disabled or have a carer.

“For people who are shielding, there’s an assumption they can get online and order food. There’s problems with this – not everyone is online, and in rural areas connections can be poor, or people rely on being able to get out to get a phone signal and internet, but now can’t, they’re effectively cut off. Delivery slots are hard to come by too, so people wait, or try to find alternatives, then suddenly they’re within days of running out of food.”

**(Psychosocial Support Team and Support Line Supervisor, British Red Cross)**

<sup>41</sup> Parliament (April 2020) Food Supply: Coronavirus: Written question – 3963 [www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-04-24/39632](http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-04-24/39632)

## Financial support

For those able to leave home, giving people cash is an efficient way to provide immediate support, enabling people to make personalised and culturally specific choices about their food. During the Covid-19 outbreak, the British Red Cross has set up a Hardship Fund that provides short-term help for people who cannot afford essentials such as food and toiletries, empowering them to make decisions about their own lives.

Our polling showed that financial support was particularly valued by some of the groups who are more vulnerable to food insecurity. For example, we found that 12 per cent of BAME respondents had sought out financial support for short-term needs – compared to 5 per cent of UK adults – and they were also twice as likely to be interested in financial support in the longer-term. Respondents living with children were also more likely to be interested in financial help for things like accommodation and food, as were younger people aged 18-34 and those who had been shielding.

Government or local authorities should consider forms of cash, rather than food vouchers.

However, it is recognised that giving people cash does not help those who physically cannot access food, and that providing immediate food or money directly does not tackle the underlying causes of food insecurity.

## Clear information

Clear, consistent, accessible information on how to access food is vital. This can include ensuring the information is available in a range of languages and through various communication channels.

Some groups may find it particularly difficult to get good information. For example, the main source of official information is the internet. Yet 5.3 million people – 79 per cent of whom are over 65 – have not gone online in the last three months or ever.<sup>42</sup> Older people, those living in poverty, and refugees and people seeking asylum may particularly struggle to access information, as they may have limited access to mobile phones or devices to access the internet. Other factors stopping people accessing information include language barriers, mental health issues, isolation or fear of public authorities.<sup>43</sup>

## A human-centred approach to emergency response

A human-centred approach to crisis response means that organisations and systems empower people to access personalised support at times of crisis. People and communities should be involved in every stage of crisis planning (before, during and in recovery). At times of crisis, the people involved:

- will have the best idea of the support they need most
- have distinct psychological, emotional and social needs, as well as immediate practical needs (such as for shelter and food)
- may need support in their longer-term recovery and not just in the immediate aftermath of a crisis.

<sup>42</sup> Office for National Statistics (March 2019) Exploring the UK's digital divide [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04)

<sup>43</sup> Refugee Action (May 2020) How the Refugee and Asylum Sector Responded Rapidly to the Impact of Covid-19 [www.refugee-action.org.uk/how-the-refugee-and-asylumsector-responded-rapidly-to-the-impact-of-covid-19](https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/how-the-refugee-and-asylumsector-responded-rapidly-to-the-impact-of-covid-19)

# 10. Who should provide food assistance in a crisis?

It is unclear who legally holds the responsibility for food provision in emergencies. This has resulted in an inconsistent response to food insecurity across the country during the Covid-19 crisis.

## The legal framework

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The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its corresponding regulations and guidance require ‘Category One’ responders – such as emergency services, local authorities and NHS bodies – to plan for and meet the needs of those affected by emergencies. The Act’s non-statutory guidance outlines that such needs can be met by humanitarian support, which includes short-term help like medical treatment, food, shelter, and being reunited with friends and family, as well as longer-term support accessing financial help, advice or accommodation.<sup>45</sup> However, providing humanitarian support – such as food – is not currently a statutory requirement.

## The role of local authorities

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Local authorities are largely responsible for providing humanitarian support to certain vulnerable people, coordinated by their adult social care departments.<sup>46</sup> Yet providing food is not a general statutory duty for local authorities in an emergency.<sup>47</sup> They are required to provide food for particular groups in specific circumstances – such as in schools and care settings – but though these groups may be vulnerable in a crisis, the range of people affected by food insecurity is much broader.<sup>48</sup> This lack of clarity on what food should be provided and by whom results in a postcode lottery. While multiple organisations often attempt to provide food for different groups, too many people fall through the gaps.



<sup>45</sup> Cabinet Office (October 2013) Emergency Response and Recovery Non statutory guidance accompanying the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/253488/Emergency\\_Response\\_and\\_Recovery\\_5th\\_edition\\_October\\_2013.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253488/Emergency_Response_and_Recovery_5th_edition_October_2013.pdf). Though is referenced in the Human Aspects in Cabinet Office (2016) Emergency Management Guidance on supporting individuals affected by emergencies [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/564306/human\\_aspects\\_guidance\\_2016\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/564306/human_aspects_guidance_2016_final.pdf)



Photo © Peter Flude/BRC

46 Cabinet Office (2008) Identifying People Who Are Vulnerable in a Crisis Guidance for Emergency Planners and Responders [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/61228/vulnerable\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61228/vulnerable_guidance.pdf)

47 Parliament (July 2019) Food Supply: Written question – 281010 [www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-07-23/281010](http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-07-23/281010)

48 Parliament (July 2019) Food Supply: Written question – 281010 [www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-07-23/281010](http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-07-23/281010)

# 11. Moving forward: ensuring a human-centred approach to food provision in an emergency

**Food should be a central part of any humanitarian emergency response. Every person should have access to food that meets their dietary requirements and personal circumstances no matter who they are or where they live in an emergency.**

Since the Covid-19 crisis began, the voluntary and community sector, businesses, local and national government, statutory agencies and spontaneous community groups have stepped up to support people affected by the pandemic. Together, we have worked tirelessly to ensure vulnerable people have what they need to cope, whether that be food, medicine, connections or cash.

Despite these efforts people have fallen through the gaps, hardship has grown and many more are struggling. Through our own Covid-19 response, the British Red Cross has seen an increase in food insecurity, as well as an increase in many of its triggers, from financial struggles to social isolation.

But we've also seen new ways of working and emerging solutions to these challenges - unique cross-sector partnerships, more nuanced assessments of vulnerabilities, the provision of small cash grants to enable choice and tide people over before their benefits come in.

As the UK moves into the next phases of the Covid-19 response, we must take stock of the challenges, the gaps, and the learnings so far. If we act now, we can ensure we're better prepared for whatever happens next, whether that be a second wave, multiple local lockdowns, recovery, or even the next emergency.



For more information, please contact  
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