RoseRegeneration

Food in vulnerable communities

A research project for the
Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership
(South West)

RoseRegeneration

Contents

1. Introduction & Methodology

1.1 From crisis to a new normal for the voluntary and community sector: the role of food in vulnerable communities

Food insecurity provides a lens through which to understand a wider range of impacts linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, food insecurity helps us understand the role that the voluntary and community sector (VCS) has played in the pandemic – not just in helping to provide food support, but in linking this support to mitigate the effects of the broader social and economic impacts on local communities. Many of the issues identified in this report and the response to them predate the pandemic, which has brought them to a head. A huge civic effort, organised at the local level, has demonstrated the significant capacity of local people to solve big challenges when faced by a crisis without undue direction and, in some cases, with very little external funding.

There are some profound learning points arising from the response of local VCS organisations to the challenges of ensuring everyone had enough to eat during the past 18 months. The evidence collected for this report provides some fascinating pointers to understanding the way community capacity and the scope for local action manifests itself not just in terms of food insecurity but more widely. Looking to the future, this report recommends:

- The role of local food as a pathway to a deeper understanding of other issues of disadvantage and vulnerability justifies an ongoing dialogue about how access to food support and levels of food insecurity act as an indicator of wider challenges in local communities.

- The task of building sustainability into local food action in the context of volunteering, social enterprise and third party support from statutory and giving organisations is key territory for VCS infrastructure bodies and must be kept on the agenda going forward.

- The opportunities to build social impact through scaling up and transferring good ideas (recognising that everywhere is different and will need to follow its own path in implementing good practice) should be further considered. This needs to be done in a future-looking way – following new trails around opportunities, such as the extension of pay-as-you-feel and community supported agriculture, for locally owned and sustainable solutions to local challenges.

- The scope for digitally enabled activities (for example, using social media applications such as Facebook or WhatsApp or using remote learning approaches via Zoom or Teams) to enhance and grow local initiative, particularly in rural settings where sparsity impedes local connection to services, should be further considered.

1.2 Purpose of the research

This **food in vulnerable communities across the South West[1]** research was commissioned by the eight local lead liaisons (LLLs) for the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership – South West (VCSEP [SW]). The LLLs wanted to develop their understanding around the complex and changing nature of food and the eco-system

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[1] For the purpose of this report the 'South West' includes the Thames Valley as the footprint is based on the Cabinet Offices Local Resilience Forum areas which are aligned to the Police Constabulary areas and the Red Cross' regional structures.

around it, to provide a legacy for their future actions and responses as the voluntary and community sector moves from emergency to recovery, in a space where 'business as usual' will not be an option for many of our communities.

The key lines of inquiry set out below were informed by consultation with their Local Infrastructure Organisations[2] (LIOs), who are working with grassroots organisations and the emerging mutual aid groups and other front-line food organisations who all have links through to the direct beneficiaries.

Key lines of inquiry

1. A review of food distribution and accessibility during the last 12 months at a hyper-local level

2. VCSE working with local authorities and HMG in emergency food response (particularly on the shielded cohort)

3. Understanding the role of mutual aid and faith groups alongside established food banks

4. Understanding the cultural barriers and inequalities that exist in emergency food responses

5. Unpicking food insecurity, food poverty and the issue of meeting immediate needs versus addressing systemic/root causes

1.3 Methodology

Rose Regeneration were appointed in May 2021 by the VCSEP (SW) to deliver a range of research activities in the following main stages:

- **Primary research**, comprising interviews, focus groups and online surveys circulated to a wide range of LLLs, LIOs, local food support organisations, community groups and mutual aid groups and stakeholders including health and local authority partners

- **A literature review** and application of findings to the practice identified in stage 1 above

- **Reporting** including producing a set of case studies, recommendations for action and good practice, within an overarching report

For the Stage 1 primary research, we approached the LLLs in each of the eight areas of the South West Multi Area Cell (MAC):

1. Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset
2. Cornwall
3. Devon, Torbay & Plymouth

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[2] Local infrastructure organisations are VCS organisations whose main or only purpose is to support the work of other groups in the local voluntary and community sector. Examples include a local CVS, a volunteer centre, local voluntary action provider or specialist local support and development organisation.

4. Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole
5. Gloucestershire
6. Somerset
7. Swindon & Wiltshire
8. Thames Valley

The LLLs identified key partners, including LIOs, food support organisations and stakeholders such as health or local authorities within their area. We then approached these key partners to arrange interviews, which were conducted using specific topic guides depending on their role and involvement in the food agenda. To supplement the interviews, we also produced online surveys, based on the interview topic guides, which were shared with contacts who were unavailable for interview in the timescales of the research.

For smaller community groups, mutual aid groups and faith groups, our original project plan had been to arrange one focus group in each of the eight MAC areas. However, identifying these smaller-scale organisations and arranging focus groups around their mutual availability proved difficult within the timescales of the research. We arranged two small focus groups in Wiltshire and Dorset and again supplemented this activity with an online survey based on the focus group topic guide questions to ensure that we had involvement from a wide range of these smaller organisations across the South West region.

A summary of the Stage 1 primary research by area

| | | Number of interactions | | | | | | |
| | | By research method | | By type of organisation | | | | |
Area	Total	Interviewees[3]	Survey responses	Local lead liaisons[4]	Local infrastructure organisations	Food support organisations	Stakeholders	Community, mutual aid and faith groups
West of England (Briston, Bath and NE Somerset)	**5**	5		1		1	2	1
Cornwall	**16**	10	6	2	3	5	3	3
Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	**10**	10		1	2	5	2	
Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	**13**	11	2	1	3	1	4	4
Gloucestershire	**7**	6	1	1	1	5		
Somerset	**14**	12	2	2	1	5	4	2
Swindon & Wiltshire	**15**	11	4	2	1	3	5	4
Thames Valley	**29**	13	16	2	8	13	3	3
Total	**109**	**78**	**31**	**12**	**19**	**38**	**23**	**17**

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[3] Most of the interviews were one-to-one discussions; however there were also a small number of group interviews and focus groups. The total number of interviewees is therefore greater than the total number of interviews and focus groups (total = 60)

[4] We interviewed each of the eight LLLs, but we also received survey responses from some of them, which means that the total for this column is greater than eight.

2. Background & Context

2.1 VCSEP origins of research, reasons for commissioning

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership for South West England, facilitated by the Red Cross and NAVCA, has played a pivotal role in bringing together the Local Infrastructure organisations across the South West to share learning on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a collective this group commissioned Rose Regeneration to independently assess the impact of their work in relation to the food aspects of their work.

The lead members of the partnership are:

- Voluntary Action Swindon

- Plymouth Octopus

- Reading Voluntary Action

- Gloucestershire VCS Alliance

- Spark Somerset

- West of England Rural Network

- Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum

- Community Action Network: Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

Through these lead members the collective experience of a wide range of Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) is represented and included.

The lines of inquiry focused on:

1. A review of food distribution and accessibility during the last 12 months at a hyper-local level

2. VCSE working with local authorities and HMG in emergency food response (particularly on the shielded cohort)

3. Understanding the role of mutual aid and faith groups alongside established food banks

4. Understanding the cultural barriers and inequalities that exist in emergency food responses

5. Unpicking food insecurity, food poverty and the issue of meeting immediate needs versus addressing systemic/root causes.

6. Understand and record what has worked well during the 12 months

7. Learning and recording lessons on what hasn't work well

8. Creating a template for a successful and well-coordinated locality-based food response ecosystem for the future

9. Identifying and recognising best practice across the region enabling the sharing of ideas and solutions

The food focus of the research (picking this aspect of delivery out from the full range of responses undertaken and facilitated by these groups) was chosen because it was felt that due to the VCS' creative response during the pandemic, the potential changes in need during recovery, food's universality, the direct impact on health and wellbeing and finally, the ability of local communities and individuals to have an impact in finding solutions this single theme was merited.

2.2 Analysis of existing research of Covid-19 and impact on food security

Defining food insecurity and the impact it has on individuals and families is an interesting challenge. The University of Southampton provides a series of food insecurity data sets which combine indicators from the Census 2011, Department of Work and Pensions 2020 and Office for National Statistics 2019. Using their "my local map" website it is possible to view the distribution of food insecurity at very local levels. The example below shows food insecurity risks at a medium super output area (MSOA) level for all of the local authorities in the VCSEP (SW) area (a lower super output area filter is also available).

Food insecurity mapping of the VCSEP (SW) geography at MSOA level (Source: University of Southampton, https://www.mylocalmap.org.uk/iaahealth/)
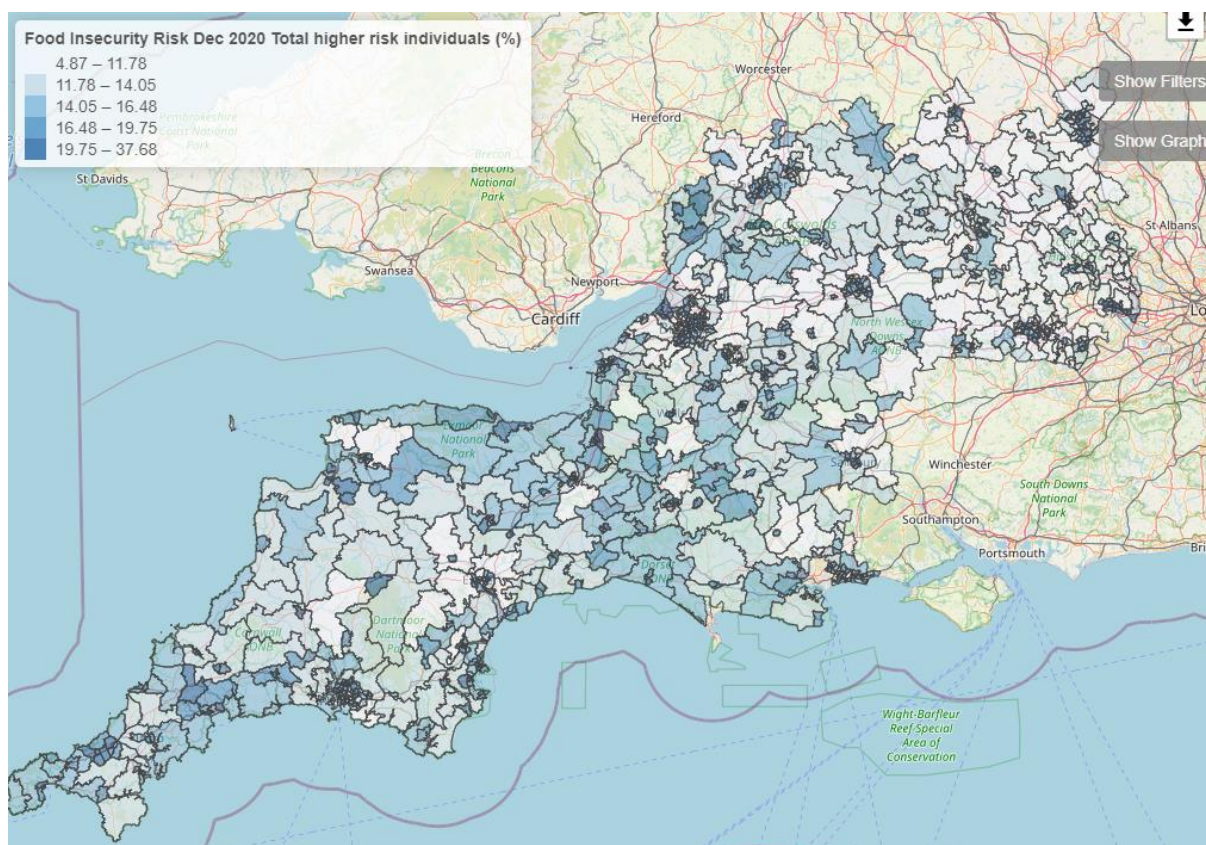
"The Lived Experience of Food Insecurity under Covid-19", A Bright Harbour Collective Report for the Food Standards Agency provides a very cogent summary of all the literature reviewed as part of this research. Whilst dating from July 2020 it still provides insightful

personal narratives based on the experience of 20 citizens chosen to reflect the diversity of those impacted by food insecurity as a consequence of the pandemic. Variables included: age, gender, life stage and household composition, health and mental health status. The report found the following key features of people's experience:

- An inability to build and draw on financial safety nets - low-paid work, zero hours contracts, mixed self-employment/salaried work, and/or work in unpredictable sectors left people financially exposed under Covid-19

- Caring responsibilities which limited income potential and raised outgoings - particularly but not only for women and single parents.

- Health and mental health challenges - 70% were experiencing chronic health issues prior to Covid-19; 65% long-term mental health issues.

- Elimination of social food sharing - many had previously counted on meals with others (e.g. a family Sunday roast) to stretch their weekly food budgets.

- People struggling to afford supermarket delivery fees - e.g., if isolating; c.£4-£6 for grocery delivery is a big percentage of a £25/£30 weekly food budget.

- Reduced access to 'budget' shops and not being able to 'bargain shop' - the inability to reliably access preferred supermarkets increased costs.

- Increased competition for 'value' and 'budget' brands - cheaper items were often already taken by others, leaving only expensive branded items.

- Price increases by shops which charged more for basics when Covid-19 hit.

- People relying on others to help with food shopping - but feeling too ashamed to dictate brand choices or supermarket choice, raising spend.

- Caloric intake, nutritional quality and variety had reduced - Many were subsisting mostly on tinned food, frozen food, or simple carbohydrates (bread, pasta and rice). Many were skipping meals and going hungry regularly.

- Some respondents showed potential signs of malnutrition - for example, regularly feeling fatigued, sluggish or poorly.

- Many were putting on weight, even as they ate much less, raising concerns about links between obesity and Covid-19's more severe symptoms.

- Stress, anxiety, overwhelm and depression were serious issues for many; well-being suffered, and existing mental health issues worsened.

- Many with food intolerances were unable to afford foods used to manage their health (e.g., gluten free), with negative physical and emotional impact.

- Some were compromising on food safety - e.g. 'stretching' labelling advice around use-by dates, raising risks of food poisoning.

- People lost the small comforts that provided a sense of stability under Covid-19; eating only for basic sustenance

- Some spoke of reduced family contact time over meals: there was little sense of social 'sharing' when serving toast for a second 'meal' of the day.

- Celebratory meals, like birthdays or Sunday dinners, were cancelled - eliminating 'small pleasures' that would otherwise provide useful distraction.

- Most were unaware of community/charity schemes available - and many who were aware did not access them. Stigma and a desire to 'leave those services for people that need them most' were strong barriers to use.

- Food banks had high awareness but low use due to stigma.

- Food boxes were a source of embarrassment and stigma though gratefully received; some raised concerns about the nutritional quality of food provided.

- Many were unable to access Universal Credit, or were still going hungry with support. People with complex income seemed to be particularly vulnerable (e.g., zero-hours contracts, mixed employment/self-employment).

- Supports like furlough, mortgage/rent holidays, and business support made a big difference to some - but many weren't reached. Gaps in furlough support were pronounced for those not working full time

- Food insecurity risk is not equally distributed, in ways that track with wider socio-economic, health and racial inequalities. Households are more likely to be food insecure they include: lone parents; larger families with children; adults or children with disabilities or health issues; Black or other minority ethnic people

- Food insecurity was on the rise in the UK prior to Covid-19. Controlling for socioeconomic variables, the probability of low-income adults being food insecure rose from 27.7% in 2004 to 45.8% in 2016

- Food insecurity has more than doubled under Covid-19 and lockdown. Food insecurity levels in May 2020 were 250% higher than pre-Covid. As of June 2020 1 in 4 young people under 25 were experiencing food insecurity

"The Impact of Covid-19 on Household Food Security" by the Food Foundation (March 2020 to January 2021) reinforced the findings of the Bright Harbour Collective report. *"State of Hunger"* by the Trussell Trust (May 2021) further expanded on how the underpinning trajectory of food hardship had been accelerated by the pandemic highlighting:

1. Food banks in the Trussell Trust's network distributed 61,000 emergency food parcels in 2010/11, rising to 2.5 million in 2020/21.

2. Compared to this time five years ago, the need for food banks in their network had increased by 128%

3. 1.5million (5.8%) UK households in July 2020 reported food insecurity in the previous week.

4. 42% of people referred to food banks in mid-2020 lived alone – almost twice the rate of the UK population.

5. 51% of households referred to food banks in early 2020 had someone with poor mental health.

6. An increase in the proportion of people referred to food banks estimated to have No Recourse to Public Funds from 2% in early 2020 to 11% in mid-2020.

7. An increase in the proportion of people aged 25 to 44, from 54% in early 2020 to 62% in mid-2020. This reflects that this group were more likely to be in employment, and therefore be affected economically by the pandemic.

8. An increase in the proportion of couples with children from 19% in early 2020 to 24% in mid-2020.

9. An increase in the proportion of people reporting mental health problems from 51% in early 2020 to 72% in mid-2020.

10. 29% of people who recently started receiving their UC payments were food insecure.

"Levelling Up Our Communities: Proposals for a New Social Covenant" by Danny Kruger MP (September 2020) identified a number of the key wider social factors associated with the pandemic:

1. 4,000 spontaneous 'mutual aid groups' were set up in local communities during the lockdown, part of a general phenomenon of neighbourliness across the country.

2. Office for National Statistics estimated that almost half of people provided help or support to someone outside of their household, such as shopping or providing meals, during the first month of lockdown

3. The upsurge in neighbourliness may recede as the furlough scheme ends and many working age people return to their jobs or look for work

4. As the Behavioural Insights Team summarise the evidence from European countries, *'the same ties that bind people and communities together, increasing the risk of infection, appear to have protected them in the long term.'*

5. The Charities Finance Group estimates that charities will suffer a 24% loss in income, or £12.4 billion, this year, with the highest losses felt by the small charities which rely on fundraising events. Social enterprises like shops and cafes, which have built a model of income generation dependent not on grants and gifts but on trading, have suffered most of all as retail shut down.

In relation to the longer term origins of food insecurity, there is a significant literature which shows how the linkages between community resilience and local poverty, condition the capacity of places to recover from the challenges associated with impacts such as this pandemic. *"More than Just Food: Food Insecurity and Resilient Place Making through Community Self-Organising"* by Megan K Blake, University of Sheffield identifies:

"Firstly, food insecurity effects are not only hunger and poor health experienced at the individual scale, but they also extend into places through the loss of social networks, erosion of community spaces, denigration of local foodscapes and collective de-skilling that limits the community resources needed for self-organising. Secondly, the ways in which food support is provided in communities has implications for how communities can regain the resources

11

they need to be able to enact resilience in the face of trouble and difficulty. As such, the research demonstrates that self-organising is more than free-time activity; in these conditions, the capacity to self-organise is a vital community asset that is necessary for building resilience and social sustainability."

Our work with the eight lead organisations and the many other LIOs active across the sector in the South West has identified a varied pattern of support and facilitation. All of the factors referenced in the reports above have been experienced in the South West.

A number of more distinctive factors have conditioned the regional experience. These include the often-rural nature of the area, meaning a very wide range of small-scale distributed activities have predominated in the mobilisation of the response to the challenges faced. This has also given a high premium to organisation through online approaches and social media, exemplified by Natalie Dyson's work in Somerset, which through the "Coronavirus Community Help Taunton" initiative established and supported 40 community response points across Somerset. Local government and health and care structures are also more complicated in this geography with a number of two-tier local authorities and correspondingly complicated Clinical Commissioning Group/Integrated Care System structures.

In most cases, in addition to providing direct help within communities the eight lead bodies at the heart of this analysis, along with the many LIOs in their respective areas, have been initiators and organisers of local action. The formation of the Cornwall Food Access Alliance by Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum is a classic example of this approach. Across such a wide and diverse geography the nature of need and its manifestation has varied, with key areas of challenge in larger urban places like Plymouth and Swindon, but also in a number of smaller rural settlements including for example Glastonbury in Somerset and Camborne in Cornwall. More detailed insights and issues arising from the experience of delivery in the South West are set out in the next section of the report.

3. Views of partners and delivery organisations

In this section, we set out a range of key themes which were articulated by our interviewees and survey respondents. We have interspersed the commentary on these key themes with eight case study summaries, which are linked to more detailed versions in Appendix One.

3.1 The agility of the VCS sector in developing its response

> *"I think it is remarkable how people and organisations have responded – not only our food suppliers but our volunteers."*
>
> *Sue Marland, Wells Vineyard*

Whilst local authorities and local statutory health organisations have a key role in funding and strategic support for the sector, the most practical and fast moving elements of the local community food response have very often been based around the voluntary and community sector.

This is because of in many cases, the sector is very close to the ground and able both to see the detailed nature of local challenges and also equipped in terms of decision-making and flexibility to make fast-moving local decisions to respond to them. Case studies relating to initiatives such as Reading Community Food Partnership and the Long Table in Stroud show this agile and fast moving response in action.

Case Study: The Freezer of Love by the Long Table in Stroud

This project originated from a community meal programme which involved group eating around a long table. In response to the pandemic it developed an approach to making frozen meals available to people. People agreed to host a freezer and the cost of providing the meals is supported through a pay as you feel system of voluntary giving accessed through a QR code. This project acknowledges the need to move away from a traditional short term food bank agenda. It has a sustainable model based around community activists and community spirit/trust which underpins its model of local support. It has built community engagement through establishing freezer hosts and it has developed partnerships with organisations such as the Royal Agricultural University.

We identified a number of examples, due to the gravity of the crisis, of this approach being encouraged and facilitated (particularly in relation to the provision of funding support) by local authorities. In Somerset key examples included one-off direct financial support to the sector by Mendip and South Somerset District Councils.

> *"The Mendip community response was very swift. We immediately provided small community grants to get things moving."*
>
> *Emma Plummer, Mendip District Council*

There is good evidence of organisations such as local faith networks for example the Diocese of Gloucester and the networks of ACRE network members such as the Village Hall groups associated with Cornwall Rural Community Charity being pressed into action very

quickly to provide a response to the immediate needs of local people. In Somerset the Village Agent network provided a vital and fast moving interface between those organising the response and individuals in need.

The infrastructure organisations at the heart of this report were also able to provide rapid and accessible support to the very significant number of mutual aid groups which emerged from the ether in very small communities across the whole of the south west. In many cases, organisations such as Gloucestershire VCS Alliance continue to support those groups which are still active as a consequence of this movement, with advice and support.

Established food banks were able to respond to the immediate challenge and have provided coordination and development support for new food distribution approaches stemming from the pandemic. A classic example of concerted action and coordination in this context is Truro Food Bank.

> *"It [the collaboration between the VCS and the local authority] was a wonderful 12 months we were there and there was a need for a lot of funding which came through which was very helpful."*

> *Feeding Bristol*

The agile and effective response of the VCS has been acknowledged at a national level and is currently part of a wider discussion about economic and social subsidiarity in relation, for example, to discussions about the new policy approach to the Community Renewal Fund and wider discussions about the roll-out of the post-EU Shared Prosperity Fund. The outcomes of this powerful response should also feed into the enhanced role conceived for VCS bodies as part of the roll out of the NHS White Paper (2021).

3.2 Organisational subsidiary: The importance of co-ordination and co-operation, particularly between local authorities and key VCS organisations [the more local and more voluntary, the better and quicker the response]

We have seen several very successful examples of the VCS and public sector partners working successfully together. This is particularly important in relation to the food insecurity report insights cited at 2.2 above namely:

> *"...the ways in which food support is provided in communities has implications for how communities can regain the resources they need to be able to enact resilience in the face of trouble and difficulty. As such, the research demonstrates that self-organising is more than free-time activity; in these conditions, the capacity to self-organise is a vital community asset that is necessary for building resilience and social sustainability. As such, policy responses to poverty should take a multi-scale approach."*

> *More than Just Food: Food Insecurity and Resilient Place Making through Community Self-Organising*[5]

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[5] *"More than Just Food: Food Insecurity and Resilient Place Making through Community Self-Organising"* by Megan K Blake, University of Sheffield, 2019

In some instances, there have been coincidences of timing and policy which have acted as positive drivers for partnership working right from the start of the Covid-19 crisis. For example, in Bournemouth Christchurch Poole (BCP), the Council had run a Hidden Hunger event in September 2019, which led to funding for an Access to Food Partnership co-ordinator who started in post in March 2020. The Access to Food Partnership includes representation from BCP Council, public health, voluntary sector food support organisations and the LIO, Community Action Network BCP.

> *"The real successes were having the capacity, creating early partnership links, doing things at a very local level."*
>
> *Alistair Doxat-Purser, Access to Food Partnership, Bournemouth Christchurch Poole*

Elsewhere, the drive for partnership working has come from the Voluntary and Community Sector itself. For example, in Swindon, Voluntary Action Swindon (which is also one of the eight LLLs in the VCSEP (SW) partnership) was the key to bringing together the major food support organisations, alongside other VCS partners such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau and key local authority and public health partners.

Case Study: Swindon Food Alliance

The Swindon Food Alliance was formed during the first Covid-19 lockdown period in 2020. It developed initially from the local VCS infrastructure organisation, Voluntary Action Swindon (VAS), pulling together an information sheet to signpost organisations and the community to the various options available to access food and support.

Alongside Swindon Borough Council's response and Swindon Food Collective (the major local food bank), multiple charity schemes and local mutual aid groups also stepped up to provide food and it quickly became clear that this whole area needed a degree of coordination so that Swindon was able to collectively respond to the needs being uncovered. VAS therefore brought together key partners including, amongst others, Swindon Food Collective, Swindon Children's Scrap Store, Swindon Night Shelter, Bags of Hope and representatives from the emergency assistance and public health teams at Swindon BC. Crucially the group also includes the CEO of Swindon Citizens Advice, who was able to hear and share the trends being experienced by the Food Alliance members and also report back on the broader community needs that Citizens Advice was monitoring and observing through its advice activities.

Whilst this initiative was born from the Covid-19 crisis, there is a desire and a commitment to continue the network and the joined-up approaches that the Swindon Food Alliance has developed. In particular, there is a commitment to focus collectively on the root causes of food poverty to try and break any cycle of dependence. The Swindon Food Alliance has clearly played a role in helping strengthen collaborative working between the local authority and VCS organisations, especially for food support organisations which had not previously had a commissioning arrangement with the Council.

Another positive example is the Cornwall VSF Food Access Alliance. The Alliance has created a networking forum for food banks, community larders, distribution orgs and community growers to collaborate. This level of collaboration ensures that support (through donations and food surplus) is maximised and redistributed to those people/communities where there is demand. Insights from on the ground help contribute to the overall Food Security strategy. Cornwall VSF shares this with multiple stakeholders locally and nationally to advocate for a more sustainable food strategy for all.

Unsurprisingly, the role of local authorities in supporting partnerships and co-ordinating activity has not been universally positive. There have been instances where respondents have stated that the local authority has been a barrier to effective co-ordination. Similarly, where organisations work in areas with a two-tier local authority structure, respondents have said that different local authorities have offered different levels of co-operation.

> *"All major VCS partners got together very quickly and looked to co-ordinate. Then the Council got involved, but this wasn't positive because the Council was telling people what was expected without asking about what was feasible and what was funded…We were dictated to."*
>
> *Food support organisation*

There was a general sense that local provision was more effective and better targeted than national provision. For example, some respondents noted instances where Defra food boxes for shielding families were sent on unused by the recipients to local VCS organisations, who were better placed to make use of this food due to their local knowledge. One respondent noted that in their local authority, there had been very little demand for the national NHS Volunteer Responders scheme, because local organisations had been able to co-ordinate volunteering provision to meet community need.

3.3 Rural vs urban and different capacities in different places

The geographical nature of sub-constituencies in the South West has conditioned approaches to delivery significantly. In addition to adding the complexity of distance, in rural settings there has been scope to tap into established frameworks and networks which aid delivery of services over distances. Examples have included being able to leverage well established faith networks and resources at the level of individual parishes and the ability to build onto services specifically designed to support a dispersed rural population such as the Village Agent initiative in Somerset.

> *"Partnership has grown most since the start of the pandemic in relation to food poverty (up from 66% of local authorities before COVID-19 to 78% now) and mental health and wellbeing (up from 43% to 48% now)."*
>
> *Keeping the Faith - Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic[6].*

The Work of Natalie Dyson in mobilising rural communities across Somerset through Facebook (see Coronavirus Community Help Taunton Case Study) and the use of Village

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[6] *"Keeping the Faith - Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic"* Christopher Baker and All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, 2020

Halls in Cornwall as key community nodes for the development and delivery of local food provide examples of the depth of local community capacity in rural settings. Another powerful example is the very comprehensive range of support offered to its vulnerable citizens by the Saltford Community Association in the Bath and North East Somerset area.

Case Study: Coronavirus Community Help Taunton

This project was developed at the early stages of the pandemic. It was initiated by Natalie Dyson a consultant solicitor during a period of furlough. The motivation was an enthusiasm to make a contribution to addressing the challenges facing communities at the local level across Somerset. Its distinctive characteristic is the use of Facebook as a flexible medium to mobilise mass community action over a very short period of time and at the level of small neighbourhoods. It is an example of local initiative and citizen action against a backdrop of a relatively slow moving and heavily pressured statutory response to the pandemic. Whilst Facebook is now almost a prosaic medium for community involvement the scale of coordinated action encompassing 900 volunteers and 40 groups across a whole county from a "standing start" by an individual with no previous experience is the factor which makes this an astonishing achievement.

Respondents from mainly urban local authorities often commented that the smaller geography and range of key organisations made co-ordination easier.

> *"Milton Keynes is unique in many ways - one unitary local authority is working in partnership with one city-wide food bank, which makes geographic coverage easier."*

> *Louisa Hobbs, MK Food Bank*

The differences between rural and urban areas is, of course, not the only factor affecting different geographies and localities. One of the more challenging aspects of the roll out of support and more widely associated with the coordination work of the infrastructure bodies has been the variability in the capacity of communities. In some areas there has been a very significant community led response which had required very little in the way of stimulation.

> *"Finding the joy with the volunteers who have stepped up unconditionally. We have been contacted by individuals and businesses who have offered everything they are able to do."*

> *Fran Chamings, West Berkshire Food Bank*

In other areas there has been a significant lack of direct action and agencies have been concerned about how best to support those individuals living in areas which might best be described as "cold spots".

> *"[It was a challenge] having the people to support all of the groups of people who needed our support and collecting food"*

> *Cornwall-based local charity*

17

The difference in the capacity of individual settings inevitably comes to the fore when individuals and groups are pressed into rapid action in a crisis. We have significant evidence of action by local infrastructure bodies to address the deficits in provision and to help ensure that individual community activities and services are connected and co-ordinated.

Case Study: The Reading Community Food Partnership

The Reading Community Food Partnership evolved as the result of Covid emergency relief efforts as a way of co-ordinating the work of local community hubs (local community groups with a focus on food support). There had been some partnership work involving community hubs prior to the pandemic. For example, Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) had hosted community fridge information sessions/ local best practice meetings with community hubs since 2018/19. The development of the Community Food Partnership has allowed for better coordination and sharing of best practices and resources. This partnership is still an informal group, but works together with a commitment to increase community resources, link residents with tools to address gaps in food access, as well as provide links to broader support around issues such as finance, housing, health and wellbeing.

This does however raise the longer term issue of equity and ongoing legacy planning. Those places with the greatest community capacity are best equipped to build a longer term legacy from the experience of the supply of local food. Those places with less capacity merit greater support to build a sustainable longer term experience of the benefit of the emergency response. This could be an important aspect of the wider legacy planning of the VCSEP partners going forward and in relation to their dialogue with the statutory sector in their areas.

3.4 Community cohesion

> *"Many of our clients, English is not their first Language, we work with an agency 'Diversity Voice ' Who interprets for us."*

> *Phil Jarman, Bridgewater Food Bank*

Many providers have noted the key demographic groups within communities are more likely to need to access support.

> *"We have learned a lot about those groups of people most likely to be affected with food insecurity... Households on low incomes, with dependent children, and where at least one member of the household has a mental health condition, for example, are more likely to be affected, as are those who have experienced adverse events as a result of the pandemic (illness, job loss, furlough, etc.), and those living in rented accommodation.*

> *Nicola Frost, Devon Community Foundation*

These groups include:

- Single parents on low incomes

- Older people

- Families with young children

- BME communities

- Disabled people

- People housed in temporary accommodation, including refugees and asylum seekers

There have been several positive examples of community cohesion being addressed as this project has proceeded. These have involved:

- the provision of translation services for individuals.

- a recognition of groups with specific community interests and values for example in Glastonbury, migrant worker communities and BAME groups.

- work to engage specifically with minority communities and different categories of people not always attitudinally adjusted to seeking support.

- Work to provide food that meets the cultural and dietary needs of different groups including access to fresh vegetables and halal meat.

> *"After a couple of months [of the Covid crisis in 2020], we looked at data and realised that there were a couple of under-represented groups - BME and elderly. Discussions indicated that pride was a key point for both older people and also African communities. So we looked to identify groups and individuals who would help access these communities."*
>
> *Louisa Hobbs, MK Food Bank*

3.5 The benefits of expediency in a crisis: Covid allowed people to take action, make decisions in a less regulated / hierarchical way, and allowed new approaches to develop more quickly than usual

> *"It's amazing to see what a crisis can do for community support and joint working. Overcoming historical tensions - it just disappears!"*
>
> *Public sector stakeholder*

Since March 2020 a range of cross-sector community food partnerships have been set up; in many instances these partnerships would not have come into being without the Covid-19 crisis.

Where cross-sector partnerships have worked well, there has been a view that organisations have had less 'preciousness' about different organisations retaining their traditional roles. For example, one interviewee from an LIO described how voluntary and community sector

organisations have felt *"a sense of agency"* in their partnership work with the local authority, public health teams and the CCG.

There was widespread commentary from Food Bank respondents, as well as other organisations directly involved in food support, that the Covid-crisis had acted as a driver for introducing new processes and approaches. These new approaches mean that food support will in future be more accessible and better targeted than before March 2020. For example, new approaches include:

- New online referral systems
- The setting up of new delivery services for clients who could not access food support due to shielding or self-isolation
- Access to increased storage spaces
- Setting up a new telephone helpline
- New types of food packages and approaches to help specific groups within a community.

3.6 Digital approaches and the role of community mapping

We have seen several examples of innovative use of digital approaches to share information and, in particular, to map provision.

Example of online community mapping of food support

The kind of mapping shown above is useful both at a strategic partnership level to understand the spread and type of provision in the locality. But it is also useful at a community level for individuals and families to understand where and how to access support. For example, the Chair of the BCP Access to Food Partnership explained that one of his

colleagues has a shortcut to the map shown above on his mobile phone which he can show to community groups and individuals to explain what services are available.

There are other positive examples of community mapping approaches elsewhere. For example, Plymouth Food Aid Network have developed a similar community food map on the aDoddle platform (aDoddle.org is a UK wide project that started in the South West and works to bring communities together by mapping charities, community projects and groups, opportunities and resources).

In Dorset, #HelpAndKindness was launched in 2019 using a blend of approaches, including digital, to bring together information about all kinds of help and support available in Dorset and is now part of the county-wide response to Covid19. It has specific information on food support and how to access food and food projects. It also offers a forum for community groups to discuss common issues and share information.

Case Study: #HelpAndKindness

#HelpAndKindness is a grass-roots project looking to find, share and connect support services from all sectors with people that need help and support across Dorset. The project is inclusive and open and seeks to improve collaboration and working between partners from all kinds of backgrounds and areas of work in the local communities in the county.

Help And Kindness was launched in November 2019 after 18 months of consultation and research. The project was privately funded by its founders through personal investment and through one of the founders Jon Sloper's business. #HelpAndKindness have now set up a community interest company to run the project to allow them to develop formal and informal partnerships with agencies and organisations as the project grows.

The rationale is to use a blend of approaches, including digital approaches, to make the provision of community support more accessible, better connected and more holistic in a way that has more practical relevance to people's lives and capacity.

"This has been a massive kick forward in respect to digital - we have previously really struggled to put on successful online events. We've run over 45 events with 2,000 plus attendees."

Paula Bennetts, Dorset Community Action

Digital approaches have also proved to be beneficial in other fields too. In particular, a number of Food Banks commented that over the course of the Covid-19 crisis they have transitioned to an e-referral system

"[Processing referrals] was previously full-on and exhausting and e-referral model has been so much more straightforward."

Sue Sibany-King, Slough Foodbank

Some respondents also commented on the benefits of virtual meetings – both for allowing meetings to be arranged with partners more easily and also for helping to deliver support in a more engaging and less stigmatising way.

> *"One thing that Covid taught us is virtual meetings can help us see via Zoom what people actually have in their own kitchens, for example, what cooking equipment they have available so we can tailor our sessions accordingly to suit the individual - meaning they are more likely to cook recipes again in the future."*

> *Tami Skelton, Food is Fun CIC*

Several local partnerships also noted that they had set up WhatsApp groups to allow quick and more informal dialogue between partnership members.

An additional and different example of the use of digital responses to coordinating responses to the pandemic arose in the context of the Bath and North East Somerset response. This involved a three-way partnership between the local authority, the VCS sector and the private sector well-being partner of the local authority, Virgin Care. Virgin Care were able to develop their RIVIAM data system to coordinate activities around a response hub which working with the statutory and VCS sector made effective pooling of action and system oversight very straightforward to coordinate.

3.7 Demand is subsiding from its peak and responses are entering a second phase of norming (in a number of nuanced ways within each locality)

Across all of the South West geographies, it is clear that the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in March-May 2020 saw a massive peak in demand.

> *"2020 was an extraordinary year for everyone, and MK Food Bank was no exception – across the year we distributed over 29,500 parcels, more than double the number given out in the previous year."*

> *MK Food Bank 2020 annual report*

Part of this peak was undoubtedly linked to providing support – particularly to those who were shielding – that would not typically be provided by organisations supporting people in food poverty. However, there were also large numbers of people who had never needed to access food support services who were thrown into economic crisis in the early part of the Covid pandemic.

Alongside this peak in demand, there was also a surge of community support and many new people offering to volunteer.

> *"One thing I would say is that the supply of volunteers has changed - when many people were furloughed, there was a ready bank of people able to volunteer, with capabilities and skills."*

> *David Tyler, Churches Together - Diocese of Oxford*

What has happened since these early months seems to differ from locality to locality. Some respondents stated that numbers of clients are reverting to something more like normal. Others stated that demand is double what it was before the Covid-19 crisis began.

Slough Food Bank monitoring information comparison for 2019 and 2020 *(source: Slough Food Bank news release, 12 Jan 2021)*

> **Statistics for the full year 2020, versus 2019**
>
> **Total number of food parcels:** 6533, a 37% increase
>
> **Number of adults:** 4168, a 36% increase
>
> **Number of children:** 2365, a 38% increase
>
> **Total number of vouchers:** 3025, a 27% increase.

Certainly, the type of recipients of food support has shifted since before the crisis, with many families and individuals who had previously never needed food support now becoming part of the newly food insecure.

Overall however a number of examples cited by survey respondents, such as the Cornwall Village Hall Community Initiative, are beginning to wind the scale of their interventions down. A number of projects have now entered a legacy planning stage.

3.8 The role of 'mainstreaming' / managing the legacy

Many respondents have expressed concern about the development of a specific legacy associated with the food response. It has in many cases revealed a deeper seated and underlying problem which has if anything been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *"Covid-19 has deepened the financial hardship faced by low income households and has also created a newly vulnerable group who were financially stable pre-Covid."*

> *A CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS: The Impact of Covid-19 on Household Food Security*[7]

As a consequence of the immediacy of the crisis, most organisations began a process of supporting people without having the space to develop a legacy plan. In many cases by working with the grain of events there is evidence to suggest that their impact has been more effective through them not seeking to "second guess" what was needed. This has however left the need to develop a longer term sustainable legacy under-discussed and considered. Undoubtedly in some areas it is likely that the crisis will subside as quickly as it arose. In others the surfacing of the deeper needs arising from the response and the

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[7] *"A CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS: The Impact of Covid-19 on Household Food Security"* Shona Goudie, Zoe McIntyre, Food Foundation, 2021

23

perceived efficacy of retaining certain aspects of the response both point to the need for a structured process of legacy planning.

A number of issues connected with the emergence of a legacy agenda are now beginning to present themselves, several of which are considered in more detail in the report including: food dependency in some areas and communities, a wider anti-poverty agenda and preserving the positive impacts of community engagement arising from the crisis.

> *"We are now not just responding to emergency but thinking about how to make things sustainable and making it a shared approach."*
>
> *Daisy Carr, Access to Food Partnership, Bournemouth Christchurch Poole*

We anticipate the development of a dialogue with the statutory agencies and within communities themselves about the opportunities and challenges of legacy planning to from the next stage of the evolution of the emergency food response to the pandemic. Case studies such as the Plymouth ARC are now actively considering what the future context for their operations might look like.

Case Study: Plymouth ARC

The Aid Redistribution Centre (ARC) was developed by Food Plymouth at the start of 2021 to meet the need for storage by multiple food aid providers across the city of Plymouth. Each individual group was struggling to accept larger donations of items that they either could not use straight away or would never be able to use fully. The ARC offered a place to accept, store and share these donations across multiple charities & community groups.

At the same time the Coop supermarket were looking at ways to reduce waste of surplus. The ARC allows the retail stores to send any unneeded food, previously identified as 'waste', to the ARC to be sorted and redistributed to approximately 60 causes each month, with some groups picking up multiple times every week.

In addition to food surplus, the project now also acts as a donation point for a number of non-food causes. This allows deliveries of hygiene and cleaning products, school uniform, baby basics, sleeping bags and blankets, as well as kitchen crockery and utensils, to be accepted, sorted and redistributed across the City.

Food Plymouth originally received National Lottery funding to help storage and co-ordination of food aid, which was then adapted to help support the set-up of the ARC. The project is also now in summer 2021 starting national Covid Emergency Fund support, delivered via Plymouth City Council.

3.9 Food dependency has become something of a theme

There was a widespread sense that food aid is not a long-term solution to resolving hardship in a dignified or effective way. A concern noted by several respondents was that the Covid crisis, which has resulted in many new individuals and families receiving food support, might lead to a subset of these new beneficiaries becoming dependent on food support.

"The scale is still huge, there is no prospect of ending the need for foodbanks; there is a real danger that reliance on charitable provision is now embedded and that customers are being conditioned into expectancy and dependency."

Food bank respondent

A wider consideration of new approaches to addressing food needs without encouraging food dependency has become a part of the future planning agenda in a number of areas. There has been widespread interest in community supermarket and community pantry approaches. For example, in Somerset the transition to a community-larder approach, where participants make a modest contribution to the cost of the support they receive, is becoming well established. In Cornwall, innovation around local food supply through the development of community-supported agriculture and the immersion of local communities in the growing-agenda has become a key aspect of the future planning of the Cornwall Rural Community Charity. The "Freezer of Love" initiative in Gloucestershire has focused on resourcing its activities through a pay-as-you-feel approach.

"Co-farming is an interesting opportunity. Community-supported agriculture is rippling out from this."

Rob Poole, Fishing Animateur, Cornwall Rural Community Charity

There are clearly some complicated issues underpinning the issue of food dependency and legacy planning and it is important to have regard to them in all their independent hues. There is however a sufficiently large reporting of the phenomenon that it merits direct inclusion in the report.

3.10 A wider anti-poverty agenda is emerging in many places

There is a sense that the Covid-19 crisis has *highlighted* issues around food insecurity and food poverty as well as *creating* these issues. Levels of need have been increasing year on year long before Covid-19.

"Covid shone a floodlight on underlying issues of food insecurity and amplified them."

Survey respondent

Trussell Trust information on levels of emergency food parcels distributed *(source: State of Hunger report, the Trussell Trust, 2021)*

Compared to this time five years ago, the need for food banks in our network has increased by 128%

Number of emergency food parcels distributed each year

- 1,110,000 — 2015-16
- 1,200,000 — 2016-17
- 1,350,000 — 2017-18
- 1,610,000 — 2018-19
- 1,910,000 — 2019-20
- 2,540,000 — 2020-21
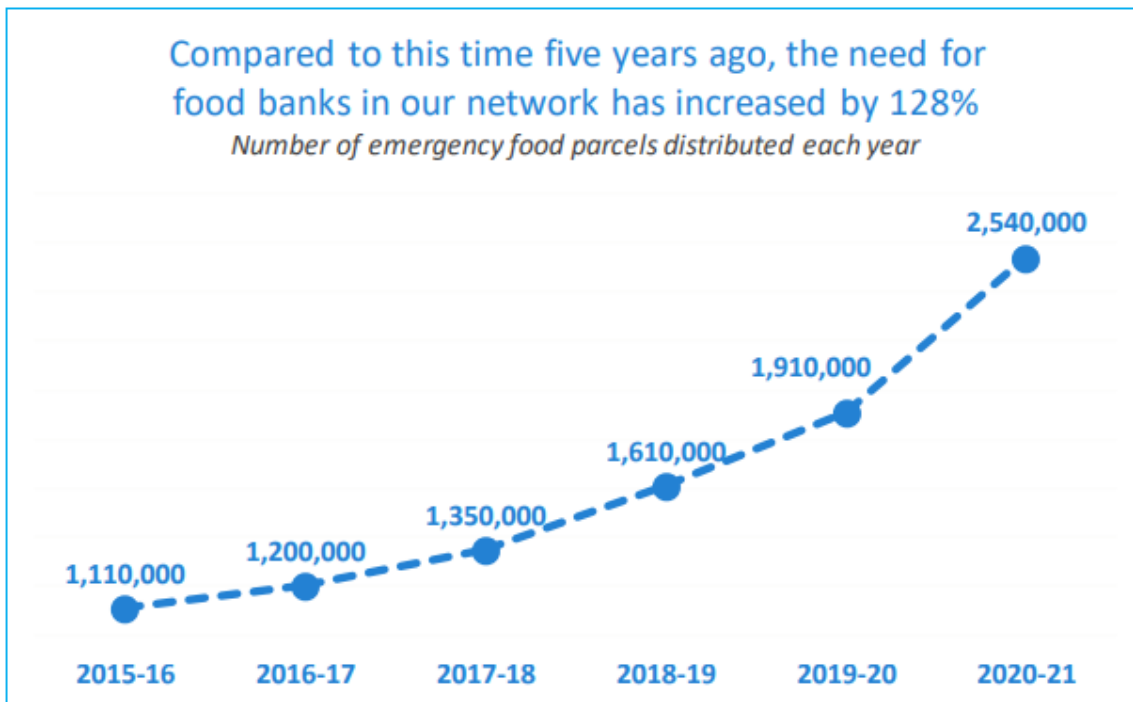
Many areas are considering how the raised awareness of food poverty and food insecurity can act as a driver for tackling poverty and increasing community resilience more broadly.

For example, in Devon, the County Council has funded Devon Community Foundation to carry out research into both understanding the provision of food support at a district level, as well as commissioning a food insecurity survey so that they can understand the full range of support and need in the County.

"We and our partners have produced evidence that levels of food insecurity have risen dramatically in Devon since the beginning of the pandemic. This is shocking, but essential knowledge."

Nicola Frost, Devon Community Foundation

Also, community food support is often closely linked to other services that help people in poverty – either within the same organisation or through signposting to other voluntary and community groups. For example, Kerith Community Church run Bracknell Foodbank but also run activities including debt advice, addiction support, a job club, reading and writing programme, financial skills courses and emotional skills courses.

3.11 Wider health and well-being outcomes are being given a high premium in the process

One of the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 crisis has been a loss of social interaction, which is often a key element of the broader offer of food support organisations. For example, Sarah Walker at Bracknell Foodbank noted that typically with a new referral they would have an initial open discussion to allow people to raise and discuss issues, which often went far beyond just food support needs. Socially-distanced provision of support means that these types of conversations are lost.

26

"We were noticing more and more that isolation and mental health were major issues"

Sarah Walker, Bracknell Foodbank

As organisations moved out of the crisis phase of provision in Spring 2020, many have been considering how to ensure that food strategies are much broader than just emergency food provision. A common theme has been how preventative support can help build knowledge around food and its role in healthy living (although there was also widespread acknowledgement that education alone will not be enough if structural barriers and high levels of poverty remain).

"The aim is to 'get yourself out of a job' through people already having the food knowledge and skills themselves."

Interviewee on the value of education about food and its role in healthy living

There are often links between health and well-being outcomes and increasing local community resilience and capacity, through, for example, growing projects, developing local food hubs stocked by local producers and holistically developing skills and knowledge. Food projects also often opportunities for social interaction with mental health and well-being benefits.

> ## *Case Study: West Cornwall Food Project*
>
> *This project has its origins in a campaign to support fishermen during the covid pandemic. It began by providing 40 meals per night with referrals through the Fishermen's Mission. This led to a wider appreciation of the capacity to support rural communities more generally using Village Halls as hubs, supported by volunteer delivery drivers. Funding has been contributed from the local authority (Cornwall Council) and other third parties and the project has rippled out across Cornwall employing one chef and 27 volunteers. Village Halls also orrganise local events and participants in these specific community eating events generate £4 a head which is retained by the Village Hall.*

Within emergency food support, there is still an important health and well-being perspective. For example, Devon County Council public health team has been working with the Devon Food Partnership to improve the nutritional content and fresh food content of emergency food provision in the County.

3.12 The level of coordinated data and intelligence is often limited at the level of localities

Through our interviews and survey work, we have requested monitoring information and detail of the level and type of provision from organisations. Some of the information provided is very clear and informative, but in no locality have we been able to gather information that covers all of the providers. Additionally, the way that information is presented varies from organisation to organisation; comparing the level of provision in different areas, or even within a single local authority area, is very challenging. One of the food support organisations described this issue as *"monitoring the skew"*: One of their

27

family food boxes may be 35-40kgs – three to four times the size of a box provided by some other organisations – and this type of difference would be lost in monitoring the number of food boxes provided.

How much does the absence of co-ordinated and comprehensive data matter? Where there is good partnership working and clear routes to share intelligence, the impact is limited or even beneficial (because time is saved producing and collating information in a standardised format which may not suit the needs or capabilities of an individual organisation – particularly for smaller volunteer-led groups).

Where there may be more of an issue is where community activity is more diffuse and happening at a very local level. For example, in rural local authorities, the level of community food support will typically be operating at a town/parish council level, rather than a district or county-wide level. Understanding these issues within each of these localities, and where there are gaps in provision, places an onus on strategic partnerships to think about effective ways of sharing information and mapping provision.

We have included as a case study in this report the food research carried out by Devon Community Foundation, commissioned by Devon County Council. This type of research gives local areas a route to understand the different needs within their locality and the prevalence of food insecurity within different types of communities.

> ### *Case Study: Devon food research*
>
> *Devon Community Foundation (DCF) was asked by Devon County Council to distribute Winter Support funds to organisations providing emergency food support, from November 2020. Alongside this, DCF was also commissioned to work with VCSE partners to scope the value of developing district-level food networks in the county, to support emergency and other food-related work. This research comprised an initial brief survey, district-level mapping with VCS leads in six districts, and a high sample-size survey on food insecurity. DCF and its partners are in the process of designing further research to investigate more fully questions raised by both the food networks work and the food insecurity study. They hope to build on this understanding in their planning for ongoing work with food networks in the county. They also hope to continue their connection with the DCC public health team in terms of developing shared access to data to help monitor the progress of future work.*

At a regional level, gaps in knowledge about what approaches are being taken in, for example, neighbouring local authority areas are common. This is, of course, one of the reasons why this research was commissioned: to give an overview of community food needs and case studies of good approaches to meet these needs. It also gives a rationale for continuing opportunities for region-wide discussions and information-sharing that the VCSEP (SW) partnership has provided during the pandemic. Our interviews with LIOs, particularly the eight LLLs, suggest that this regional level of information-sharing has more utility and local relevance than national level information.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

In this final section of the report, we set out commentary on five key conclusions from our research:

1. **The voluntary and community sector has played a central role in the local food response to the Covid-19 crisis**

2. **Whilst the nature of the response in each locality reflects the geography, demographics and capacity of each area, there are key common themes**

3. **The Covid-19 crisis has allowed new approaches to develop quickly, with VCS organisations often having increased agency to make decisions and shape approaches within cross-sector partnerships**

4. **The challenge now is to ensure that local food strategies move effectively from emergency response to providing sustainable support that links to wider agendas around poverty, health, and local sustainability.**

5. **Future approaches should be based on a clear, evidenced understanding of need at a local level**

Recommendations

For each of these conclusions, we have set out a range of recommendations. Very often these recommendations relate to more than one conclusion and should be viewed in that context. We have set out recommendations specifically for the following audiences

- **The VCS Emergencies Partnership (South West)**

- **Public sector stakeholders, including national government and local authorities**

- **Individual VCS local infrastructure organisations**

- **Local VCS organisations**

4.1 The voluntary and community sector has played a central role in the local food response to the Covid-19 crisis

Although this research has been focused on the VCS response to the food challenges arising from the pandemic, it illustrative of the much broader role of the VCS in the Covid-19 crisis. In particular, the food response is a demonstration of the ability of the VCS to respond rapidly and effectively to unforeseen shocks.

Our research suggests that the agility of the VCS sector in developing its response has been a key factor. VCS organisations are often best placed to have the detailed local knowledge as well as the ability to deliver local action to reach communities and individuals in need.

Effective local partnerships with other key stakeholders – particularly local authorities and public health teams – have often been key to co-ordinating local delivery. There have been a number of examples of local authorities working with VCS local infrastructure organisations to set up local food partnerships from the very start of the pandemic. This opened up opportunities for VCS organisations to access the knowledge and skills of public health teams, access funding, make use of council facilities for storage, and co-ordinate volunteering efforts.

VCS infrastructure organisations had a key role to play on partnerships on at least two levels:

- As organisers and conveners of strategic-level partnerships (see for example, the Swindon Food Alliance case study)

- As co-ordinators of local community food groups, many of which emerged or re-purposed their activities to food support in response to the pandemic (see for example, Reading Community Food Partnership case study)

LIOs such as Gloucestershire VCS Alliance continue to support and advise many smaller community and mutual-aid groups, even though these groups had originally seen themselves as a time-limited response to the Covid-19 emergency.

Overall, there was a theme of 'organisational subsidiarity': *the more local and more voluntary, the better and quicker the response.*

Recommendations

Public sector stakeholders

1. Acknowledge the importance of the key role of VCS organisations within local partnerships and take this into account in the structure and delivery of future funding programmes such as the Shared Prosperity Fund.

VCS local infrastructure organisations

2. Ensure that the challenge of building sustainability into local action remains a key territory for infrastructure bodies, through continued involvement and leadership of local partnerships, including local food partnerships.

4.2 Whilst the nature of the response in each locality reflects the geography, demographics and capacity of each area, there are key common themes

The geographical nature of the different areas in the South West has affected approaches significantly. There are substantial urban areas in the South West, including Bristol, Bournemouth, Plymouth, and Swindon. But much of the VCSEP (SW) area is rural.

There are examples of there being established frameworks and initiatives in rural areas that help overcome the challenges of providing support over greater distances, such as the Village Agent approach in Somerset. There are also examples of social media being used in both rural and urban areas to harness and mobilise community food support. Conversely, the smaller geographic size and smaller number of key organisations can make co-ordination in urban local authorities more straightforward.

Looking beyond issues of rurality, community capacity can vary greatly between different localities. Some areas have had a significant community-led response whilst others can be seen as 'cold spots' for community action.

There are also major differences in the socio-economic demographics of different localities, but there have been commonalities about which groups face the greatest food insecurity challenges: single parents on low incomes; older people; families with young children; BME communities; disabled people; people housed in temporary accommodation, including refugees and asylum seekers.

Recommendations

Public sector stakeholders and **VCS local infrastructure organisations**

3. Consider further investigation and research in local areas, which can help build a better understanding of how the geography, demographics and capacity of an area link to the food support needs and priorities. In particular, infrastructure bodies should have a focus on building understanding of how to remove barriers to local initiative. In this context, it is particularly useful to consider where cold spots, with lower levels of visible community capacity, exist and to think about how to support these communities / neighbourhoods.

4.3 The Covid-19 crisis has allowed new approaches to develop quickly, with VCS organisations often having increased agency to make decisions and shape approaches within cross-sector partnerships

The need for an emergency response to the Covid pandemic meant that new approaches and new ways of working had to be developed to ensure that food provision reached the people who needed it. Often this meant that the crisis allowed VCS organisations and partnerships to take action, make decisions in a less regulated / hierarchical way, and allowed new approaches to develop more quickly than usual.

Where cross-sector partnerships have worked well, there has been a view that organisations have had less 'preciousness' about different organisations retaining their traditional roles.

There was also a widespread view that the Covid-19 crisis has acted as a driver for new systems and new approaches to services. In particular, digital approaches have often been beneficial, including e-referral systems, the much-expanded use of remote video systems such as Zoom and Teams (both for service delivery to beneficiaries and for partnership meetings), online community mapping of services and organisations, and the use of social media such as FaceBook and WhatsApp to support delivery.

Recommendations

Local VCS organisations and **VCS local infrastructure organisations**

4. Consider how examples of good practice could be both scaled up and transferred to other settings. This report has captured several case studies (see **Appendix 1**) which form a starting point for this process; VCS organisations should note these approaches to see what learning can be applied to their localities.

5. Note the scope for digitally enabled activities to enhance and grow local initiative, particularly the range of approaches set out in **section 3.6** of this report, **Digital approaches and the role of community mapping**, including using:

   - Blended approaches to service delivery, particularly learning events and seminars, using face-to-face sessions in combination with remote approaches using packages such as Teams and Zoom
   - Social media applications such as FaceBook and WhatsApp to co-ordinate and connect volunteers and community activity
   - Online community maps to make information about food support activities more readily available and accessible.

4.4 The challenge now is to ensure that local food strategies move effectively from emergency response to providing sustainable support that links to wider agendas around poverty, health, and local sustainability.

The early months of the Covid-19 in March – May 2020 were unique and unprecedented in terms of the demand for food support and the challenges facing organisations providing this support. Organisations described demand doubling or tripling, combined with the loss of volunteers who were shielding or self-isolating, and the challenge of accessing food and delivering it to beneficiaries who could not get to venues such as food banks.

However, the challenges of these first lockdown months in 2020 are not the challenges that organisations face in the second half of 2021. Most organisations report that demand has reverted to something closer to normality, although still often a step-change higher than pre-March 2020. They also often note that a proportion of their service users are now the newly food-insecure: individuals and families who came 'unstuck' during Covid-19 through job loss, financial or family crisis.

The types of service being provided are also changing. Much of the surge of organised community activity seen in the first lockdown in 2020 has reduced, with some community interventions now winding down. Funding for food support activities that was relatively easy to access is now becoming more competitive as VCS funders revert to more programmatic funding approaches rather than emergency grants. Approaches to food support that are linked to wider food issues (such as local growing, reducing food waste and access to fresh food) have become more prevalent, with networks of community fridges, community pantries and cookery projects developing in many local areas. Established food banks have also often supported newer community groups to become more skilled and organised in providing emergency food support (for example, advising on the quantity and type of food in an individual food box for particular types of recipients).

The challenge now for VCS local infrastructure organisations is how to help local VCS organisations navigate this new environment and ensure that the positive impacts of community engagement arising from the crisis are preserved. Three particular themes have come through consistently in our research:

- **Minimising food dependency** - There was a widespread sense that food aid is not a long-term solution to resolving hardship in a dignified or effective way. Emergency food support should not exist in isolation and should be linked to broader local food strategies, so that individuals and families can access other types of food support (including pay-as-you-feel and fee-based schemes) that do not encourage long-term use of emergency food support.

- **Recognising food poverty as a part of wider anti-poverty approaches** – The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of food poverty. Many areas are seeking to use this raised awareness to ensure that tackling food poverty is seen as part of wider efforts to reduce poverty and increase community resilience. Food support is being combined with advice and sign-posting to a wide range of other services such as debt advice, addiction support, and basic skills courses.

- **Promoting wider health and well-being outcomes** Many areas are looking to link food support with wider health outcomes. First, in emergency food support, there are opportunities to link public-health teams with food banks and other providers to ensure nutrition is a key factor in the composition of food boxes. There are also opportunities to further develop preventative approaches such as developing cooking skills and nutritional awareness. The expanded use of approaches such as community fridges and community larders also means that there is now greater access to fresh food alongside dried and tinned produce.

Recommendations

Public sector stakeholders and **VCS local infrastructure organisations**

6. Ensure that a broad range of food support activities - ranging from emergency food support to community larders / community fridges, food waste reduction and redistribution action, local growing and food skills development – are promoted within local strategies to develop holistic approaches that help reduce food dependency.

7. Ensure that local food partnerships are linked to broader local strategies and that the role of food in supporting anti-poverty approaches is recognized.

8. Recognise the importance of health and well-being as a theme within local food strategies and local food partnerships through, for example, ensuring that public health teams play a continuing key role within local partnerships.

9. Note the opportunities to build social impact through scaling up and transferring good ideas (recognising that everywhere is different and will need to follow its own path in implementing good practice). This needs to be done in a future looking way – such as pay-as-you-feel schemes and community-supported agriculture, which provide scope for locally-owned and sustainable solutions to local challenges.

Local VCS organisations

10. Seek opportunities to share learning and skills with other local organisations, through, for example, food banks sharing their knowledge with smaller community and mutual-aid groups and, conversely, smaller groups engaging with more-established, larger organisations to ensure that their activities are focused and complement existing provision.

4.5 Future approaches should be based on a clear, evidenced understanding of need at a local level

To work well, local food strategies need be to be informed by a range of different types of knowledge and information.

First, strategic partners need to understand the level and range of local provision. This is only in part an issue around collecting clear monitoring information on the level of services and support provided. At an individual organisation level, reliable and comprehensive monitoring information will undoubtedly be a key part of performance management. But much of its value will be lost in attempting to aggregate information across different organisations with different purposes and roles within a locality.

The key is instead for local partnerships to have an overview of the types of support available across a locality and how different providers work together or complement each other. We have seen several excellent examples of online community maps, which help to give a clear sense of the different types and distribution of food support across a local authority area. Conversely, we have heard examples of localities where small community organisations have been 'doing their own thing' with little external knowledge of exactly what services they are providing.

Secondly, although many individual organisations have an excellent understanding of the needs of their organisation's beneficiaries, at a whole local-authority level, it is much harder to have full knowledge of the prevalence and distribution of food insecurity and community

food needs. This more-strategic level of understanding will rely on good partnership working or specific research – and often the funding to make this happen.

Finally, these two aspects of understanding provision and understanding need have to be brought together to provide insight into which areas and types of provision have the capacity to meet community need, and which need further development and support.

At a regional level, there is an opportunity to share learning and consider how different localities are moving beyond emergency provision to new types of more sustainable provision. It is clear from our research that there is often limited knowledge of potentially replicable or scaleable approaches from different localities within the South West region. Similarly, different areas can learn from each other about their overall strategic approaches and how these can be adapted to different communities and geographies.

Recommendations

Public sector stakeholders and **VCS local infrastructure organisations**

11. Consider research approaches for mapping community food provision alongside local needs assessment to ensure that local food strategies are evidenced-based and targeted on meeting local needs (see, for example, the Devon food research case-study in **Appendix One**).

VCS Emergencies Partnership (South West)

12. Consider ways to continue to pool intelligence on levels of community-food need and provision and wider related issues around health, poverty and local sustainability. For example, this might be achieved by maintaining regional-level discussions between the infrastructure bodies which have commissioned this report.

13. Consider pulling together a formal networking event to be hosted by the eight LLLs to capture and share the best practice that has developed in the region over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, and also to share intelligence and views on what is likely to happen next in each area.

35

Appendix 1: Case Studies

Gloucestershire Freezer of Love

About this project

This project originated from a community meal programme which involved group eating around a long table in Stroud. In response to the pandemic it developed an approach to making frozen meals available to people. People agreed to host a freezer and the cost of providing the meals is supported through a pay as you feel system of voluntary giving accessed through a QR code. This project acknowledges the need to move away from a traditional short term food bank agenda. It has a sustainable model based around community activists and community spirit/trust which underpins its model of local support. It has built community engagement through establishing freezer hosts and it has developed partnerships with organisations such as the Royal Agricultural University.

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

Funding from the National Lottery Emergency Covid-19 Coronavirus funding, and support from the Long Table Friends programme enabled The Long Table to set up 18 community based 'Freezers of Love' supplying 20 freezers located across Stroud District in 5 months. The food is prepared at a "Mother Kitchen" using locally sourced produce along with occasional support from partners such as the Royal Agricultural University.

What have been the major successes?

The following has been achieved:

- 20 Branded and locally decorated Freezers of Love in 18 Freezer hubs across the Stroud area in a wide range of settings including online ordering through Stroud Co.
- 3 Community cooks plus a partnership with Royal Agricultural College.
- 6 Community organiser training courses free to Freeze r of Love leads in partnership with Community Roots
- 2 Freezer of Love network events plus networking zooms galore
- 16 Freezer review visits
- 1500 family meals have been provided over school holidays
- £7,000 worth of specialist staff support involving over 50 dedicated Volunteers
- Overall 8400 locally sourced meals have been provided
- £15,900 has been generated by communities for reinvestment
- 415 Long Table Friends generated as supporters

And the major challenges?

Managing people's expectations around what is achievable and seeking to ensure some sustainability by getting people to understand the importance of social enterprise within the programme of food support. This approach will help to deliver a sustainable model. It is important to get people to focus on the subtle and nuanced needs of local communities in terms of wider disadvantage through the lens of the short term local food agenda. There is some definite merit in moving away from a traditional short term food bank agenda.

What are the next steps now for this project?

Lottery funding which supported the project comes to an end in June 2021. The scale of enthusiasm for the project both from volunteers and in terms of food consumption has led to the development of a legacy planning approach. The initiative is establishing a network of mutual friends. A group of Long Table Champions will be created to promote the approach across the Stroud area. The current Pay as You Feel resources will be used to support the roll out of the initiative. Volunteers will have the opportunity to become Long Table Cooks to work alongside the Long Table Champions. The Long Table will coordinate and provide training to all the participants in the new arrangement.

Swindon Food Alliance – the role of VCS infrastructure organisations in developing strategic level partnerships

About this project

The Swindon Food Alliance was formed during the first Covid-19 lockdown period in 2020. It developed initially from the local VCS infrastructure organisation, Voluntary Action Swindon (VAS), pulling together an information sheet to signpost organisations and the community to the various options available to access food and support.

This information sheet provided signposting on multiple food delivery options including available options to obtain free food for those who were experiencing food poverty. It included the response from the local authority, Swindon Borough Council, who stepped up a scheme to provide a food box delivery service and support to residents to register for Defra shielding boxes. Alongside Swindon Food Collective (the major local food bank), multiple charity schemes and local mutual aid groups also stepped up to provide food and it quickly became clear that this whole area needed a degree of coordination so that Swindon was able to collectively respond to the needs being uncovered. VAS therefore brought together key partners including, amongst others, Swindon Food Collective, Swindon Children's Scrap Store, Swindon Night Shelter, Bags of Hope and representatives from the emergency assistance and public health teams at Swindon BC. Crucially the group also includes the CEO of Swindon Citizens Advice, who was able to hear and share the trends being experienced by the Food Alliance members and also report back on the broader community needs that Citizens Advice was monitoring and observing through its advice activities.

"Coming together enabled a more joined up service. For example, a flyer promoting and signposting the range of support services available from Citizens Advice around debt management, benefit advice and other support services was co-produced quickly. The flyer was printed by VAS but with printing costs covered by the local authority, and then distributed in the free food boxes being delivered."

Pam Webb, Chief Executive, Voluntary Action Swindon

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

The food alliance group has continued to meet although less frequently since COVID-19 restrictions have reduced. It provides the opportunity to share learning and experience across statutory and voluntary services and consider key changes coming up that may lead to peaks in demand. A WhatsApp group has also been set up which provides a quick and efficient way for those distributing food and supplies to share peaks and troughs in donations.

What have been the major successes?

Pam Webb, Chief Executive at VAS explained that the collaboration between the statutory and voluntary services was a particular success:

- *"The Alliance was able to link one particular charity up that was receiving high volumes of requests for free food boxes with a dedicated contact in the local*

38

authority team so that needs assessments could be completed and any further support put in place.

- *"It was also able to link through to other local authority services to arrange additional refuse collections where the key food charities were generating more waste due to increased donations and demand.*

- *"The local authority, which was collecting unwanted Defra food boxes, was able to re-distribute these to other people in need in partnership with the food charities.*

- *"When further government emergency funding for food was made available to the local authority it was quickly able to distribute some of this to help the food charities with their increased demands as well as use some for its own services.*

- *"The local authority was able to keep the alliance up to date with its support to those shielding."*

And the major challenges?

Pam Webb commented that the situation for families shielding during the first lockdown was unprecedented and created a huge demand across the entire system which required an agile and joined up response. One of the major challenges initially was many families able and willing to pay for food but not able to leave home to get it. Response services both within the statutory and voluntary sectors were not initially set up to take card payments. This led to creative solutions and a 'needs must' response involving a degree of trust to enable families to access food without immediate payment, followed up by invoices.

The food response delivered nationally by central government, whilst well intended, would have been more effective managed locally. Many Defra food boxes were surplus to requirement and many lacked particular dietary needs or critical supplies for babies and pets. The time required to set up the national system meant that local systems had to step up, this was a similar picture around volunteering with the national initiative coming too late to the party.

What are the next steps now for this project?

Whilst this initiative was born from the Covid-19 crisis, there is a desire and a commitment to continue the network and the joined-up approaches that the Swindon Food Alliance has developed. In particular, there is a commitment to focus collectively on the root causes of food poverty to try and break any cycle of dependence. The Swindon Food Alliance has clearly played a role in helping strengthen collaborative working between the local authority and VCS organisations, especially for food support organisations which had not previously had a commissioning arrangement with the Council.

Coronavirus Community Help Taunton

About this project

This project was developed at the early stages of the pandemic. It was initiated by Natalie Dyson a consultant solicitor during a period of furlough. The motivation was an enthusiasm to make a contribution to addressing the challenges facing communities at the local level across Somerset. Its distinctive characteristic is the use of Facebook as a flexible medium to mobilise mass community action over a very short period of time and at the level of small neighbourhoods. It is an example of local initiative and citizen action against a backdrop of a relatively slow moving and heavily pressured statutory response to the pandemic. Whilst Facebook is now almost a prosaic medium for community involvement the scale of coordinated action encompassing 900 volunteers and 40 groups across a whole county from a "standing start" by an individual with no previous experience is the factor which makes this an astonishing achievement.

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

The initiative started on an informal basis. It has now become a formal unincorporated voluntary association. It is able to manage donations. It has developed a database of contact details for community activists at the very local level. It established a food and a petfood bank. It also supported the distribution of the "Boris Boxes". In December 2020 it distributed 300 presents to disadvantaged families. The initiative is now coming to a formal close and Natalie stepped down from her role as a core organiser in April 2021. The majority of the 40 groups which were formed are still in operation.

What have been the major successes?

With the willingness to learn, Facebook provides a potent and flexible platform to enable dynamic local action. Facebook and other similar media now provide the scope for local action outside of formal boundaries, freeing up the potential for local people to use their own initiative. 900 volunteers across 40 communities handled 15,000 calls from the community as a consequence of this initiative. Natalie was able to establish a working group to cover legal and financial issues. She was not experienced in community action in this context but did have confidence more generically linked to her role as a solicitor. She was however also able to work actively with others to ensure the initiative developed safely. She became actively involved with the local infrastructure organisation "Spark Somerset". She also developed a website to run alongside Facebook. 60,000 hard copy leaflets were distributed for those who weren't active users of IT. A pop up shop was developed in Natalie's own community and became established as a CIC.

And the major challenges?

As this initiative grew organically to a large scale, programme management was the biggest challenge, liaising with individuals across 40 communities. An inner coordination group was eventually formed which helped remove some of the pressure. The scale of activity was also very significant very quickly, 80-100 people were supported daily with local information and resources at the height of the operation. The VCS bodies and local authorities did act in a very supportive way to help with information and insights over a number of key organisational issues but in essence the approach was driven by local people responding to local challenges in their own neighbourhoods.

What are the next steps now for this project?

The initiative will now move forward at the level of individual communities at a pace to reflect their challenges and circumstances. The central coordination role has now been mothballed as the crisis has become manageable. The scale of need in terms not just of food but in relation to mental health and well-being challenges and wider hidden rural poverty will provide an ongoing challenge for society. One really positive legacy approach arising from wider responses to the local food crisis is the notion of food pantries where people make an ongoing modest contribution for food support. The idea of making a contribution to the cost of support at an affordable level provides scope for a more sustainable long term response to the food related challenges arising from the pandemic.

Reading Community Food Partnership: the role of VCS infrastructure organisations in co-ordinating local community food support

About this project

The Reading Community Food Partnership evolved as the result of Covid emergency relief efforts as a way of co-ordinating the work of local community hubs (local community groups with a focus on food support). There had been some partnership work involving community hubs prior to the pandemic. For example, Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) Development Officer, Sarah Timmins DeGregory, had hosted community fridge information sessions/ local best practice meetings with community hubs since 2018/19. The development of the Community Food Partnership has allowed for better coordination and sharing of best practices and resources. This partnership is still an informal group, but works together with a commitment to increase community resources, link residents with tools to address gaps in food access, as well as provide links to broader support around issues such as finance, housing, health and wellbeing.

"We have got to know our community better. We have assisted with a wide range of other issues, unrelated to food. People have been able to have a safe space throughout the past year so they can reduce isolation. We have offered place for mental health awareness. We have networked with other support services."

Kathryn Deacon, Foodshare @ Wycliffe

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

Sarah Timmins DeGregory explained that in the early part of the Covid-19 crisis, RVA had played a key role in co-ordinating the efforts of the voluntary and community sector. RVA staff kept in contact with community leaders via email and phone, finding out what was needed and trying to direct support and resources to communities; as well as working with the local, regional and national government, charities and businesses that reached out with goods and services to donate. This work was fast-paced and often relied on frequent email and phone contact. Community hubs worked alongside the local authority and Readifood, Reading's food bank, providing emergency food relief via food parcels and cooked meals to local residents. In November 2020, the local authority, RVA and community food partners started bi-weekly virtual meetings to coordinate outreach and address possible duplication of effort and sharing of resources. At this time, members of the Community Food Partnership created a WhatsApp group to quickly enable resource sharing.

What have been the major successes?

"Being able to witness community leaders and partners work together in the service of the town has been an inspiration and a pleasure. I would say an unintended consequence of the pandemic was better coordination at a community-level; where once community food hubs knew of each other, now community food hubs work together and have expressed shared visions for the future."

Sarah Timmins DeGregory, Development Officer, Reading Voluntary Action

42

And the major challenges?

Sarah Timmins DeGregory commented: *"Communication during the pandemic was a challenge, but we kept working with groups and meeting groups where they were at, at the time. It is difficult when community hubs are serving the needs of entire communities on limited staff/ volunteers and budgets. Also, space restrictions and Covid guidance became challenging for groups operating out of government-owned buildings. Outdoor working was set-up in some communities, and continues now. Working together and meeting other groups in the region (for example, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire) has been eye-opening for us. There is great potential in Reading for food-related projects and better coordination, we are just at the beginning."*

What are the next steps now for this project?

The Community Food Partnership is working on a joint document to share among community members and partners that lists local finance, housing and health support organisations and the range of help they provide. Community hubs have expressed interest in a food mapping exercise, and this project would include other partners outside current membership addressing issues such as food growing, cooking and distribution. Should the Community Food Partnership move to a more formal structure, RVA will work with members to advise on how to manage finances and establish a leadership structure.

43

HelpAndKindness Dorset - using blended approaches, including digital, to connect communities and promote access to food

About this project

#HelpAndKindness is a grass-roots project looking to find, share and connect support services from all sectors with people that need help and support across Dorset. The project is inclusive and open, and seeks to improve collaboration and working between partners from all kinds of backgrounds and areas of work in the local communities in the county.

#HelpAndKindness was launched in November 2019 after 18 months of consultation and research. The project was privately funded by its founders through personal investment and through one of the founders Jon Sloper's business. #HelpAndKindness have now set up a community interest company to run the project to allow them to develop formal and informal partnerships with agencies and organisations as the project grows.

The rationale is to use a blend of approaches, including digital approaches, to make the provision of community support more accessible, better connected and more holistic in a way that has more practical relevance to people's lives and capacity.

Jon Sloper from #HelpAndKindness explained, *"It is about supporting and building civil society, reducing inequality, improving opportunities, working smarter and helping to support the development of new responses to needs that emerge. It's a fluid, agile and highly responsive project that makes a difference by making connections and collaboratively developing services that are highly targeted to particular needs and the community partnerships that want to respond."*

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

Jon Sloper described how #HelpAndKindness has been involved in community food support during the Covid-19 pandemic: *"Through our work with the COVID Community Response team – which included a host of brilliant partners from the Dorset Council, VCSE sector, NHS and public health – we were aware of all kinds of issues around food access and supply at the start of the pandemic and the first lockdown. This included issues around paying for food when people had no credit/debit cards, accessing supermarket delivery slots, needing emergency food parcels, accessing food banks and other charitable sources of food, looking at supply chain issues, exploring the impact of local businesses and schools in the provision of food to the community, engaging with the community response groups that offered food collection and delivery to support shielded residents, and more.*

"Our initial work included mapping the Covid Mutual Aid Groups / Community Response Groups and helping to build a network and communications system with them and the Community Response Partners to help with emergency food supply and distribution, as well as with local food collection and delivery. As more local food businesses changed their services and offered more home delivery or other services, we mapped these too. This included pubs, restaurants and cafes as well as community shops and other food retailers and wholesalers.

"We also started to collate information about the Food Banks, Community Fridges and Social Supermarkets, working alongside Public Health Dorset and other partners to map their activity. This information and network became a resource that was used to support other partners' and community projects and to develop responses to meet local needs.

We worked with Dorset Council and Dorset Community Foundation to identify projects that needed financial and other support to deliver their services. Some were supported with money to enable them to buy food to distribute to people in emergency need.

The network of Food Poverty organisations and the Mutual Aid Groups both made use of a forum system that we developed in #HelpAndKindness where they could engage in mutual conversation and also share their experiences and support needs with the other key partners in the county: the local authority, NHS, public health and the VCSE sector leaders and partners, such as Volunteer Centre Dorset."

What have been the major successes?
"A number of people contacted us from overseas (Australia, USA, SE Asia, and elsewhere) who were concerned about the welfare of their shielding family members in Dorset. Some needed food and others needed medicine, and all needed some local point of contact for support. We were able to draw on the county volunteer network with our partners at Volunteer Centre Dorset to ensure their needs were met."

Jon Sloper, #HelpAndKindness

Through partnership working with the COVID Response Team, #HelpAndKindness were able to support the emergency requests for food delivery to people who were shielding, putting them in touch with local community groups and businesses who could offer local food collection and delivery through volunteer networks.

With Public Health and other partners, #HelpAndKindess' Food Projects Forum has now got the capacity to share learning, needs and support to improve food projects' services across the county. The Food Projects Forum also have a Red Alert service that they can use to highlight shortages or gluts of food at the food banks, and others can then respond immediately to their needs. This has meant that food has not been wasted, and shortages have been filled.

"Over Easter 2020 a Weymouth resident phoned up to find out where he could get hold of some beef and have it delivered to him, as he was shielding. Through our network we were able to supply information about two local butchers who could do this, and he was able to place the order that same day."

Jon Sloper, #HelpAndKindness

The referrals and connections to local food retailers and wholesalers also boosted the local connections through the signposting of people to their services. There has also been a number of connections made between community-growing projects and local community food banks, fridges and social supermarkets.

And the major challenges?

Jon Sloper commented in detail about the importance of local-level solutions: *"I haven't observed any significant change to the challenges within the development of our approach, as the team of people around the network have always seemed to find a way to overcome or engage with any issues encountered. Our continuing challenge is building connections with people and their communities, and making those networks and the information we uncover as accessible as possible. We are also perpetually engaged in helping to make visible the hidden needs that people experience in the community in a way that catalyses and delivers a response.*

"On a high-level view there are obviously many large-scale issues that are highly significant; for example, the eco-impact of food production, food miles, long supply chains, poor nutritional quality of cheap commercial food, lack of accessible/affordable transport to cheaper supermarkets in the rural areas of Dorset, significant levels of poverty and so forth.

"Any work to try and tackle these issues is most successful when looking into the really hyperlocal and personal conditions that people face. Large generic responses are largely weaker. Instead, bringing together the wisdom and work of the micro providers makes for a more appropriate and effective response and solution. Tying in with existing projects who are concerned with the issues, or who work in adjacent or similar spaces, to develop really locally relevant responses is far better and more effective than parachuting in an external project."

What are the next steps now for this project?

Jon explained that #HelpAndKindness's role will continue to involve providing the space and networks for connection, tying in micro / local community action and needs with local partners and strategic providers, planners and programmes.

#HelpAndKindness is helping to bring together network members involved in a wide range of different aspects of food / food support in Dorset, including supply, production, distribution, retailing, consumption, nutrition and skills. The network is also forming the structure for further community capacity development through looking at and supporting community assets like village hall kitchen facilities, or food hygiene training and certification. The most recent example is the Holiday Activities and Food / Summer in Dorset 2021 programme for children in receipt of Free School Meals, which has woven together work with local food projects and suppliers along with the Activity providers' sessions. This has resulted in collating and signposting to over 18,000 activity places with 40+ providers and 50+ locations across Dorset.

Plymouth ARC – co-ordinating and enhancing food re-distribution

About this project
The Aid Redistribution Centre (ARC) was developed by Food Plymouth at the start of 2021 to meet the need for storage by multiple food aid providers across the city of Plymouth. Each individual group was struggling to accept larger donations of items that they either could not use straight away or would never be able to use fully. The ARC offered a place to accept, store and share these donations across multiple charities & community groups.

At the same time the Coop supermarket were looking at ways to reduce waste of surplus. The ARC allows the retail stores to send any unneeded food, previously identified as 'waste', to the ARC to be sorted and redistributed to approximately 60 causes each month, with some groups picking up multiple times every week.

In addition to food surplus, the project now also acts as a donation point for a number of non-food causes. This allows deliveries of hygiene and cleaning products, school uniform, baby basics, sleeping bags and blankets, as well as kitchen crockery and utensils, to be accepted, sorted and redistributed across the City.

Food Plymouth originally received National Lottery funding to help storage and co-ordination of food aid, which was then adapted to help support the set-up of the ARC. The project is also now in summer 2021 starting national Covid Emergency Fund support, delivered via Plymouth City Council.

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?
This project did not start until part way through the Pandemic. It has continued to grow month on month, and the feedback suggests that there remains a real benefit to such a project being able to simplify the redistribution of aid donations for both the collecting causes and the donors themselves.

What have been the major successes?
"The success of the ARC lies in the passion of the people involved as well as the excellent network in Plymouth. The Plymouth Food Aid Network has over 150 members, each looking to tackle poverty in the area. Understanding the needs of the different communities, and the groups who support, them has been vital. Also being able to act as a connector between the different groups, so they can build and grow their own collaborative relationships, has been a key strength of the project."

Ayshea Cross, Food Aid Co-ordinator, Food Plymouth

Ayshea Cross from Food Plymouth also highlighted how all the leading supermarkets now support this project, with Sainsbury's working with Coop to share transport and other resources to allow their food to reach the ARC every weekday. Two retailers actively working together in this way is clearly not typical, and both organisations are looking at other ways they can support projects together.

And the major challenges?

There have been challenges with starting a new project in the midst of a pandemic, however flexibility, adaptability and responding to the needs of Plymouth's food aid providers has been critical in overcoming these challenges. There have been ongoing conversations with other organisations with a role in food re-distribution, DCFA (Devon & Cornwall Food Action) and FareShare, to help avoid overlap and duplication. The fact that the project has been led by Food Plymouth's Food Aid Co-ordinator has been very helpful in ensuring that the Plymouth ARC complements and builds on existing provision.

What are the next steps now for this project?
As this project is only 6 months old, it is still forming, adapting and growing. The impact that the ARC has had however is leading the core team to consider registering it as a charity so it can look at sustainable funding options. The ARC team is also reviewing how it can best serve Plymouth, avoiding overlapping with other organisations. This is being achieved in part by working closely with Food Plymouth and Plymouth City Council, as well as the whole of the city's Food Aid Network.

West Cornwall Food Project

About this project

This project has its origins in a campaign to support fishermen during the covid pandemic. It began by providing 40 meals per night with referrals through the Fishermen's Mission. This led to a wider appreciation of the capacity to support rural communities more generally using Village Halls as hubs, supported by volunteer delivery drivers. Funding has been contributed from the local authority (Cornwall Council) and other third parties and the project has rippled out across Cornwall employing one chef and 27 volunteers. Village Halls also orrganise local events and participants in these specific community eating events generate £4 a head which is retained by the Village Hall.

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

The employment of a professional chef not only created a job in an industry badly hit by Covid, but also brought assured reliability in terms of the food offer. Village Halls have moved on from acting as hubs and now in some cases run food based events in their own right. The wider impact of local food delivery in relation to addressing loneliness and isolation has arisen from the activities. Village Halls have been re-energised more widely through participation. It has become clear that part of the distinctive agenda around this initiative is the provision of fresh food, almost completely locally sourced, which is different from the standard offer from food banks and other sources of food support. Vegetarian meals are provided to ensure that everyone is able to benefit irrespective of their personal eating preferences.

What have been the major successes?

200 vegetarian meals are delivered per week. The people supported have become part of a social and engaged network with mental health and well-being benefits. Village Halls have been given an additional boost. 27 volunteers and one full time chef have contributed to social cohesion.

People have been encouraged to eat locally sourced healthy meals. Local intelligence and insight has been harnessed to identify the areas of need and to help direct the action taken. Local partnerships amongst civic organisations have been forged by participation in a networking activity around local food and the pandemic coordinated through the Cornwall Food Access Alliance. The key components of this initiative are very simple to replicate.

And the major challenges?

There is not evidence of significant challenge. Funding would be an issue in the longer term but this has been a time limited initiative which will be wound down in August 2021. Organisation and networking are important aspects of the agenda but neither of these factors have proved overly difficult and there have been some positive outcomes associated with them in terms of wider partnership building.

What are the next steps now for this project?

This project has widened awareness of the deeper roots, of which food based need is a symptom of rural disadvantage. It has been brought to the fore by the pandemic and exposed by the initiative. Addressing this issue is now a substantial theme within the Cornwall Food Access Alliance. There is scope for the Village Halls to continue providing group eating activities in their own right. There is also scope to build on the local sourcing

and wider interest in local food which has arisen through the activity. This can connect into opportunities such as community supported agriculture. The volunteering outcomes could be sustained where people have developed a taste for supporting their peers.

Devon Community Foundation food research - Using research to develop evidence-based approaches

"We and our partners have produced evidence that levels of food insecurity have risen dramatically in Devon since the beginning of the pandemic. This is shocking, but essential knowledge."

Nicola Frost, Knowledge Guru, Devon Community Foundation

About this project

Devon Community Foundation (DCF) was asked by Devon County Council to distribute Winter Support funds to organisations providing emergency food support, from November 2020. Alongside this, DCF was also commissioned to work with VCSE partners to scope the value of developing district-level food networks in the county, to support emergency and other food-related work.

Nicola Frost, Knowledge Guru at DCF, explained how they developed a research framework: *"We were aware of the paucity of local-level data on residents' experience of food insecurity (as opposed to assessments of the risk of food insecurity, based on proxy indicators). Our instincts also told us the organisational landscape of food support would look rather different in different parts of the county. We therefore designed a research framework to better inform our current and future work:*

1. *"Drawing on our knowledge of emergency food providers locally, we carried out an initial brief survey to establish immediate need, so we could focus our grant-making effectively in the short term.*

2. *"We worked with VCSE leads in six areas, who coordinated mapping and exploratory work to understand the emergency food landscape in those areas, to build a picture of its strengths and weaknesses, and gain a sense of how some form of alliance or network might best support general food-related work in each area.*

3. *"We linked up with colleagues from DCC's public health and economies teams, to co-design a high-quality, high sample-size survey (commissioned by DCC) to give us, for the first time, an accurate understanding of the impact of the pandemic on experience of food insecurity, at a district level of detail, in Devon. This also provided a robust baseline on which to base this and any future work with food-related networks. The research was designed to complement national surveys as far as possible, while answering questions of specific interest to us in Devon, and with a rapid turn-around time from implementation to analysis."*

How has this project developed since the start of the Covid-19 crisis?

This research project began in November 2020, so the pandemic, and changes to levels of food insecurity and emergency food provision, have always been at the heart of it.

What have been the major successes?

Nicola Frost highlighted some particularly useful findings from the research:

1. *"We learned that there is a clear rationale for continuing to work at a district/two-district level, as the food support 'ecosystem' varies considerably between areas. There are differences between urban and rural areas, for example, and between areas with more developed systems for communication between organisations. District council engagement in this field also varies. There do need to be links between these local networks, however, to facilitate 'cross-border' operation, and to share good practice and learning.*

2. *"We have learned a lot about those groups of people most likely to be affected with food insecurity, and in particular, about the other aspects of vulnerability they are likely to be challenged by. Households on low incomes, with dependent children, and where at least one member of the household has a mental health condition, for example, are more likely to be affected, as are those who have experienced adverse events as a result of the pandemic (illness, job loss, furlough, etc), and those living in rented accommodation. As a result of this insight, we can begin to develop proactive responses that are focused, and preventative in nature, where an understanding of emergency food support opens up a much wider arena of upstream hardship-prevention work.*

3. *"It has been extremely rewarding to work so closely with the public health team at DCC, and with a respected social research consultancy, pooling our skills and experience to develop a robust and insightful evidence base. We have been able to take into account the priorities of a range of agencies in designing the research, and as a result, we have a number of opportunities to make swift use of this insight in developing improved approaches in Devon."*

And the major challenges?

"As is unsurprising during an emergency situation, there has been a necessity to act with speed, which does not always result in decisions being taken with the fullest information. I think we have done a good job of reflecting on this process, and putting what we have learned to good use."

Nicola Frost, Knowledge Guru, Devon Community Foundation

What are the next steps now for this project?
DCF and its partners are in the process of designing further research to investigate more fully questions raised by both the food networks work and the food insecurity study. It hopes to build on this understanding in its planning for ongoing work with food networks in the county. DCF also hopes to continue its connection with the DCC public health team in terms of developing shared access to data to help monitor the progress of future work.

Appendix 2: List of interviewees / survey responses by organisation and region

Organisation	Area	Type of interaction
Bath and North East Somerset Council – Community Response Team	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
Bath and North East Somerset Council – Public Health	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
Feeding Bristol	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
Saltford Community Association	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
Southern Brooks Community Partnership	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
WERN	Bristol, Bath and NE Somerset	Interview
Community Enterprises PL12	Cornwall	Survey
Cornwall Council	Cornwall	Survey
Cornwall Food Action	Cornwall	Survey
Cornwall RCC	Cornwall	Interview
Cornwall VSF	Cornwall	Interview & survey
Diocese of Cornwall	Cornwall	Interview
Disability Cornwall and Isle of Scilly	Cornwall	Interview
Feeding Britain	Cornwall	Interview
Fishing Animateur	Cornwall	Interview
Newquay Community Orchard	Cornwall	Interview
NOGH	Cornwall	Survey
The Hive	Cornwall	Interview

Organisation	Area	Type of interaction
Transformation Cornwall	Cornwall	Interview
Truro Community Trust	Cornwall	Interview
Truro Foodbank	Cornwall	Survey
Devon Communities Together	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Devon Community Foundation	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Devon County Council	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Food is Fun CIC	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Food Plymouth	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Plymouth Octopus	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Teignbridge CVS	Devon, Torbay & Plymouth	Interview
Access to Food Partnership (Bournemouth Christchurch Poole)	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Beaminster Town Council	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Bournemouth Christchurch Poole Public Health Team	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Community Action Network (Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole)	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Dorset Community Action	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Dorset County Council	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Dorset Race Equality Council	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Gillingham Foodbank	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Survey
Help and Kindness	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
The Vale Pantry	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview & survey

Organisation	Area	Type of interaction
Volunteer Centre Dorset	Dorset / Bournemouth Christchurch Poole	Interview
Cheltenham Borough Council	Gloucestershire	Survey
Fair Shares Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire	Interview
Gloucester VCS	Gloucestershire	Interview
Long Table Stroud	Gloucestershire	Interview
Wells Vineyard	Gloucestershire	Interview
Bridgewater Food Bank	Somerset	Interview
Community Council for Somerset	Somerset	Interview
Coronavirus Community Help Taunton	Somerset	Interview
Mendip Council	Somerset	Interview
Salvation Army	Somerset	Interview
Somerset County Council	Somerset	Interview
Somerset West and Taunton Council	Somerset	Interview
South Somerset District Council	Somerset	Interview
Spark Somerset	Somerset	Interview & survey
Taunton Food Bank	Somerset	Interview
The Hope Centre	Somerset	Interview
The Trussell Trust	Somerset	Survey
Yeovil Christian Support Trust	Somerset	Interview
Glastonbury Bridging the Gap	Somerset	Interview

Organisation	Area	Type of interaction
Bags of Hope	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Community First	Swindon & Wiltshire	Survey
Devizes and District Foodbank	Swindon & Wiltshire	Survey
Gorse Hill Baptist Church	Swindon & Wiltshire	Survey
Melksham Family of Churches Food Bank	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Swindon Borough Council	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Swindon Children's Scrapstore	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Swindon Food Collective	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Swindon Night Shelter	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
The Food Box in Chippenham	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Voluntary Action Swindon	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview & survey
Wessex Community Action	Swindon & Wiltshire	Interview
Aylesbury Foodbank	Thames Valley	Survey
Bracknell Foodbank	Thames Valley	Interview
Buckinghamshire Council	Thames Valley	Survey
Catalyst Housing	Thames Valley	Survey
Chiltern Foodbank	Thames Valley	Survey
Church of England	Thames Valley	Interview
Coffee and Craft	Thames Valley	Survey
Community First Oxfordshire	Thames Valley	Interview

Organisation	Area	Type of interaction
Community Impact Bucks	Thames Valley	Survey
Good Food Oxford	Thames Valley	Interview
Involve Community Services	Thames Valley	Interview
Involve Community Services	Thames Valley	Survey
Launchpad Reading	Thames Valley	Survey
Loose Ends Newbury	Thames Valley	Survey
Milton Keynes Food Bank	Thames Valley	Interview
One Can Trust	Thames Valley	Survey
Oxfordshire CVA	Thames Valley	Interview
Reading Mencap	Thames Valley	Survey
Reading Voluntary Action	Thames Valley	Interview & survey
Slough Foodbank	Thames Valley	Interview
SOFEA	Thames Valley	Interview
Sustain	Thames Valley	Survey
The Haven (West Berks) - Newbury Soup Kitchen	Thames Valley	Interview
Tilehurst Methodist Church	Thames Valley	Survey
Volunteer Centre West Berkshire	Thames Valley	Interview
West Berkshire Food Bank	Thames Valley	Interview
Whitley CDA	Thames Valley	Survey
Wokingham Foodbank	Thames Valley	Survey

57