

Written evidence submitted by Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN)(COV0120)

Please note this report is based on a very changeable situation.

The impact of Covid-19 on food supplies

1.5.20.

The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) was established in 2016 to support, connect and advocate on behalf of a growing number of UK-based independent food aid providers, including independent food banks, not affiliated with The Trussell Trust or other national organisations. Its vision is of a country that doesn't need emergency food aid and in which good food is accessible to all. IFAN has a growing membership of organisations operating across the UK and has established itself as a voice on food poverty issues on behalf of hundreds of grassroots independent food aid organisations principally in calling for action to address the root causes of poverty.

IFAN has been responsible for identifying at least 842 independent food banks operating across the UK. We know as a result that at least 40% of UK food banks operate independently of the Trussell Trust's network of over 1,200 food banks. In March 2019 and January 2020, IFAN published food parcel distribution figures alongside A Menu for Change collated from independent food banks in Scotland. This data almost doubled previously known Trussell Trust figures. In addition to over 800 independent food banks and food parcel distributors, there are thousands more independent food aid providers operating across the UK. These food aid providers include community kitchens, soup kitchens, food pantries and social supermarkets. On top of these numbers, the Salvation Army runs numerous food banks and food aid schemes across the country.

During the COVID-19 crisis IFAN has been supporting its members in a variety of ways, and in particular as they struggle to source food while trying to support increasing numbers of people in need. However, IFAN has also been calling for the Government to introduce measures involving a "cash first" approach to urgently address economic vulnerability that would see the footfall to food banks reduced.

Have the measures announced by the Government to mitigate the disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic been proportionate, effective and timely?

Unfortunately, the measures announced by the Government to mitigate against disruptions to the food supply caused by the pandemic have not been proportionate, effective nor timely from the perspective of independent food aid providers. Given that the UK Government has not been able to provide sufficient income through the benefits system to support people living with economic vulnerability, the need for charitable food aid has grown very rapidly.

IFAN independent food banks operating across the UK have seen a major rise in emergency food parcel distribution since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK and subsequent lockdown, IFAN ran a survey among its member organisations to track how food parcel distribution has changed since 2019. 85 organisations running 147 independent food banks reported an average 59% increase in need from February to March, 17 times higher than March 2019. Almost a third of organisations experienced rises of 100% or more comparing figures for the months of March 2019 and

March 2020 while 7% saw a rise of 300% or more.¹ The Trussell Trust has reported a soaring 81% increase for emergency food parcels from food banks in its network during the last two weeks of March 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 - including a 122% rise in parcels given to children.²

Independent food banks and other food aid providers began reporting shortages of supply in early March³ and have continued to struggle to access food, particularly ambient non-perishable food, either through purchasing from supermarkets and wholesalers or through donations from these sources and food redistribution charities.

During the first few weeks of the crisis, independent food banks weren't able to purchase food in supermarkets because of lack of supply and the rationing imposed by supermarkets. By the middle of April this situation started to improve so that food bank teams could make purchases of food and could start to buy in bulk again. Meanwhile the need for food supply has grown as increasing numbers need support. Independent food banks are continually trying to catch up with food being distributed as fast as it is sourced.

Some independent food banks and food aid providers are signed up to the national food surplus redistribution charity FareShare and can benefit from a temporary free membership scheme. However, there is a substantial number of independent food aid providers not signed up to FareShare or who are unable to access this support. Ambient non-perishable food is still often missing from the food surplus system and many independents do not have cold storage for fresh, chilled or frozen food.

The supermarket Morrisons has been able to support independent food banks as well as Trussell Trust food banks via a £10 million donation. This contribution has certainly helped with escalating need but can be limited in terms of available food and by too many charities in a local area needing support.

There appears to be a misconception that the support extended to the Trussell Trust and FareShare, through IGD donations (Institute of Grocery Distribution), a £15 million donation of food by Tesco's, a £1.5 million donation from the Coop, £5 million donated by ASDA will benefit all food aid providers. Independent food banks, among a large cohort of independent food aid providers, represent only some of the frontline charities supported by FareShare and many independent food banks and food aid providers are not linked to FareShare and may not benefit from temporary free membership terms. The Trussell Trust is working with the Independent Food Aid Network through this crisis and its network members try to support individual independent food banks when possible.

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

The Government is not doing enough to support people access sufficient healthy food. The food industry is making substantial donations to the emergency food supply chain however these measures are limited

¹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-report-on-covid-19-impact-1>

² <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/10/food-banks-run-out-of-milk-and-other-staples-as-shoppers-panic-buy-coronavirus>

Whilst measures were taken to ensure food supply to 1.5 million medically vulnerable people, no such measures were taken to ensure that the healthy food needs of up to 10% of UK households already living with moderate and severe food insecurity.⁴

We urge the Government to act immediately and collectively across departments to address the rapidly growing poverty driving the need for charitable food aid. Measures that would address economic vulnerability at this time include:

- ensuring that advance payment for Universal Credit are grants and not loans and so do not need to be repaid;
- removing the 2-child limit on social security benefits and removing the benefit cap;
- increasing child benefit payments;
- ensuring all local authorities are able to give out adequate welfare assistance crisis grants;
- removing the restrictions placed on migrants and asylum seekers to social security benefits and to work.

Generally, the approach should be “money first”, so that people on low or no incomes can purchase healthy food for themselves. By introducing measures to decrease poverty, the pressures on independent food banks and other food aid providers would be significantly reduced and the need for charitable food aid would diminish.

⁴ Food Standards Agency *Food and You Survey* (2018)