Change and innovation in food aid provision in Sussex and Southwest London during the Covid-19 pandemic

Table 1: Organisations interviewed within the project

Interviews within Southwest London (n=8)	Interviews within Sussex (n=20)
One interview each: - 1 food partnership - 5 food aid providers Two interviews: - 1 food aid provider	One interview each: - 5 food aid providers - 2 complex organisations[1] - 2 food partnerships - 1 national supermarket - 1 surplus food provider Two interviews: - 1 food partnership - 1 complex organisation Three interviews: - 1 surplus food distributor In addition, an interview with Thapa Karki, an academic researching food aid in Sussex was carried out.

Sites visited

- Food aid provider, Southwest London (1 site visited on multiple occasions)
- Surplus food distributor, Sussex (1 site visited on multiple occasions)
- Food aid provider, Sussex (1 site visited twice)
- Complex organisation, Sussex (1 site visited twice)
- Food partnership, Sussex (1 site visited twice)
- 2 complex organisations, Sussex (1 site visited once)
- 2 Food aid providers, Sussex (1 site visited once)

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine how food aid providers in Sussex and Southwest Lonon responded and managed during the pandemic.

Methodological approach

Our methodological approach consists of three inter-related layers. A qualitative description research approach based on naturalistic inquiry, was used, supplemented by site visits and personal observations.

Findings

The pandemic catalysed dramatic, often positive, changes to the provision of food aid, with a move away from the traditional food bank model. It brought about increased coordination and oversight, as well as the upscaling of capabilities, infrastructure, and provisions.

Originality/value

The paper contributes to the literature on food aid in the UK. It provides evidence for how providers are transforming the sector for the better and potentially helping to deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

Key words: food aid; food insecurity; food waste; surplus food; food bank; Covid-19 pandemic; poverty

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a dramatic increase in both need and demand for food aid, driven by difficulties in accessibility, availability, utilisation and stability, the four pillars of food security (FAO, 2006). In many areas this demand was several times higher than pre-pandemic, affecting many who had never previously experienced food insecurity (BHFP, 2020; Lambie-Mumford and Loopstra, 2020; Macaninch et al., 2020; Trussell Trust, 2022).

Over the past two years, since the beginning of the pandemic, we have researched food insecurity and the provision of food aid in Sussex and Southwest London. Our aim was to explore the provision of food aid in 'real time', to understand how food aid providers responded and managed during this unprecedented crisis. This is important for several reasons beyond contributing to the literature on food aid and addressing a gap in how it was addressed during the pandemic. Understanding the response provides an indication to the future of food aid in the UK and to whether the problems faced by providers pre-pandemic, from lack of government support to struggles accessing resources (see, for example, Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford 2017; and Riches, 2018), have been addressed. Additionally, is important because it could support the response to the cost-of-living crisis, where the need for food aid might potentially be greater.

Our main finding is that providers did indeed address many of the problems they faced pre-pandemic. They responded to the pandemic by rapidly changing and innovating operations and practices. The pandemic caused providers not only to rethink how best to provide food aid and respond to increasing food insecurity, but also to think about

broader and related issues, such as poverty alleviation, food waste, and sustainability. Based on these findings, we argue that if the changes and innovations are maintained, they have the potential of not only transforming the food aid sector and food aid for the better, but also help deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

Below we divide the paper into four main sections. First, we discuss the literature on food aid in the UK and the issues faced by providers pre-pandemic. Second, we explain our methodological approach. Third, we discuss and provide evidence of our findings, focusing on four key areas: improved food aid infrastructure; increased coordination; rethinking the food aid model; and going beyond food aid. We conclude by discussing the importance and implications of these findings and question the long-term durability of these changes.

Food aid in the UK

Food insecurity is not a new issue in the UK.[1] Since the implementation of austerity measures by the coalition government in 2010, the UK has seen a gradual increase in

[1] Food insecurity is defined as 'a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food' (Trussell Trust, 2019).

food insecurity levels, reflected, among other measures, in demand and need for food aid (Caplan, 2020; Garthwaite, 2016a; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017; Power et al., 2020). Leading up to the pandemic, levels of food insecurity in the UK were classified as very high. In the most recent iterations of the biannual 'Food and You' survey, 16% of the British population were classified as food insecure (FSA, 2020; 2021a, b); the Institute of Health Equity estimated that food insecurity affected 8-10% of UK households between 2016-18 (Marmot et al., 2020).

Despite rising levels of food insecurity, it has been argued that the UK government lacked a clear policy response; indeed, one of the flagship policies to address poverty, the shift to universal credit, has directly increased food insecurity, albeit temporarily in many cases (Garthwaite, 2016a). In place of national policy, the response to food insecurity has largely been left to the food aid sector, which includes a variety of food aid providers, including community supermarkets, lunch clubs, and particularly food banks (Caplan, 2016). Over the past decade food aid providers have become permanent features of the unofficial welfare system in the UK (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). This is particularly the case with food banks,2 which are the main food aid providers and on which the literature and popular media have predominantly focused (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; and Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017).

To understand the response during the pandemic, it is important to examine some of the issues that were raised regarding the sector, particularly food banks, pre-pandemic. One of the main issues was whether they should address needs beyond the provision of food aid, a term that has different meanings depending on the organisation (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). The Trussell Trust emphasises that the purpose of food banks is short-term food aid, not long-term relief (Caplan, 2017; Loopstra, 2018a). The emphasis on the temporary nature of food aid means that pre-

pandemic many providers focused on essential and long-life items and spent less time and resources examining the underlying issues causing food insecurity.
A limitation of only providing short-term food aid is that many of those who require food aid are already struggling with long-term food insecurity (Loopstra, 2018a). AsGarthwaite (2016b) explains, those who eventually make it to a food bank, overcoming the stigma and shame associated, are already desperate and have exhausted all other options; for them it is literally a last resort (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). What was clear pre-pandemic was that many users relied on food banks to supplement their diets and mitigate their existing food insecurity (Loopstra, 2018a, and b).

Before the pandemic providers also struggled with several structural issues, from recruiting and retaining volunteers to accessing sufficient food provisions. Caplan

2 The first food bank was set up in 2000 by the Trussell Trust (who now have approximately 1300 food banks nationally); the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) operates food banks outside of theTrussell Trust, and numbers approximately 900.

noted the 'running of a food bank is like running a small business and requires a great deal of volunteer time and organization, well beyond the hours that the food bank is open for clients' (2016: 7). There was also duplication of resources in some areas with several food banks operating in parallel, while other areas, particularly rural, had insufficient resources. We very much agree with Power et al. (2020) that the initial phase of the pandemic exposed many of the above issues as well as the overall fragility of the food aid sector.

The issues faced by food aid providers and how these should be addressed, are of interest not only for dealing with food insecurity. Food insecurity is strongly related to inequality and poverty and inextricably linked to health outcomes; the pandemic demonstrated that economic and social inequalities lead to differentiated health and mortality outcomes (Belanger et al., 2020; Marmot et al., 2020). Underlying levels of inequality in the UK are high with large difference in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived parts of the country (ONS, 2021a, and b). Pre-pandemic an estimated 26.9% of households would need to spend more than a quarter of their disposable income (after housing costs) to meet the recommended healthy eating guidelines (Public Health England, 2016; Scott et al., 2018). Lone parents and larger families were most likely to struggle to meet the minimum food budget standard for a healthy and socially acceptable diet (O'Connell et al, 2019). This is not surprising as those on the lowest incomes have less access to a heathy diet (Maguire and Monsivais, 2015), and greater prevalence of lifestyle-related conditions, such as cardiovascular disease (Baker, 2019). In short, how providers responded and managed during the pandemic has wider implications beyond addressing food insecurity.

Methodology

Our focus was to explore in 'real time' the provision of food aid focusing on two geographic regions, Southwest London and Sussex, through the lens of those involved in its provision. What we wanted to understand was how the sector and the various food aid providers responded and managed during this unprecedented crisis.

The bulk of the research was conducted between March 2021 and March 2022, and covers the period from March 2020, and the beginning of the first lockdown, to December 2021. Our main objectives included understanding providers experiences during the pandemic; identifying the changes that occurred or that were introduced in response to the pandemic; exploring their impact on the provision of food aid; and developing an understanding of their long-term durability. We focused on the above regions for practical and conceptual reasons. Restrictions on travel during the pandemic forced us to focus on areas we already knew well, could travel to safely, and where we had existing networks of contacts.

 The description research approach (Moisey et al., 2022; Bradshaw et al., 2017) based on naturalistic inquiry (Sandelowski, 2000), was used, supplemented by site visits and personal observations. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with those in charge of providing food aid in a range of organisations, including food banks, lunch clubs, community supermarkets, as well as key stakeholders who support them, such as food partnerships, local authorities, and surplus food distributors. Purposive sampling was used with participants identified using a snowballing technique (Parker

et al, 2019), whereby initial contacts identified from desk research suggested others working in the field. The only inclusion criteria were individuals working to provide food aid throughout the pandemic in the specific geographical areas. Interviews were carried out initially online and after restrictions were lifted, in person. A bespoke interview guide was used for consistency (shown below). Interviews aimed to explore interviewees' experience of food aid prior to and during the pandemic, the impact of the pandemic, the meaning of food aid involvement for the individuals and their views on the likely durability of changes which had occurred. Interviews typically lasted 30-45 minutes, and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed. Transcriptions and recordings were analysed separately by the research team in an iterative process to identify the main themes and subthemes which were manually coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These were collated and illustrative quotes using pseudonyms for participants were chosen for each theme. The headline topics discussed in the interviews were:

1. What is your involvement with food aid?
2. What was your experience of food aid before the pandemic?
3. How did this change in response to the pandemic?
4. What does your involvement with food aid mean to you?

Second, the interviews were supplemented by visits to several key sites of food aid provision, during which the facilities and methodologies adopted during the pandemic were seen. During the visit, the contact at the organisation was interviewed, however, these sessions were not audio-recorded and are not included in Table 1 below.

Lastly, one of us has been volunteering with one of the main surplus food providers in Sussex and Southwest London since March 2020, and another with a food aid provider in Southwest London since January 2022, another reason why we chose to focus on these two areas. Once the initial research grant was awarded in February 2021 and ethical approval for the research was granted, the nature of the research was made clear to the organisations and to all those working and volunteering with them.

The research was carried out with ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee with informed consent of all participants. One important caveat is that within the timeframe mentioned above we did not interview claimants of food aid.

Results

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were undertaken up to December 2021 (20inSussex and eight in Southwest London). In total eight separate sites were visited, several of which were visited more than once (see Table 1).

(Insert table 1 here)

Major themes identified.

Increased need for support during the pandemic occurred in both geographical areas. This resulted from difficulties with all four pillars of food insecurity; availability (e.g. food shortages), access (e.g. difficulty obtaining online shopping slots), utilisation (e.g. physical ill-health) and stability (e.g. altered employment and income). Innovations occurred across the sector to meet this need including enhanced cooperation, communication and sharing of food and resources. Altered organisational practices to accommodate different demands were reported (e.g. food deliveries rather than collections). A more holistic response seeking to address underlying issues (e.g. development of a structured local response over time), signposting to appropriate support (e.g. benefits support) and enhanced skills development (e.g. provision of recipe boxes), was also found. The extent to which improvements identified will be possible to sustain longer term is unclear. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Key Findings

1. Food aid infrastructure

When asked where the food provided came from pre-pandemic, Olga, the project manager of a food partnership overseeing and coordinating several food aid providers said:

'I think they were mostly reliant on donations, er, donations of food and obviously cash donations and buying food'.

Running a food bank and/or providing food aid has always been complex (Caplan,2016). Pre-pandemic, many providers struggled with unreliable food donations and access to surplus food. Most relied on donated food, often of random nature and quality, supplemented with food purchased through monetary donations, and surplus food provided by distributors. Surplus distributors in turn did not always have access to stable and reliable food provisions, the majority coming from UK supermarkets.

The unreliability of the system was also due to the lack of clear structures in food donations including 'a lack of legislative framework requiring supermarkets to donate surplus food' (Thapa Karki et al., 2021: 575). Food redistribution initiatives have been largely fragmented and independent from each other (Facchini et al., 2018). As observed by several of the providers we engaged with, on the one hand, pre-pandemic surplus food providers could not always be relied on. On the other hand, in some areas they appeared to compete. When asked whether there was a need to alleviate 'turf' issues between surplus food distributors, Asya, the project manager of a food partnership overseeing and coordinating many providers, replied: 'yeah, very much so'. 'The development of a larger and more coherent food surplus redistribution system' was argued (Facchini et al., 2018) as a step in the right direction, in terms of addressing food waste and other aspects of the food supply chain. For example, leaving aside the debate over whether surplus food is the appropriate solution to food insecurity (Caraher and Furey, 2017), establishing a more coherent food surplus system held promise of providing stable supplies to food aid providers. This is exactly

what happened during the pandemic.

The early stages of the pandemic were chaotic. Many providers either shut down or struggled to operate. One of the issues they grappled with was access to food supplies. To ensure stable supplies, local authorities, food partnerships and the national government stepped in. Local authorities and food partnerships provided financial support and grants as well as coordination, and in some cases even stepped in and created central food hubs to supply food providers. Alison, the manager of one hub explained it to us: 'so the council and…the food partnership kind of got together and said…we need some kind of strategic thinking here and we need….to mobilise an operation whereby we can make sure that [food aid providers] stay open'. Food for these hubs was provided by surplus food providers, donated by local businesses, or purchased by local authorities and food partnerships from their own funds or from grants they were awarded.

The role of surplus food providers was also clarified and strengthened. In the UK there are a limited number of surplus food distributors, Fareshare being the largest. The pandemic accelerated previous developments that anchored Fareshare's pivotal role in this system, making the supply of surplus food to food aid providers clearer and more reliable (Caplan, 2017). At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK government also helped support this process by making large funds available to Fareshare and other providers of surplus food, as well as WRAP3 (Parsons and Barling, 2020). In turn, funds from WRAP were given to surplus food organisations, including Fareshare. These funds helped anchor surplus food suppliers as the main suppliers for food aid providers and paved a move away from a mostly donation-based aid provision. Nonetheless it is clear that the move towards relying on surplus food providers involves pitfalls:

3 WRAP (The Waste and Resources Action Programme) is a UK based charity that promotes and supports sustainable resource use, including reducing food waste

'so yeah we definitely need both together, I think if we were purely relying on a Fareshare delivery it would be tricky. But, er, yeah we're able to kind of supplement it with donations' [Olga, food partnership, Sussex].

The role of surplus food distributors also changed during the pandemic. According to Mary, a regional manager of a large surplus food distributor, their role shifted 'from an environmental solution to provide a social resolution'; from focusing primarily on tackling food waste, towards supporting and supplying food aid organisations, which included purchasing food using DEFRA grants for the first time. This meant further expansion of their logistical capacities, including storage and distribution, and further establishing surplus food distributors as the main vehicle for supplying food aid providers.

Upscaling of operations and resources for surplus food distributors and clarification of their roles and distribution infrastructure was also aided by actions taken by national supermarkets. During the pandemic they coordinated and provided additional support to surplus food distributors.

[Pre-pandemic] '...we had less idea of what was coming in erm, because it would just turn up. Nowadays [the surplus distributor] have done something with Salesforce which means we get more oversight on what's coming in [James, operations manager for a surplus food distributor, Sussex].

In many parts of the country, supermarkets clarified their provision of surplus food by designating one charity that would be responsible for collecting food from each supermarket branch:

'So it's not necessarily FareShare that are coming in at the end of the night to a [branch], it could be City Harvest, it could be any other local charity' [Helen, regional community engagement manager for a national supermarket].

In summary, the pandemic brought about a more coherent food surplus system and a clearer and more central role for surplus food providers. This is a substantive change for two key reasons. First, it shifts the UK towards a US style food aid provision system (Martin, 2021; Riches, 2017) with large distribution depots (food banks in the US) supplying front line food aid providers. Second, it provides the UK government, as well as local authorities and food partnerships, with a direct avenue to step in and support food aid provision in case of a national crisis.

2. Increased coordination

Prior to the pandemic, the extent to which food aid providers, cooperated appeared variable. According to Thapa Karki, who mapped the architecture of food aid distribution in Sussex pre-pandemic, much of the coordination was based on individual

relationships. This was problematic 'because every time this person moves away, [the providers] have to start again'. The lack of sustained coordination, as well as the limited resources many had access to, also likely contributed to a sometimes-competitive attitude:

'So, for example if that organisation was trying to fund raise for something and actually there's another organisation that's going in for the same funding bid, they would get less' [Mary, surplus food distributor, Sussex]

The sudden onset of the pandemic and increased need for support required a paradigmatic shift in attitude. Almost overnight, new partnerships and support networks developed among food aid providers to coordinate responses and share resources:

'So we had meetings, you know, with other food banks and we were able to, if we had extra food or sources of food, we could put people in touch with it' [Catherine, food aid provider, Sussex].

Increased cooperation and coordination extended beyond simply communicating and sharing resources better. It started in the first few weeks of the first lockdown with a triaging system, coordinated by food partnerships,4 supported by local authorities, to assess levels of need and to collect surplus food, from the many closed hospitality venues. It continued with food partnerships coordinating food purchasing and deliveries to those in need, and in some areas creating central hubs for the coordination and distribution of resources, including volunteers. Food partnershipswere well placed to use their networks. They could quickly identify the local capacity and level of need and help establish and strengthen relationships. Their centrality to the provision of food aid was highlighted in numerous interviews:
'Yeah, I would say Food Partnership were, were pretty instrumental in, in getting everyone sort of together and meeting - and getting different parties together and - erm, to try and meet the need. They were definitely, yeah, important to that' [James, surplus food distributor, Sussex].

'...food partnership, definitely, with the central, they had a central venue, and they were basically going to the city, was erm, what do you call it, they were acquiring food as a city. So that was orchestrated by the council and the food partnership' [Cassia, food aid provider, Sussex]

The level of cooperation and coordination seen during the pandemic was, in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, exceptional. The development manager of a

4 These were either pre-existing or set up during the pandemic. In our field work, we came across food partnerships in different stages of development, several of which were established either just before or during the pandemic.

complex organisation told us that, even though he did not want to 'overly romanticise it… there was almost that kind of wartime spirit that you hear about in the Blitz' [Pedro, complex organisation, Sussex]. Relationships were either establisheor strengthened, particularly between food aid providers, food partnerships and local authorities. New working groups were established, and dormant groups were revived to deal with the immediate need and wider issues concerning food aid. The project manager of one food partnership told us of the weekly and monthly meetings with the, among others, 'emergency food network', 'affordable food network', and the 'surplus food network'.

This increased cooperation and coordination continued throughout most of 2021; the CEO of a surplus food distributor told us in the summer of 2021 that 'there are coordination groups and networks that have recently been set up in East Sussex and … West Sussex as well' [Kenneth, surplus food distributor, Sussex].

The extent to which these groups and networks are supported and managed in future will be important. Sharing and community asset building has the potential to embed resilience across localities, but it is not a one-way street. While food partnerships link already existing community assets and resources, they also offer opportunities for volunteering, education and training (Food for Life, 2021). Thus, they offer potential long-term benefits for locality asset development, embedding skills and knowledge locally which could act as a reservoir for other public health initiatives requiring grounds-up approaches.

3. Rethinking the food aid model

'For us, because ignoring the politics of it, there is a value in feeding people that haven't got food, but if that's all that you do, then you just become the bottom of a failed system, you just become an enabler of a failed system in a way….so we had reached a point where we recognised that just running a food bank in itself was insufficient' [Brian & Luke, food aid provider, Sussex]

There was recognition pre-pandemic in the literature and among providers, that providing food aid was not enough, as it did little to address the long-term issues many faced, beyond temporary alleviation of food insecurity. And even that was not always accomplished. As Loopstra and Lalor (2017) show, regular use of food banks did not necessarily result in food security; regular users were often food insecure with poor nutritional quality diets. In many ways, 'the existence of food banks conveys the message that 'something is being done', but reveals that this is far from sufficient to meet the need' (Caplan, 2020: 9)

One of the most striking things we encountered was the realisation, among all providers we interviewed, that the traditional food aid model, in particular food banks, did not work well. For some providers this was a culmination of past experiences, for others it was an eye opener brought about by the pandemic, particularly for new providers. As a result, all the providers we interviewed looked at ways to innovate and change their practices, including setting up new social enterprises, such as pantries, community supermarkets, and pay-as-you-feel cafes, to better deal not only with the pandemic but also the wider causes of food insecurity.

One of the most immediate and practical examples of the changes introduced was the

relaxation of referral requirements; all providers recognised the difficulties of acquiring referrals during the pandemic. As a result, all providers relaxed requirements for referrals, while many new organisations did not require them:

'So we just said, no, no. It's absolutely fine. We will serve anybody at whatever the need' [Pauline, food aid provider, Sussex].

Another change was the focus on delivering food, rather than relying on those in need to collect it; particularly during the first lockdown, with social distancing, this was often the only way of providing food aid. By the end of 2021, most of the providers we interviewed continued to provide deliveries, albeit at a reduced level, despite the removal of restrictions. Although primarily driven by the pandemic, these two changes resulted in easier and more consistent access to food, and dramatically reduced the stigma and shame associated with accessing food aid (see: Caplan, 2016; Williams et al., 2016).5 However, there was widespread recognition that food insecurity usually reflected greater need. Pre-pandemic, most providers limited the number of times food aid could be accessed using referrals. With the relaxation or elimination of referrals, providers moved towards either expanding the number of times food aid could be accessed, or in several cases putting no upper limit:

'When you come to us and hunger is a problem, we're going to take that away, we're going to feed you for as long as it takes, you don't have to worry about that anymore' [Brian & Luke, food aid provider, Sussex].

Despite the increased provision of food aid, many providers told us that just meeting food needs would not alleviate the underlying drivers of food insecurity:

'There's a reason why they're needing food and it may be addiction. It may be employment. It may be housing. It may be, you know, lots of other… but we - giving

5 Reducing stigma and shame was also part of the reason for setting up new social enterprises. Community supermarkets, pantries, and cafes, with either subscription or pay-as-you-feel models, which offer users both choices over their food (in contrast to food parcels over which they have little choice), and the option of making a payment if they can, reduced stigma and shame by allowing users to give back when they were able (Caplan, 2020). Feeling valued and able to contribute is an important principle espoused by those seeking to avoid stigmatisation in the food aid arena (Nourish Scotlandand the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018)

them food and just patting them on the head and just saying, 'Well, cheerio,' that's not enough. We've got to meet their, their real needs' [Pauline, food aid provider, Sussex]. It was recognised pre-pandemic that food insecurity was multifaceted (House of Lords, 2020). However, at the core it is mostly about poverty and, despite official failures to recognise it, a flawed benefits system, with its unnecessary delays and sanctions (House of Lords, 2020; Caplan, 2020).

'Food is just one manifestation of a much greater need' [Morgan, food aid provider, Kingston].

'The root of it is poverty. It's money. It's housing. It's the other things that there are huge issues across the country' [Lorna, food partnership, Sussex].

Recognising the limitations of only providing food aid,6 all the providers we interviewed either started to provide or expanded their existing provision of additional support and resources to tackle underlying problems. All provided signposting to other services, as well as direct support in accessing these. Many went several steps further. They either hired a dedicated support coordinator, using grants acquired during the pandemic, or provided space for service providers to come to their premises (dependent on Covid regulations):

'Then people from the council came, we had people come to talk about physical health, mental health, people to talk about housing situations, training, offering training courses. We've had all sorts of different people come and do that, trying to sort out their fuel bills and utility bills and things like that' [Catherine, food aid provider, Sussex].

The additional steps taken by providers, regarding referrals, access to food, deliveries, and extra support, might not be enough on their own to dramatically alter food insecurity. However, anecdotally they are very positive steps in that direction. Additionally, and this is an important point to highlight, they also provide a new model and way of thinking of food aid and the purpose of providers.

4. Beyond food aid

The pandemic brought about several changes to the food aid landscape. On the one hand, there was a dramatic increase in demand, and many providers, at least initially, either closed or struggled to respond. On the other hand, there was a corresponding scaling up of operations and capabilities, with new organisations set up, an influx of volunteers, more cooperation between organisations, and more money, from donations and grants.

6 We were told bluntly that 'you can't just chuck food at poverty' (Bill, complex organisation, Sussex)

Pre-pandemic, many of the food aid providers we spoke to wanted to address issues beyond food aid; some were already moving in that direction, while others did not have the capacity. These issues relate to food insecurity, as discussed above, but also to nutrition, culinary skills, food waste, sustainability, and climate change.

The addition of more resources, in terms of grants, donations, and volunteers, meant providers were often more able, despite the increased demand, to consider and address these wider issues. In terms of nutrition and culinary skills, this entailed the provision of recipe cards, heavily subsidised, sponsored, or free cookery classes, and in some cases prepared meals (fresh and frozen). These are important developments, enabling users to gain additional culinary knowledge, confidence, and skills.7 In addition, the transition from traditional food bank models discussed above included new innovative practices, such as the provision of free weekly recipe boxes, supporting cooking skills and nutritional knowledge:

'…we can be in the business of giving people maybe some tools that will help them, so greater knowledge around cooking, and cooking skills, and then also hopefully the opportunity and the means to grow something for themselves' [Morgan,food aid provider, Kingston]

The provision of weekly recipe boxes to those identified as being in need is less about supporting nutritional intake (since only one family meal a week is provided), and more about gaining confidence and skills in the kitchen, spending time preparing food together as a family and tasting new foods. In this, it resembles commercial options available at a cost to those who can afford them (e.g. HelloFresh). A somewhat similar initiative was taken by other providers that sought to provide heavily subsidised or free fresh food boxes, working with local producers and/or farmers' markets:

'We were very interested in how you make the same quality of food accessible to paying farmers' market customers in middle class neighbourhoods, and people getting subsidised or free meals, so our real focus was, is this an opportunity for us to experiment around financial models that will make that possible?' [Pedro, complex organisation, Sussex]

Beyond culinary skills and nutrition, most providers paid increasing attention to food waste, sustainability, and climate change. This was always the case for surplus food providers but became increasingly important for food aid providers as well. The importance of linking food insecurity, food waste, sustainability and climate change was recognised pre-pandemic (Schnitter & Berry, 2019). However, the greater

7 The coordinator of one complex organisation told us that they were: 'looking at trying to show these alternative ways of thinking, teaching people how to grow food, teaching people how to forage, teachingpeople how to cook, that those things can show a more self-sustainable model' (Bill, complex organisation, Sussex)

involvement of surplus food providers and new providers during the pandemic, particularly those concerned with reducing food waste and promoting more environmentally sustainable food systems, into the arena of food aid, resulted in the overlapping of the above priorities with tackling food insecurity. The idea of using food waste as part of the solution to food insecurity is contested (Caraher & Furey, 2017), including by some of our participants:

The problem is if it's seen as the solution, then the underlying causes of why people are there in the first place might not get dealt with' [Jane, food aid provider, Sussex]

Nonetheless, the potential for use of surplus food to meet short-term need for food was highlighted by some as also benefiting food waste and sustainability priorities: 'we could actually eliminate hunger throughout the whole UK if stuff was put in place for collecting and donating this food that's otherwise being wasted so it's just like a win/win for everyone really' [Deepak, food aid provider, Kingston].

The focus on food waste and environmentally sustainable practices was also evident in the way organisations cooperated and endeavoured to upcycle food, whether surplus food, left over from farmers' markets, or even surplus from food aid providers. One example we came across several times was transforming surplus and leftover food into meals, using community kitchens, which could then be offered in community supermarkets, pantries, or via other routes to those who needed them:

'what they cook with is stuff that has been left at the end of the community market….But often they wait until the end, they take everything that's been left and then they cook with it, freeze it, kind of goes out in the community market so it's like a second option for people to take it' [Olga, food partnership, Sussex].

This also illustrates the move away from the traditional food bank model we have witnessed. Traditional food banks rarely provide cooked food (fresh or frozen) and often do not have the kitchen or storage facilities needed:

'...the food banks don't have community kitchens, they're in churches or they're places where they get dried food and people are coming to pick it up. But they can't use perishable food because they can't store it, you know, they don't have fridges, they don't have the space' [Fred, food aid provider, Kingston].

The project manager of one food partnership provided the rationale for the 'new' focus on sustainability:

'The sustainability side of it and then the environmental sustainability side of it as well because we're in a situation where we're in a changing climate which will affect our food system and the first people that are going to be hit are the people that can't afford or just about can afford food' [Lorna, food partnership, Sussex]

Conclusion: implications, limitations, and long-term durability

When we started this research, we were unsure what we would find, but we did not expect the pandemic to bring about positive change. Nevertheless, this is exactly what had happened in the areas we looked at, and anecdotally in many other areas too. The pandemic catalysed dramatic, often positive, changes to the provision of food aid. In response to the pandemic providers increased coordination and oversight as well as upscaled their capabilities and resources. These changes leave the food aid sector better placed to manage and respond to the cost-of-living crisis if the changes introduced are maintained. Additionally, and maybe even more importantly long-term, the manner in which providers addressed the problems they faced pre-pandemic, including by moving away from the traditional food bank model, holds the possibility for a more humane and durable form of food aid provision.

We fully accept that the sample size, the geographic focus, and researching in 'real time' during a pandemic merit consideration when examining the findings. It is also important to point out that many of the changes we observed might have happened anyway. Nevertheless, the circumstances of the pandemic removed some of the barriers to change often seen. Grants from central and local government and donations from the private sector as well as the public, meant that it was possible to supplement donated food with purchases. It also meant that providers could buy vehicles for food delivery and equipment for food storage, and hire new staff, including those focused on supporting users. Pre-pandemic volunteers were often older adults, the group required to self-isolate during the pandemic. An influx of new volunteers, many on furlough, professionally skilled and qualified, took their place, bringing fresh ideas and energy to the food aid sector.

The question we are left with in the 'post-Covid' phase with continuous high levels of demand,8 is how durable are these changes long-term? Based on what we were told and have seen, it is likely that the increased coordination and cooperation among providers will continue. This is particularly important given the continued demand:

'You know, I cannot see it [demand for food aid] going down to level that we were at before the pandemic any time soon. So I think there has to be a continued

8 The introduction of a £20 uplift to Universal Credit payments in March 2020 (DWP, 2021), was widely welcomed, and made a substantial difference to many (Waters and Wernham, 2021).

However, despite widespread concern this was removed in October 2021. Alongside rises in food prices, energy bills and inflation (Institute for Government, 2022), the cost-of-living crisis in the UK will make financial recovery from the pandemic a distant prospect for many families, so levels of food insecurity and the need for food aid will either remain relatively high, or further increase.

strategic kind of coordination between the different organisations that are doing this. [Asya, food partnership, Sussex

Perhaps most importantly will be the role played by food partnerships. Given the importance of coordinated working, it is to be hoped that existing food partnerships will remain in place, since working relationships have been established. We also expect the moves away from the traditional food bank models to continue. All the organisations we engaged with were re-evaluating their practices regarding referrals, choice, response to food insecurity, and wider issues concerning food waste, sustainability, nutrition, culinary skills. Nevertheless, there are several worrying signs.

The move towards relying more on surplus food distributors raises several difficult questions. If surplus food available for use falls (e.g. by more closely aligning food production and imports with need, and reducing food waste), this will clearly benefit the environment, but will reduce the amount available for food aid. This is already happening to some extent, which raises long-held concerns that surplus food is not a viable long-term solution to food insecurity (nor should it be); anecdotally we have seen substantive fluctuation in surplus food levels in 2022.

In terms of resources, many of the changes mentioned above were made possible by the influx of volunteers and the availability of additional grants and donations, which are now in shorter supply. The ending of the furlough scheme has reduced the pool of potential volunteers, and the national government and local authorities have made fewer grants available. Most of the providers we spoke to were worried about the future. They fear the end of the pandemic might give the wrong signal that the food insecurity crisis is over, when it might be getting worse. When asked about whether the changes introduced will be maintained, the project manager of a food partnership told us:

'Yeah, I mean I really hope so. Some good stuff has happened so far and there's a lot of energy around it so I'm just hoping we can continue to do it and continue to work on it … so fingers crossed.' [Lorna, food partnership, Sussex].

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