

# NUTRITION CONNECT

Innovative food systems partnerships  
in response to COVID-19:

**Food redistribution in the U.K.**



## Summary

COVID-19 has changed our lives in many ways. It has also served to highlight social and economic inequalities. One tangible way that this has surfaced is through our food system – exacerbating existing challenges and creating new ones in the way that people produce, sell, purchase and consume food. This piece looks at how COVID-19 has impacted the U.K., with examples from the capital, London, focusing on both the challenges and responses that have arisen as a result of increased need for food assistance. Prior to the pandemic, food bank use was already growing at alarming rates across the U.K, indicating there were existing failures across the food system, linked to ineffective government policy and social programmes, as well as market failures.

COVID-19 has only served to underscore the severity of these challenges – evident in the surge in need: in the last two weeks of March 2020, food bank use in the U.K. rose by 81% compared to the previous year (Trussell Trust, 2020). Estimates indicate that needs have not dropped and

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remained much higher than normal for the second quarter of 2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020). Over one in five U.K. households are poorer than they were pre-pandemic (Handscome and Judge, 2020), while rates of childhood obesity continue to rise (Issacs et al, 2021). At the same time, across the U.K., isolation and social distancing have increased unhealthy snacking and intakes of high calorie food, fat salt and sugar (Imperial College London, 2020). Given that unhealthy foods are three times cheaper than healthy foods (The Food Foundation, 2020), lower-income families at greater nutritional risk. Despite

being one of the wealthiest cities in the world, COVID-19 has intensified economic inequality in London, resulting in higher rates of food and nutrition insecurity.

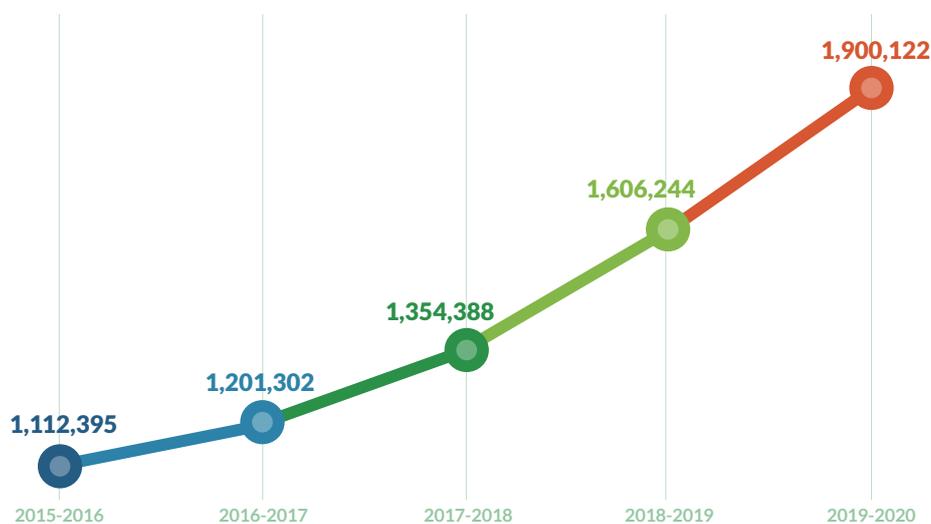
In looking ahead to a recovery phase, it is possible to reflect on the innovations, partnerships and alliances that have evolved in response to the pandemic. They demonstrate that establishing new connections between a more diverse set of actors has the potential to enable more resilient food systems. At the same time, without measures to address structural inequity, the nutritional health of low-income and vulnerable populations will continue to be disproportionately affected. This piece highlights:

- Socioeconomic changes or exacerbations due to COVID-19.
- Inequality as an important root and driver of food and nutrition insecurity.
- Subsystems of public-private food redistribution initiatives that help people access food, including new food banking relationships and schemes that directly link consumers to farms and growers.
- The urgent need for routine nutrition data collection and measures of food and nutrition security to be integrated into national household surveys.
- Opportunities for public-private collaborations, and reflections and considerations for the future resilience of the U.K.'s food system.

## The impact of COVID-19 on food and nutrition security in the U.K.

### Inequality and food bank use is on the rise

Across the U.K., a greater proportion of the population are unable to meet their nutritional needs because of underlying structural inequities that have worsened because of the pandemic. A report by the Trussell Trust – the U.K.'s largest network of food banks – finds an almost 50% increase in people using food banks for the first time since March 2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020). The graph below shows that a growing demand for food banks across the U.K in the past five years, coupled with an immediate surge in need in early 2020.



**Figure A:** Continued increase in the demand for food banks between 2015 – 2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020).  
Source: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2019/04/25/record-1-6m-food-bank-parcels/>

#### Main reasons for referral between April 2018 – March 2019:

- 33.1% due to low income; electronic referral data suggests over 80% of these referrals were for people receiving benefits and not earning
- 20.3% due to delays in benefits being paid
- 17.3% due to changes in benefits

The above graph indicates that prior to COVID-19, structural inequities leading to continued increases in food bank use have been well embedded in the U.K.'s food system. The pandemic has catalysed food and nutrition insecurity, yet it is not the root cause. In times of crisis, gaps in food systems are exposed and it is harder for more households to attain the four pillars of food and nutrition security – access, availability, utilisation and stability. The nutritional health of the homeless, low-income families and the elderly is most at risk (Imperial College London, 2020). A report by the Food Foundation finds that food insecurity is higher than pre-COVID-19 levels and that: “55% of those experiencing food insecurity (an estimated 2.5 million adults) said it was because they did not have enough money for food, 31% said it was due to isolation, 23% said it was lack of access and supply and 8% cited other reasons in the last six months” (The Food Foundation, 2020a).

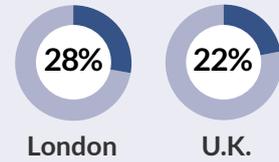
In May 2020, following the onset of the pandemic, the [BBC reported](#) that nationwide Universal Credit claims exceeded the normal rate by six times. Concurrently, low-income families have been reported to spend more during lockdowns, not less (The Resolution Foundation, 2020). Over one in five U.K. households are poorer than they were pre-pandemic (Handscomb and Judge, 2020), buying cheaper and less healthy foods as result (Howes et al, 2020). Sharp increases in claims for Universal Credit food across the U.K. tally with the rise in food bank use.

Food bank statistics for April 2020 across the U.K. show an 89% increase in food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust food banks (representing two thirds of all food banks operating in the U.K.) and a 175% increase at the Independent Food Aid Network, when compared with the same month in 2019 (The Trussell Trust, 2020). Typically, food banks are unable to offer nutritionally rich foods - a challenge that is underscored by the fact that healthy foods are three times more expensive than unhealthy foods in the U.K. ([The Food Foundation](#), 2020). It is unsurprising, then, that the U.K.'s 2020 National Food Strategy review indicated that children ate more junk food and snacks but fewer fruits and vegetables during lockdown and that this effect was heightened among poorer children (U.K. National Food Strategy, 2020). This is aligned with reports from Imperial College London that indicate that isolation and social distancing have increased snacking behaviours and the intake of high-energy, fat, salt and sugar in the U.K. (Imperial College London, 2020). The poorest 10% of households in the U.K purchase only 3.2 portions of fruit and vegetables per day ([The Food Foundation](#), 2020). Childhood obesity rates in the U.K are growing as inequality rises, with recent evidence suggesting that children from deprived areas are more likely to be obese (Issacs et al, 2021).

Despite growing records of U.K. food poverty, there is a lack of systematic investment in nutritional data and no nutrition data routinely integrated into national surveys. The absence of data on micro-nutritional deficiencies, in particular, provides an additional set of challenges to policy makers.

### London Highlight

Before the pandemic, London's children were more likely to grow up in poverty than anywhere else in the U.K: 28% of people lived in poverty compared to 22% in the rest of the U.K ([Trust for London](#)). While this poverty gap existed in London before



the pandemic, it is widening as a result of the additional stresses on households. Data captured in December 2020 shows that London is home to the U.K.'s top five local authorities with the highest share of children facing hunger and food insecurity:

1 Redbridge	25.5%
2 Tower Hamlets	24.7%
3 Newham	23.9%
4 Harrow	23.7%
5 Brent	23.6%

(Social Market Foundation, 2020)

In London, one of the biggest changes with respect to food banks is user demographics. Skilled professionals facing unemployment are now turning to

food banks as a last resort. Numerous news articles corroborate this trend; for example, Ishraq Bhattim Co-founder of the Bounds Green Food Bank states that almost ten percent of households are now "educated middle class" (quoted in the [Evening Standard](#)).

The exacerbated risks to low-income families and vulnerable populations are especially concerning given scientific evidence confirming that diet related illness is one of the top three risk factors for dying of COVID-19 (Butler et al, 2020). Obesity, diabetes and poor metabolic health – all symptoms related to nutrition – increase a person’s chances of suffering worse effects of COVID-19 (Berry et al, 2020). Results from the findings of this large global in-depth nutrition study indicate that people’s responses to COVID-19 are individualised because they are affected by metabolic and blood sugar response, and dietary inflammation. Such factors are often socio-economic, which is illustrated by the fact that Brent – London’s poorest borough (with 33% of people living in poverty) has had the highest death rates of COVID-19 in the country (Lord Best, 2020). Examples of food redistribution efforts demonstrate that the food system can pivot.

### New cross sector alliances

Historically, food banks and their networks rely on relationships with supermarkets for a significant share of their donations. Generally, food banks receive food in four main ways:

1. Surplus and non-surplus food direct from supermarkets;
2. Surplus food direct from shops;
3. Food donated by individuals in supermarkets;
4. Food purchased in bulk from supermarkets/shops by food banks (Power et al, 2020).

COVID-19 posed challenges to these four avenues; for example, during March and April 2020, many consumers stock-piled food, which had a direct impact on the surplus food that was available for supermarkets to donate. Food donations by individuals significantly declined. Supermarket rationing and lower stock availability limited the amount of food bank parcels that food banks could receive (Ibid).

### London Highlight

The London Food Alliance was formed in response to these challenges and is made up of London’s three biggest food redistribution charities – City Harvest, FareShare and The Felix Project. The partnership provides emergency response by delivering food to new London borough community hubs, which have been created to distribute food to vulnerable people in every London borough. The Alliance is coordinating with all 32 London boroughs to make sure the council-run community hubs are well stocked with supplies ([The Felix Project](#)).

[Newham Council](#) is an example of an effective collaboration between local government, the voluntary sector, local faith groups and resident volunteers. Eight food distribution hubs have been created, which are supported by 15 community organisations that accept fresh produce. Newham Council has also invested in fridges and freezers to get large volumes of surplus food into the borough.

In order to meet increasing demands due to COVID-19, the charities have each scaled their operations and created new processes and systems; for example, The Felix Project, has tripled the amount of food rescued from surplus, delivering the equivalent of 1.9 million meals in June 2020. The Felix Project teamed up with restaurants to get home-made ready meals to the homeless and have been delivering food to NHS staff and schools during lockdown. Many food banks have lost volunteers because of the pandemic; however, a new younger cohort of volunteers is growing in London. Londoners, such as [Naomi Russell](#), who lives in Hampstead, are stepping up. Naomi has set up a food bank distribution centre on her front drive. Celebrities and city campaigns, such as [Food For London Now](#), continue to raise the profile of food banks in London, which is enabling more contribution from restaurants.

**1.9 million**  
meals in June 2020

Since the pandemic, the Trussell Trust formed a new partnership with Sainsbury's, which has donated 3 million GBP and pledged to make its surplus food available. Sainsbury's have committed to identify stock available within its supply chain that food banks are most in need of, and has hired group of logistics companies to help FareShare move stock from regional depots to smaller groups in need (The Independent).



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At the same time that the expansion of food distribution charities has been supported by supermarkets, there have been reports that supermarket staff have experienced greater levels of food insecurity due to less than minimum wage salaries. In some cases, this may have led to supermarket staff being reliant on food banks themselves. These challenges demonstrate that food redistribution efforts across the U.K. do not exist in a vacuum and are dependent upon responsible business practice, economic opportunity, social policy and other factors. Further actions are needed to protect employee wellbeing, enforce the minimum wage and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

### Direct grower to consumer sales

Vegetable box and local pick-up schemes connect producers directly with consumers, helping to decentralise the food supply. The growth of vegetable and fresh produce box schemes has been exponential: Between the end of February 2020 and mid-April 2020 vegetable box sales increased 111% (Wheeler, 2020). Local delivery schemes, in particular vegetable boxes, have managed to fill the gaps where multinational supermarkets have been unable to flexibly respond.

London, in particular, has seen a rapid growth of wholesale retailers and local pop-ups delivering vegetable and fresh produce boxes. **Natoora** – London's premium organic fruit and vegetable supplier to London's best restaurants, has made a shift to home deliveries, using delivery Apps such as Deliveroo. Local pick-up schemes, such as **CropDrop** in Haringey are also growing and building social systems and offering a platform for people to make new connections. It is likely that consumers will continue to support small and local businesses for grocery shopping, alongside continuing to rely on online grocery and food delivery services (Vanhooijdonk, 2020).

### Pale Green Dot

**Pale Green Dot** is a farm in Sussex that supplies fresh produce to London. The company pivoted within a week to respond to the pandemic and have continued to respond to customer needs. The company quickly moved into larger premises, launched new logistics software and increased its van fleet from six to more than 40 to supply south east England with vegetables from its farm and other staples from its partners. The company went from 100% commercial sales to delivering 95% at the household level, according to **Jo Farish**, Head of Business Development.

The company continues to evolve quickly - most recently responding directly to customer requests for changes to the size and variety of produce and have continued to expand the range of products delivered to the doorstep.

Pale Green Dot had a long-standing relationship with charities, such as The Felix Project who continue to take large initial surplus and cooked nutritious meals for the most vulnerable communities.

The willingness and ability of farms and wholesalers to directly reach out to customers brings greater flexibility to the food system, since it offers a localised buffer to the globalised system. These pathways have the potential to scale and provide long term sustainability, especially because they are providing new links between actors that were not otherwise there. The pandemic is spurring the beginnings of new connections within supply chains, which over time, will require greater investment, particularly in technology, innovation and marketing. However, while these innovations may provide pathways to scale, they predominately benefit high and middle-income consumers. Far greater structural change will be required to reduce the growing reliance on food banks and improving the nutritional health of low-income and vulnerable populations.

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The pandemic is spurring the beginnings of new connections within supply chains...

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How to address structural inequality through a resilience lens is the focus of the U.K. [Food Power Network](#). Through this Network, 15 independent alliances have received financial support to build local food resilience. The Food Power Network describes resilience as “the ability of a system – and the people within it – to keep going and to keep adapting and to withstand shocks and stresses (Sustain, 2021)”. The Food Power Network focuses on the principles underpinning personal resilience, demonstrating the importance of investing in approaches to boost personal agency, such as skills building, in order to increase earning potential and reduce food poverty. The Network advocates for renewed measures of success that focus on the number of people with greater self-reliance. Given the rise in poverty across the U.K. and the increases in reliance on food bank use and Universal Credit, the approach put forward by the Food Power Network offers a helpful lens for future investment, policy and programming.

## U.K. government policy and advocacy initiatives

Oversight of the food system is fragmented in the U.K. with at least sixteen government departments responsible for food (Parsons et al, 2020). The government has commissioned an independent review to set out a vision and strategy for a better food system (U.K. National Food Strategy Independent Review, 2020). The strategy focuses on reaching disadvantaged children and building new trade routes in light of national sovereignty. Alongside this review, Agriculture Act 2020 is intended to provide strategic direction on food and farming for the U.K.’s exit from the European Union. However, the Agriculture Act appears to have missed a significant opportunity to diversify and build resilient supply chains that protect biodiversity. Furthermore, the strategy does not include any reference to public health, and this lack of alignment between the U.K. Agriculture Act 2020 and the National Food Strategy Review is a missed opportunity to align health of people and planet.

The U.K. government has put in place a number of measures to support people facing food and nutrition insecurity. Policies and initiatives designed to reduce food and nutrition security in the England, for example, include: Universal Credit and an additional £20 per week COVID-19 allowance, Free School Meal Scheme, breakfast clubs, a Holiday Activity and Food Programme and Healthy Start Vouchers (increased to £4.25) to every pregnant woman and to all households under four where parent is on Universal Credit. The U.K. government also has an opportunity to further subsidize the cost of healthy food, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, to complement recently announced government measures to reduce the consumption of fatty and sugary products. Unfortunately, these programmes do not extend to all vulnerable populations, including migrants who do not have access to public funds due to their legal status (Project 17, 2020).

**£20 a week**  
COVID-19 allowance

The Department of Health and Social Care's Obesity Plan proposes introducing calorie labelling in restaurants and banning buy-one-get-one-free offers (Isaacs et al, 2021). Local authorities are beginning to enforce restrictions on take-aways near schools or to limit unhealthy food advertising. Voluntary measures, such as the Healthy Catering Commitment in London, are gaining traction; however, much more needs to be done to align policy with the socio-economic factors undercutting household decision-making with respect to food and nutrition (Issacs et al, 2021).

A Food to The Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force has been appointed to review cross sectoral evidence and strategies. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition is a long-established expert group appointed to advise the Department of Health and other government departments. Greater public-private collaboration can support enforcement of a strong accountability framework for the Food to The Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force to secure follow up on its recommendations. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on the National Food Strategy provides a platform for different stakeholders to convene.

## Opportunities for public and private sector collaboration going forward

Until food systems are functioning optimally, the need for food banks will continue. Solving issues of food and nutrition security need to go beyond moving food around to address underlying, systemic social and economic inequalities. In the long run, a more sustainable system requires greater connection between a diverse set of stakeholders within the supply chain across production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption. The resilience of new pathways and partnerships can be pressure tested by their capacity and ability to respond to shock quickly and easily.

The pandemic has created extreme challenges, which in some instances, have forced innovation and novel approaches to solve them. The following considerations reflect on these examples and suggest entry points for pathways to make the U.K. food system more equitable, flexible, sustainable and responsive.



Policy environments can be improved to support wholesalers to reach customers directly and to enable local authorities to have better oversight over food redistribution efforts. Government investment grants could support independent vegetable box schemes to upscale fruit and vegetable supply to meet increased demand. A resilient system allows local supply chains to sit alongside global systems. An important question is whether the pivots by wholesalers, growers, caterers and restaurants in London are short term or provide a more sustainable future? The agility of farmers and businesses in and around London shows that more direct routes between consumers and their food can be established, even in urban areas.



The London Food Alliance demonstrates that public and private sectors can come together and act quickly. Flexible operations and rapid scale up have been supported by new partnerships and greater public engagement. Social media has been instrumental in the London Food Alliance's operations and profile building. U.K. food poverty is a growing conversation in the U.K. Social media is a large vehicle for this conversation and helping to direct people to food banks (for example, #endchildfoodpoverty provides up-to-date information on emergency assistance). While scaling food bank response is not a long-term solution, strong collaborations are required to meet immediate needs.



Supermarkets, farmers, wholesalers and food suppliers can help boost resilience by maintaining larger stocks of nutritious foods and ensuring that more nutritious products are allocated to food banks. This requires better technology and logistics systems to help redistribute fresh foods to food banks and, in turn, reduce food loss and waste and support the food and nutrition security for the most vulnerable. The Food Foundation's Plating up Progress accountability initiative provides scorecards and accountability tools to hold supermarkets to account for their action (or inaction) to ensure nutritious products and service are affordable and accessible. The National Fruit and Vegetable Alliance has been established to drive consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables.



Better data collection and sharing systems can help inform policymakers and businesses about community food and nutrition needs. National efforts to monitor food poverty (household food insecurity) are urgently required – The U.K government has the opportunity to support wider efforts to reduce food and nutrition security by including a measure of food insecurity in regular national surveys.



Technology and innovations that can help connect producers and consumers more directly may create more resilience for both groups (income for farmers, access to affordable foods). Technology continues to evolve customer and retailer choice; however, greater innovation is needed to reach vulnerable populations and low-income families.



Extensions to government grants, the Free School Meal Scheme, maintenance of the extra £20 COVID-19 allowance and breakfast clubs and enforcement of the living wage are vital to ensure that those most in need are able to access food. Such schemes need to continue to be linked to supermarkets and food retailers. The Alexandra Rose Charity, for example, gives low-income families vouchers on top of healthy start scheme but to be bought at their local fruit and vegetable markets to keep funds in local economy (Alexandra Rose Charity, 2020). These measures are not a replacement for longer-term social protection policies and programmes. Beyond this, greater investment in personal resilience building initiatives and skills building is important to support people to raise their earning potential. Measures to record personal agency and self-reliance could support longer-term resilience building collaborations.



Greater collaboration can help form stronger accountability mechanisms for both government policies and business practices. Investors and shareholders are in a position to hold businesses to account to make nutritious products affordable and available. For example, Tesco is set to become the first FTSE100 company to be hit with a shareholder resolution on health grounds. The Food Foundation categorises companies as 'future-fit' if they focus on developing their products and revenues and ensuring their supply chains are both aligned with a healthy and sustainable food system (The Food Foundation, 2020).

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## About GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable. Nutrition Connect is an initiative of GAIN, whose purpose is to mobilise knowledge, share experiences, and stimulate dialogue on public private engagements (PPE) for nutrition.

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## Acknowledgements

GAIN is grateful to Anna Kotenko for her work as lead researcher and author of this piece.

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