

IFST Response to UK Parliament's Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee Consultation on Covid-19 and food supply April 2020

Institute of Food Science and Technology represents the UK's leading food science and technology professionals, supporting advancement of food science and technology for public benefit. **We positively support the creation of a National Food Strategy** and propose the scope should cover all UK, align with UN Sustainable Development Goals and address the entire integrated interdependent food system, not just agriculture.

1. 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?

Generally, yes, but Government were slow and reactive at first with little consideration of food supply operational needs to support the UK population.

It is our considered view that Government could have worked with retailers earlier and more closely to reduce the effects of panic buying, and all Government departments / agencies were too slow to realise if people are expected to self-isolate they will in reality need to stockpile food, personal care and household consumable items - for at least 2 weeks and possibly as much as 4-5 weeks of if there is a possibility of further future restrictions to movement.

There was a slow realisation that measures to slow down the spread of disease (particularly social distancing) would also restrict the ability of food businesses to function at full capacity. Early uncertainty about the ability of furloughed food workers to work in alternative jobs meant that capacity was lost. In contrast, medical key workers were encouraged to return from retirement.

However, food shortages could have been worse were it not for businesses stockpiling up to January 2020 in anticipation of a hard Brexit.

2. 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?

There are still some significant issues remaining which we are observing in our local communities and through our food system connections.

- Food parcels for shielded groups was a good initiative, but local council had no guidance on how to execute this initiative leading to delays and little/no best practice for them to follow on food parcel composition, safe and hygienic food distribution set-up and management Also still unclear for many as to who can apply.
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- Confusion remains over food home delivery slots and entitlements for on-line grocery shopping. Still too many people who don't need them are getting deliveries, limiting access for the vulnerable.
- Free school meal / electronic vouchers for children is not reaching families, some waiting 2-3 weeks to receive them and some not receiving them as yet at all
- Significant increase in foodbank demand but fresh food items are not available through this channel, only ambient stable and staple foods
- These elements are all especially challenging for those needing to isolate for 12 weeks and on-going as lockdown measures will be staggered
- Some vulnerable groups, in particular the blind and those with some severe mobility issues like motor neuron disease and multiple sclerosis and their supporting families are feeling left out.

3. What further impacts could the current pandemic have on the food supply chain, or individual elements of it, in the short to medium-term and what steps do industry, consumers and the Government need to take to mitigate them?

There is an ongoing need for agile, flexible and reactive State intervention and support in specific sectors due to exceptional shift in supply vs demand between different channels of the food system e.g. food service and hospitality have no demand at present whereas food retail have increased demand for foods such as eggs, meat, dairy and bread/bakery and due to labour resources issues such as exceptional movements in labour availability (e.g. crop picking) and lack of access to skilled resources in UK e.g. meat hygiene inspectors, EHO.

There has been no consideration of food system access to skilled and unskilled labour resource needs in the same way as other key worker areas. The impact of this will significantly increase as UK agriculture and horticulture requires labour through the coming summer and autumn months, and enforcement resourcing needs increase with EU Exit.

Skilled food safety professionals have been furloughed in some areas of the food industry when these are the skills needed on the ground to help small businesses, NGOs and charities adapt to supply food safely.

The on-going and potentially longer term closure of the majority of food service and hospitality sector food businesses is causing wastage and loss of income for UK farmers and food producers. For example, re-purposing of bulk product is not being encouraged, supported or enabled so millers do not have the ability to sell in small bags to meet consumer demand; eggs for food service are not Lion marked so would not be able to go into retail without concessions.

These impacts will shift seasonally and by commodity so Government needs to obtain information from trade bodies to assess on a commodity basis. It is important to consider not only domestic production but also imports and availability of key imported goods.

There is also a need for more alignment across devolved nations with approaches taken and with guidance provided.

4. How effectively has the Government worked with businesses and NGOs to share information on disruptions to the supply chain and other problems, and to develop and implement solutions? How effectively have these actions have been communicated to the public.

Overall generally there has been little or no focus by central government on the food sector or ensuring national food supply.

Greater intervention could have mitigated the impact of the overnight closure of food service supply on its supply chain and the repurposing of these resources. Milk production previously contracted for food service being thrown away – unnecessary wasted resources when it could be re-directed and processed into butter and skimmed milk powder – both of which have years of shelf life. Likewise lowered freezing point depression values (a routine measurement to check if water addition to raw milk) are being seen across the UK this April – resulting in some tanker rejections from milk processing. Not a food safety issue, but again wasted resources which could be re-directed.

Re-purposing of bulk product is not being encouraged, supported or enabled so millers do not have the ability to sell in small bags to meet consumer demand; eggs for food service are not Lion marked so would not be able to go into retail without concessions. Greater intervention by DEFRA, FSA and Local authorities working with the food supply chain could have and still play an active role in helping all adapt in the face of the unprecedented shift in markets dynamics. The scale of the food supply chain and its importance to the daily lives of millions is reflected in the number of Ministries that have a legitimate interest and involvement with the food supply chain. This diversity has not helped at a time when we have need agile and coordinated activity by many of the stakeholders in the food supply chain.

There is no evidence that Government have worked with businesses to help with re purposing, leaving the food businesses to sort themselves out to minimise losses. In the case of small businesses and especially those in food service who have pivoted into other activities in order to save their businesses this has been hampered by the lack of availability and reduced numbers of EHO and TSO employed by councils.

The response has been too slow, indicative of insufficient contingency planning around food and lacking in proactive engagement.

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