

EFRA Enquiry – Call for evidence, Covid-19 and food supply

May 2020

Feedback is an environmental charity which regenerates nature by transforming our food system. Moving towards a food system that nourishes both people and our planet will require significant changes to our food culture, the food economy and its governance. We are seeking to bring about these changes through a unique combination of campaigning and advocacy, citizen engagement and pilot programmes. For more information, visit our website: www.feedbackglobal.org

We welcome this EFRA Committee enquiry. The current Covid-19 pandemic is exposing many aspects of our food system which pose major challenges to both ensuring that the public's nutritional needs are fulfilled fairly and equitably and to producing food without exacting a dangerous environmental toll. Our response to the enquiry is founded on our belief that true food system productivity should be measured as the greatest nutritional value consumed (with the least waste) for the least environmental harm or the greatest environmental enhancement. The Government's response to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on our food supply chain needs to go beyond measures to relieve immediate scarcity – though these are of course important and vital – to encompass action that will help to build a food system that is more resilient to future shocks, especially those posed by the ongoing climate emergency.

• 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?

We find that the Government's response has, to a large extent, ignored the possibilities of supporting smaller and more local suppliers to secure supply chains. Looking at the impacts of the crisis on the supermarket-dominant model, which is one of the defining features of the UK's food supply chain, it has been laid bare how the 'just-in-time' model is unsuited to building long-term resilience into the system. Building supermarkets with huge floor space but very little storage (because food deliveries are being made on a constant rolling basis) means maximising the profit per square metre but leaves very little margin for error when that supply chain is disrupted or has an unexpected run of demand, as we have seen in the first few weeks of the crisis. Long lead-in times, setting prices and contracts for food production years in advance to reduce costs have stripped all agility and room for manoeuvre out of the corporate food supply system. Dominance and price-setting by a few very large retail players has left less room for a flourishing regional supply chain and made the whole system less resilient to shocks. It has also meant that, faced with a crisis in the supply chain, the Government has little choice but to support large retailers to further expand their dominance instead of providing assistance to enable more regional and local suppliers to adapt to the crisis and support their local communities.

We applaud the government's grant to enable fishers to sell their catch to their local communities¹: This approach should expand to cover other parts of the supply chain also. Equally, while relaxing competition laws for dairy producers may enable greater production of long-life products from surplus fresh milk, it would be helpful to provide support to smaller

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-financial-support-for-englands-fishing-businesses>

producers to identify opportunities in their local and regional market that may provide them with greater long-term sustainability. In this sense, there is a chance for the Government to treat this moment of crisis as an opportunity to reshape supply chains in ways that will be helpful in the long-term for supporting producers and reducing the environmental impacts of food production.

• 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?

We wish to express our grave concerns about the set-up of the Government's Free School Meal voucher programme. We are concerned that, in its current iteration, the scheme is inaccessible to many families who need it, as the restrictions on where the vouchers may be spent mean that many families are unable to use these vouchers to access good food in their local area.

Vouchers currently cannot be used in discounters such as Lidl, or the Co-op or more local convenience stores. They also cannot be used in, for instance, local markets, which are vital to the functioning of the community and to the supply chains and livelihoods of smaller food businesses. Because families are unable to utilise these vouchers locally, they will likely either be required to drive or use public transport to access the nearest supermarket – a precarious situation, as families will be less able to practice social distancing and thus put at further risk.

This restrictiveness is limiting the accessibility of these vouchers for families in need. Families should have the capacity to purchase food from local shops and markets, and they should have the agency to choose where and how they buy food, neither of which they can do under the current voucher scheme. In addition, the Government's late decision to extend food vouchers to the Easter holiday period came too late to benefit many families, due to glitches in the set-up of the system, and we recommend that the Government consider extending this support to the long summer holiday as well, when many families' finances will be at a breaking point.

The Government should immediately consider the many dual benefits of supporting more regional and diverse food economies, which are less wholly reliant on the complex and fragile 'just-in-time' delivery models of major retailers. There are clear benefits to having localised coordination of food poverty relief efforts from multi-stakeholder alliances that include local government. We note that that, where Sustainable Food Places have active groups, the response to food poverty relief has been most rapid and joined up but that in many areas of the country, there is confusion and lack of coordination, which will lead to some surplus food going to waste which could have been used, and to some people going hungry who could be fed. Further grants to community food projects are needed to meet the increased demand for emergency food provision. We recommend that the Government supports the growth of the fledgling National Food Service, as a joined up and equitable approach to preparing and distributing meals at the local and community level. In short, where well-resourced community institutions already exist, supporting them to enhance resilience and to ensure food for all is the best approach.

• 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?

In the short to medium term, we have identified several worrying impacts that have already been brought on by the Covid-19 crisis.

We are concerned about land worker vacancies at the farm level and the associated implications of food insecurity and environmental impact of crops going unharvested. Whilst we are seeking to expand the capacity of our Gleaning Network² to respond to cases of farm-level waste, volunteers do not offer a viable solution to the scale of the challenge. A big push by larger producers, who are normally reliant on seasonal migrant workers, for picker recruitment has thus far not yielded results, despite media attention and 36,000 people registering an interest to take up positions on farms. Support to Concordia, Fruitful and HOPS in their recruitment would be a welcome step. We believe it prudent to point out that, whilst issuing temporary gangmasters licences may be necessary to ensure farms have vacancies filled, this should not be at the expense of workers' rights and fair pay. DEFRA's Pick for Britain campaign is a welcome effort to create employment pathways into agriculture. School leavers and university students on summer holidays should be the key target of the messaging here, with an understanding of the complexities involved in individuals relocating for work. Roles should be paid at the Living Wage Foundation's living wage.

We have developed three possible, plausible scenarios for the UK's fresh produce industry in the context of Covid-19, spanning the upcoming horticultural season. We have detailed these scenarios below and strongly feel the Government should adopt the recommendations of Scenario 3.

Scenario 1: Scarce supply. In this scenario, UK production is disrupted by labour shortages, with problems recruiting workers and 20% of the working population forced into self-isolation with virus symptoms. Imports of fresh produce slow to a trickle due to distribution bottlenecks and shortage of labour on farms in southern Europe, where they are perhaps even more acutely facing a recruitment problem, as, for instance, Spanish agriculture heavily relies on Moroccan seasonal labour, now in short supply. This will also likely be felt in other countries that export to the UK, including France, the Netherlands and Germany. As supply of fresh produce falls, the prices hike, and retailers will reduce their cosmetic standards on lines of fruit and veg. Delivery systems will run at capacity and struggle to expand; for example, they will continue to have maxed-out order slots. There will be business closures across the food chain due to illness, transport restrictions and cash flow. Surplus produce will be drastically reduced at each stage of production and distribution, meaning gleaning opportunities will be severely limited. As the amount of surplus produce dries up, redistribution organisations such as FareShare will move towards procurement. Moreover, at the household level, diets will shift towards preserved/dried foods from tins and jars. There will be exacerbated nutritional inequality because many families will be unable to afford the increased cost of produce and widespread hunger.

² The Gleaning Network is a programme run by Feedback which enables local groups to take volunteers to farms to harvest produce which would otherwise go to waste; this surplus is redistributed to local charities.
<https://gleaning.feedbackglobal.org/>

Scenario 2: Glitchy. In this scenario, the flow of food from EU neighbours is patchy as the UK Government tries to prop up EU imports. Worker recruitment is successful to the extent that production almost matches 2019 levels, but virus contamination hampers many food businesses. Some food businesses close and large volumes of food are donated to the charitable sector. Delivery systems get up to speed and are able to expand. Prices rise and fluctuate. Availability of fresh produce will be limited, and at the household level, diets will be affected. There is limited support for new entrants to agriculture. Surplus will fluctuate, with large volumes of food donated unpredictably.

Scenario 3: Prioritised food security. In this scenario, #FeedTheNation sees success, and food production is increased. Government and/or industry coordinate a large-scale volunteer harvest effort. New entrants are supported to boost domestic production and under-utilised urban spaces converted into market gardens. Government intervenes to secure supply chains from southern EU, but a fall in imports will be matched by increase in UK production. Government guarantees minimum price for crop to combat increased harvesting costs due to social distancing on farms, and in some cases, supports farms with payments for them to guarantee the harvest is brought in. National push towards allotments and grow your own as a cultural uptick in domestic horticulture takes place, although without social inclusivity. Systemic overproduction in response to crisis means surplus continue which limits price increases.

From these scenarios, we have identified the great importance of the Government supporting smaller suppliers. Small, local suppliers are critical for the functioning of communities across the UK, and the resilience of these small suppliers has come to the fore during the Covid-19 crisis. Small suppliers are typically less reliant on seasonal migrant workers, and they operate with shorter supply chains, meaning they have had to adapt their models much less, if at all, as they are typically close to consumers, either directly or via small, local markets and local food businesses. With support, these small producers could grow more produce and expand their distribution to fulfil a substantial proportion of the retail sector. Direct to consumer models that are run not-for-profit are showing their true worth in these times, and we would like Government support to focus on agroecological producers that operate explicitly for the public good. Examples of such producers include Chagfood in Devon, The Community Farm in North East Somerset, Lancaster Fresh Farm Cooperative and Sutton Community Farm.

This contrasts with the experience of large wholesalers, who have had to reconfigure their route to market with next to no preparation time; while some have developed lines of direct to customer sales routes to cater to local supply, we have identified many farmers who have been unable to modify their operations so quickly. For example, Feedback recently gleaned hundreds of tonnes of beetroot in the North of England that were initially destined for export but were left in the fields after the ability to export these was lost. Whilst companies such as Cogz and Waste Knot provide a laudable short-term solution to match some sellers with buyers, in the medium-term, supporting farmers and strengthening short supply chains is the best option for food resilience. This can be done through supporting infrastructure for producers (e.g. farm shops), backing community-lead and cooperative approaches and better public procurement by Government and local authorities.

In the immediate term, to ensure good food is accessible to all UK citizens, and to ensure the resilience of food supply chains, the Government must support the #FeedTheNation campaign, ensure all farm labour are paid Living Wage and support local suppliers.

Feedback regenerates nature by transforming our food system. To do this, we challenge power, catalyse action and empower people to achieve positive change.

• 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 been communicated to the public?

We feel that the Government has not sufficiently publicised information on disruptions to supply chains. We have identified several concerns through our own contacts since the Covid-19 crisis began, including a situation in the North of England where hundreds of tonnes of beetroot, originally destined for export, was left on the farm after the ability to export the produce was lost. The Government has not clearly communicated how they are managing these problems in the supply chain, nor have the Government effectively shared information on disruptions and other problems to businesses and NGOs. It has not been clear what support or assistance may be available for producers.

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