

VEG VOICE REPORT:

Covid Veg



A Peas Please and Food Foundation report by
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Introduction

Fruit and veg consumption is the biggest marker of dietary inequality, with those on lower incomes eating significantly less. As national lockdowns due to COVID-19 are upon us again, and with those on lower incomes feeling the greatest impact (IFS, 2021), we examine people's experiences of accessing fruit and veg during the last lockdown and what they said needs to be done to increase consumption and ultimately improve our health. Addressing inequality and redressing the balance of cost between healthy and unhealthy foods came out top.

What people said:

- 
- 1 For those on below average incomes it was hard to buy enough fruit and veg
 - 2 Quality was lower
 - 3 More people used local shops and veg box schemes
 - 4 More people grew their own
 - 5 Prices were higher

Suggested solutions to increase consumption:

- 
- 1 Improve quality
 - 2 More local suppliers and box schemes
 - 3 More grow your own, community growing, education and community cooking
 - 4 Change pricing
 - 5 Broader change to address affordability of a healthy diet

Summary

Peas Please gathered stories from nearly a hundred people in the midst of UK-wide COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 (June–Aug). These present a picture of people's experiences of accessing fruit and veg at a time of national crisis. The ongoing crisis has brought to the fore the problems of a food system which provides healthy food at a cost that is now beyond the affordability of a significant proportion of the population (Food Foundation, 2020a).

In the qualitative data gathered, only people on incomes of less than £2000 per month reported experiencing problems accessing fruit and veg, and those with incomes of less than £500 per month reported significantly lower veg consumption. This adds to the evidence that affordability is a key barrier when it comes to consumption of healthy diets in the UK – this is something that measures to increase consumption have to address.

Inability to access enough fruit and veg, particularly at the beginning of the first lockdown and particularly in relation to supermarkets, was seen as a problem, with a perception that quality was lower and prices higher. Some mentioned that empty supermarket shelves had highlighted to them the fragility of the food supply system.

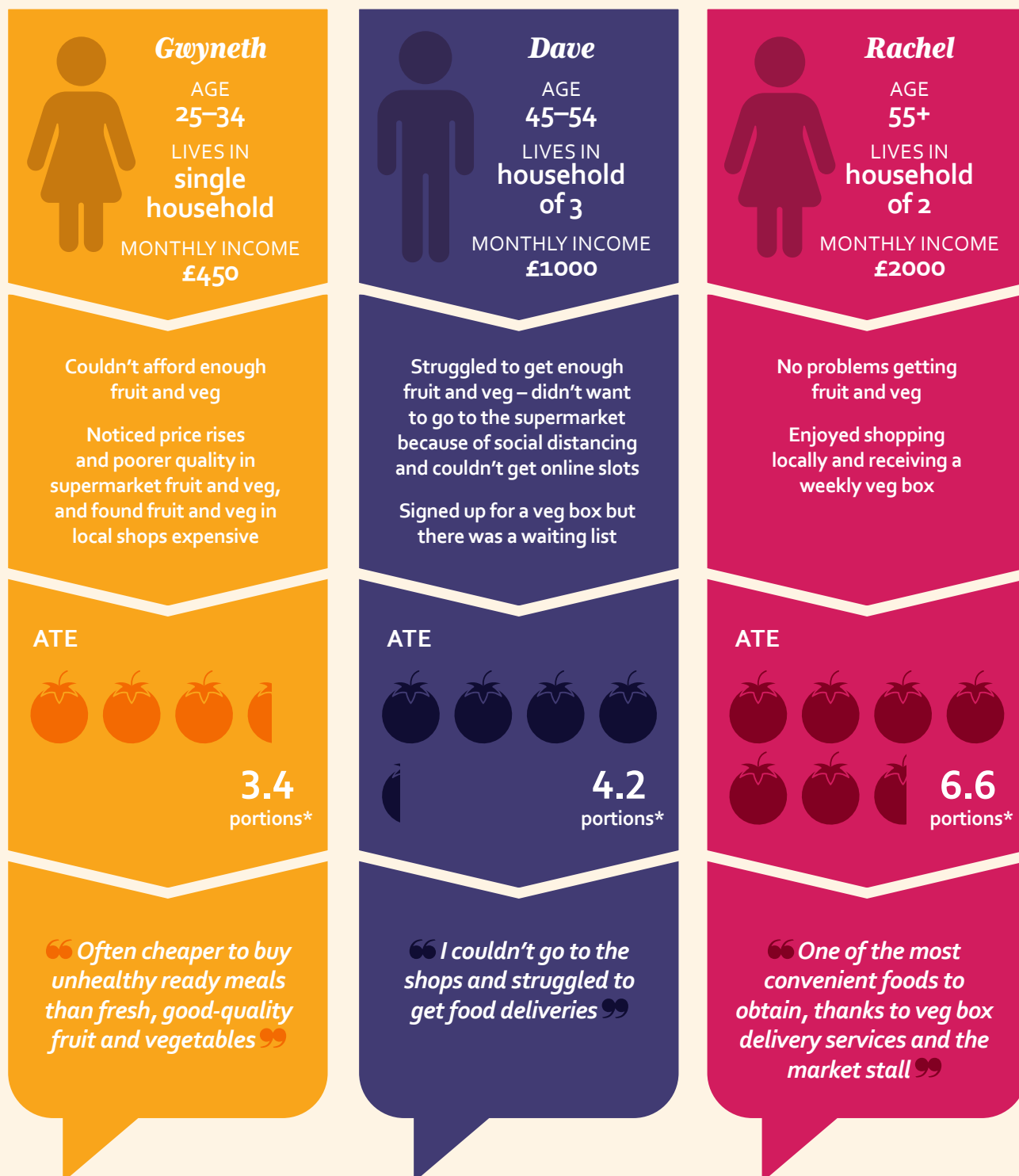
“ There is an urgent need to redress the cost balance between healthy and unhealthy foods ”

There was much gratitude expressed to local food suppliers. But those who used local or independent suppliers were more likely to be on higher household incomes and to report reliable access to quality fruit and veg. All except one of participants in the £3000+ per month income bracket either used a farm shop or veg box scheme, or grew their own fruit and veg. Many reported turning to growing in their own gardens and allotments, or with communal growing projects. When asked what could be done to help people eat more fruit and veg, increasing the number of local fruit and veg producers/retailers and delivery services was seen as important, as was education / cooking classes and more grow your own / communal growing initiatives.

Making fruit and veg more affordable was mentioned most often. This is at a time when according to the UK's Consumer Price Index (CPI), average retail prices of fruit and veg have remained fairly static or lower than the previous year, though data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2020) found grocery price inflation in the first month of lockdown primarily due to a reduction in the number of promotions.

Participants suggested that major structural change to our food system is needed to enable barriers to be overcome in any meaningful way, particularly redressing the cost balance between healthy and unhealthy foods. Several participants saw problems around accessing fruit and veg to be rooted in broader economic structures and inequality, suggesting that these need to change rather than just the price tag placed on fruit and veg at point of sale.

Typical experiences across income groups:



*These self-reported estimates of intake are likely to be higher than actual consumption. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey (Bates et al., 2019) reports much lower consumption though a similar pattern of consumption rising with income.

Background

As part of the ongoing work of Peas Please to get the nation eating more veg, partners Food Foundation, Nourish Scotland, Belfast Food Network and Food Sense Wales sent out a digital fruit and veg survey via social media (Twitter and Facebook) and email (through Newsletters) during June, July and August 2020. The survey asked about people's experiences of accessing fruit and veg during COVID-19 and what could be done to make it easier for people to consume more.¹ Demographic data was also collected – where people live, gender, age group, number in household and estimation of household income. People were also asked what fruit and veg they had eaten on the previous day.

The questions were open ended and unprompted and therefore answers varied. In all, 97 responses were received. Those who took part in the survey were entered into a prize draw for a £50 shopping voucher. The qualitative data was analysed by the report authors for themes using the NVivo data analysis tool. The sample was not representative as participants self-selected but the stories help to illustrate the food access experiences of a variety of people during the first national UK lockdown caused by COVID-19.

97
PARTICIPANTS

JUNE
JULY
AUGUST
2020

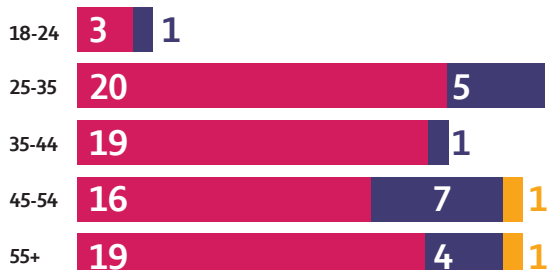
¹ SEE [APPENDIX 1](#) FOR SURVEY QUESTIONS.

Participants

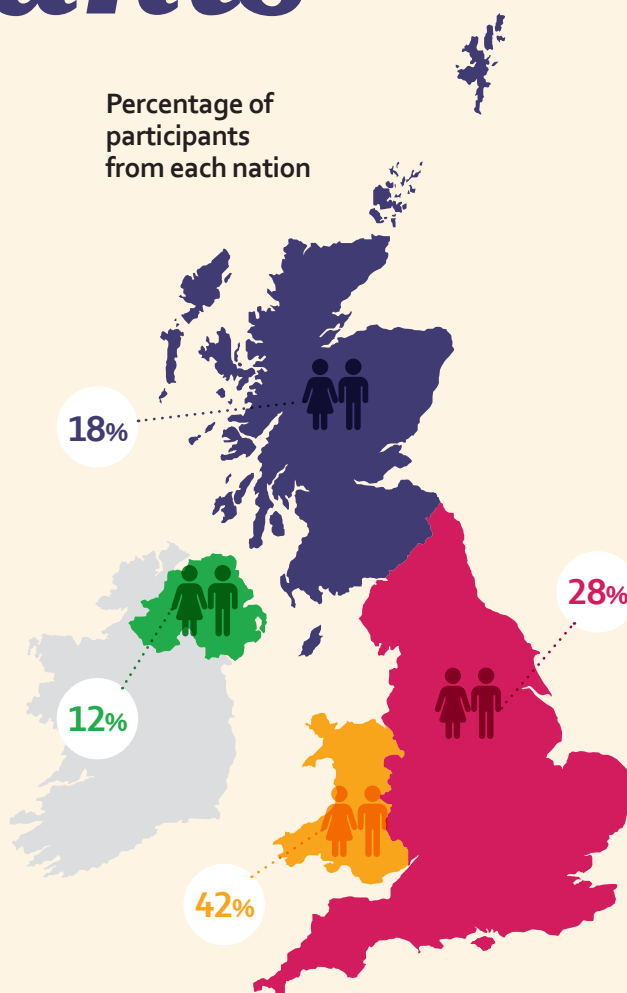
People from across the UK took part, with participants coming from all nations, though a bigger response was seen in Wales due to a paid advert on Facebook. Participants were significantly more likely to be female than male. Different sizes of household, from single people to families, were represented, with the most commonly reported household size being two. Over 63% of the participants came from households reporting monthly incomes of below £2000.²

Breakdown of participants by age and gender

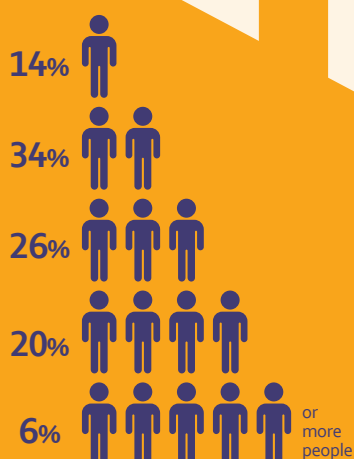
■ Female ■ Male ■ Prefer not to say



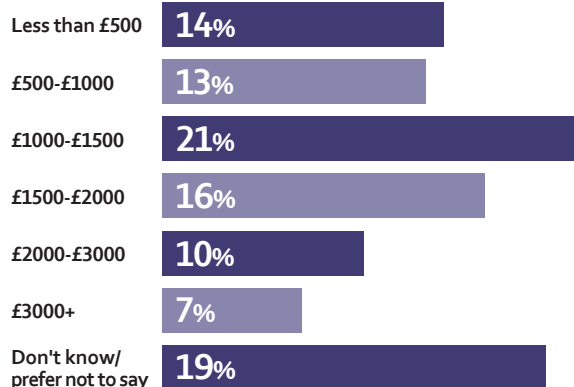
Percentage of participants from each nation



How many people in your household?

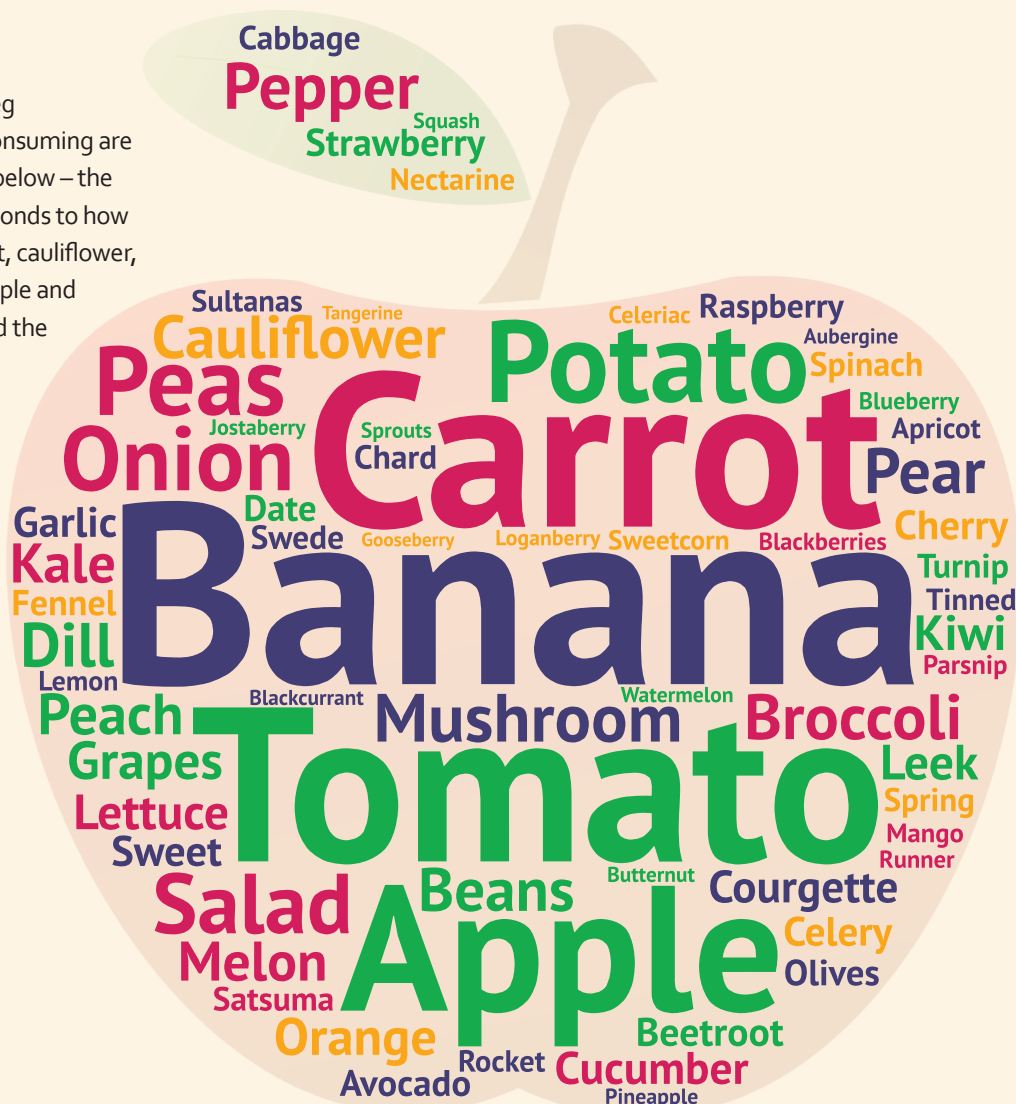


Percentage of participants by their estimated monthly household income



² SEE [APPENDIX 2](#) FOR BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.

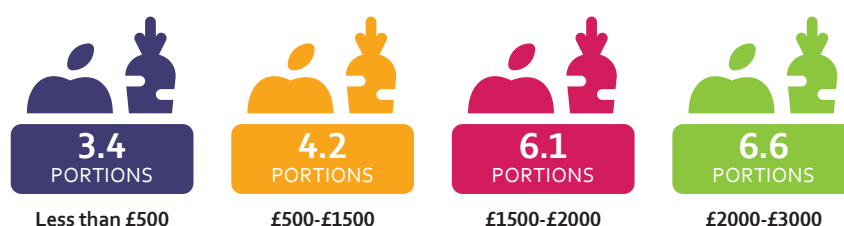
The kinds of fruit and veg participants reported consuming are displayed in the image below – the size of the word corresponds to how often it was used. Carrot, cauliflower, onion, tomato, peas, apple and banana were mentioned the most often:



The quantities of fruit and veg reported to be consumed by participants in the highest and lowest income brackets differed considerably, with those on a household income of £2000–£3000 per month reporting an average intake of 6.6 portions, £1500–£2000 6.1 portions, £500–£1500 4.2 portions and those on less than £500 per month averaging 3.4 portions.

This data was collected qualitatively and from a small sample so is not an accurate reflection of actual consumption levels. However, the pattern reflects what has been consistently found in dietary surveys and household purchasing data sets, that those on the lowest incomes purchase the least fruit and veg (Defra, 2020).

Average portions of fruit and veg consumed on previous day by estimated household monthly income



Experience of accessing fruit and veg during the first COVID-19 lockdown

Five main points were brought up by participants in relation to fruit and veg access during lockdown:

- 1 For those on below average incomes it was hard to buy enough fruit and veg
- 2 Quality was lower
- 3 More people used local shops and veg box schemes
- 4 More people grew their own
- 5 Prices were higher



Quotations are verbatim and more are available in the online interactive version of this report.

1 *Hard to buy enough if people had below average income*

Analysing results based on location, gender, age or size of household did not produce any noticeable trends. But breaking down responses based on participants' estimates of their monthly household income did. No participants with an income of over £2000 per month, that is over the median household income³ of £447 a week (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020), reported any problems accessing fruit and veg. All except one of the participants in the £3000+ income bracket either used a farm shop/delivery service, or grew their own fruit and veg. However, the majority of those with a household income under £2000 reported problems with being able to buy enough fruit and veg. This helps illustrate the disparity in access to fruit and veg between income groups.



► Of those people who did report problems with being able to buy enough fruit and veg, the beginning of the nationwide lockdown caused particular problems with a lack of availability and empty shelves:

“For the first month at least, we were finding a lot of empty shelves in the fruit and veg aisles”

► Whilst some “had no trouble accessing fruit and veg from supermarkets overall” many participants reported problems getting enough fruit and veg from the supermarkets:

“There were times there was none available at the local supermarket”

► Many said that social distancing guidelines and shielding affected their ability to access fruit and veg by making it harder to access shops and with a lack of delivery slots at that time. There were also concerns over a lack of social distancing measures in place:

“Harder to obtain unless you went out”

► Experience of not being able to access food in the supermarket prompted one participant to reflect that the food system was fragile:

“Generally, we shop in Aldi and Morrisons, and it was concerning seeing just how fragile the supply chain is. It's something we always knew in the back of our minds but seeing how quickly things broke down was concerning”

► When participants were able to access fruit and veg, many commented on the lack of variety and promotions available:

“Very little variety. If I see another cauli I think I'll turn into one”



³ AFTER HOUSING COSTS.

2 Quality was lower

► Many of the participants noted that the quality of the fruit and veg they were able to access was lower during the first lockdown. Poor quality was more often noted with regard to supermarket produce:

“It wasn’t too bad, but the quality didn’t seem as good!”

► The main problem raised was reduced shelf life:

“I have found the fruit has not been lasting very long, often going off before the use by date”

► Whilst one participant expressed that when they “started shopping for fruit and veg at my local farm shop ... the quality was no better than supermarkets and the shelf life was less”, most participants were more likely to praise the quality of fruit and veg from local or independent suppliers:

“We ordered from our local greengrocers, prices slightly higher but much better quality than supermarkets”



Suggestions to increase consumption:
IMPROVE QUALITY

► Regardless of whether people were buying from a supermarket, local shop, box scheme or market, participants felt that securing access to produce of good quality would result in greater consumption:

“The availability of good produce”

► One participant particularly highlighted the role of “convenient” foods such as “oven food or pasta and sauce” in their family’s diet and the need for the quality of ready meals to be enhanced by the addition of more veg:

“To enable us to eat more the main thing would be to have more ‘convenient’ foods that are healthy and contain a few portions of vegetables. I find nights when we are busy it’s a struggle to find the time to cook something from scratch and relying on convenience food doesn’t tend to be as healthy”



3 More people used local shops and veg box schemes⁴

► Although some participants did comment on problems of supplies from local or independent suppliers – for example “organic/local farms have had limited supplies” – generally participants who used local or independent suppliers were more likely to report reliable access to fruit and veg:

“Easy – we have a greengrocer in the village”

► One participant, who was already receiving a weekly delivery of veg from a local farm, expressed gratitude for the farm’s “loyalty to existing customers”, ensuring that they retained stable access to fresh produce.

For many participants, COVID-19 changed the way they accessed fruit and veg. Several participants commented that they now enjoyed the experience of shopping more locally:

“One thing I have noticed and liked during lockdown is the small independent fruit and veg store has been really active in the community”

► One participant emphasised that getting access to a veg box during lockdown helped them reliably obtain fruit and veg, of high quality and quantity, and that this contributed to improving their diet and their wellbeing:

“I managed to get on a waiting list for a local veg box scheme and finally started getting deliveries in June which has made a huge difference to the quantity and quality of the fresh fruit and veg in my diet and has improved my general wellbeing too. It’s a shame I could not access that sooner but I am happy I now have this reliably”

Those who used local delivery schemes and shops tended to be in the higher income brackets, suggesting that cost was a barrier to those on lower incomes. That those on higher incomes were more able to afford and access fruit and veg from local suppliers, which in general were reported as higher quality, is likely to have further exacerbated inequalities during this time.



**Suggestions
to increase
consumption:**

**MORE LOCAL
SUPPLIERS AND
BOX SCHEMES**

► Making changes to how people access fruit and veg was seen by participants as a key factor in increasing consumption. Overwhelmingly, participants wanted to be able to access fruit and veg within their communities more easily. Increasing the number of small-scale local retailers was mentioned many times:

“Have it available in communities, local fresh and looking delicious”

► Expanding and developing delivery services and schemes was also highlighted:

“If home delivery continues it would encourage me to eat more”

Participants’ experiences of not being able to travel from their community or even their home during COVID-19 made them more aware of the difficulty of accessing fresh food locally.

⁴ FRUIT AND VEG BOX SCHEMES INVOLVE SOMEONE PAYING TO HAVE A BOX OF FRUIT AND VEG DELIVERED TO THEIR HOME REGULARLY; THIS IS OFTEN FROM A PRODUCER IN THEIR LOCAL AREA.

4 More people grew their own

Growing your own produce – at home, in an allotment or in a community garden – was regularly mentioned by participants. One participant mentioned that “we grow as much as we can” and another “[It’s] not a problem as I grow my own mostly.”

► The pandemic prompted several people to try growing their own produce for the first time:

“I started growing my own veg this spring and me and my neighbours have been eating fresh salads since May”

► Several seasoned gardeners also returned to or expanded their operations:

“With a history of a market gardener I decided to throw the garden back into production and grow for myself and a couple of friends”

► Several innovative community schemes were also described:

“We set up a Community Fridge on April 1, and immediately repurposed it to make deliveries. Our fridge is based on an allotment site so from day one we were able to distribute fresh fruit and vegetables to people in need. At our height, we were feeding over 40 families twice a week!”

In the current winter lockdowns there is obviously less opportunity to grow your own veg compared to the spring/summer lockdown of last year.



Suggestions to increase consumption:



MORE GROW YOUR OWN, COMMUNITY GROWING, EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY COOKING

► Growing more of your own fruit and veg was advocated by many participants as a way to increase consumption. Some participants suggested encouraging individuals to grow their own:

“Reconnecting people with how they are grown (so they appreciate them more)”

► However, participants were much more likely to suggest different forms of community growing as the best way of getting more people involved in growing their own food:

“Any project to encourage local community gardens or shared allotments would help a lot”



Suggestions to increase consumption:

MORE GROW YOUR OWN, COMMUNITY GROWING, EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY COOKING

► More education and promotion of fruit and veg was highlighted by participants as a way to increase consumption:

“Fruit and veg needs to be celebrated more across the board so the merits of how delicious it can be are highlighted”

► The area of education that was seen as most important was the preparation or cooking of fruit and veg; one person noting that “people often won’t buy something if they are unsure how to cook it”. Ideas around confidence were often mentioned as a focus for change:

“Feel more confident in how to eat them more”



► More specifically, making recipes readily available was often suggested as a strategy for improving confidence:

“Maybe have recipe ideas on the packaging could help people visually”

► Participants saw a space for “Cookery lessons maybe”, perhaps in a community setting: “communal cooking sessions made easily available”. Educating children around fruit and veg was also suggested, whether through formal education at school, or within their homes or communities:

“More exposure for young people / children”



5 Prices were higher

► The cost of buying fruit and veg was raised regularly by participants. Whilst some reported no change in the pricing of fruit and veg, the majority of participants who mentioned price had noticed substantial increases. Price changes were noted across different kinds of suppliers with several participants highlighting that prices in supermarkets had risen:

“Everything has gone up”

Responses regarding the cost of using local shops or box schemes were more varied. One respondent commented that *“prices were too high”* at their local farm shop, and another said *“I found a local farm doing home delivery a few weeks into lockdown. It was expensive though”*. However, others stated *“I have had lovely fruit and veg at an affordable price from Abergavenny Market”*, and another respondent felt that *“prices for fruit and veg boxes have been very reasonable”* from their local greengrocer.

► COVID-19 affected participants’ spending patterns with regard to fruit and veg in different ways. One respondent noted: *“Our bills have gone up but we have been treating ourselves to pricier produce.”* For others *“price was a factor due to tighter finances with reduced work during COVID-19”*. Participants on benefits reported problems with being able to buy enough fruit and veg because of competing demands on expenditure:

“I had to stop buying it as I am on benefits. My electric bill got higher as my family were at home all the time. The extra ten pound a week I had to put in my pre-payment meter meant I had no money to buy any ... also the price of vegetables had risen during Covid”

But we know from analysis of the Office of National Statistics Consumer Price Index data (ONS, 2020b) that the pandemic did not increase the prices of fruit and veg being sold overall. Fruit during 2020 was less expensive than in 2019, and although veg was a little

more expensive between March and June 2020, from July 2020 onwards it was cheaper than in 2019. However, data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2020) on grocery prices and promotions during COVID-19 found that there was a grocery price inflation in the first month of lockdown primarily due to a reduction in the number of promotions. We also know that average incomes decreased (ONS, 2020a), affecting people’s ability to afford food. Both these factors limited the money people had to buy fruit and veg. The Resolution Foundation (2021) found that as promotions became less prevalent it made it more difficult for lower-income families to maximise what they could purchase with limited food budgets. Separate data collected as part of YouGov surveys commissioned by the Food Foundation concurs with these findings (Loopstra, Reeves and Lambie-Mumford, 2020). They found that those who became unemployed during the first six months of the pandemic were 2.5 times more likely to be experiencing food insecurity, and those who were furloughed were also more likely to be food insecure than those who continued to be employed.

Reflecting on where price reductions might come from – there is little scope for producers to reduce the prices they charge at the farm gate. Farm gate price changes show that although there were some increases in the prices received by fruit farmers between January and April 2020, this went down considerably in May–August 2020. Prices received by vegetable farmers barely changed in 2020 compared to 2019 (Food Foundation, 2020b). This was despite large increases in costs being reported as a result of social distancing measures and costs of recruitment (Andersons, 2020). In the words of one participant *“we need to square the circle of making fresh food accessible to those on lower incomes without impoverishing fruit and veg growers.”*

Although from a producer point of view there is little scope for reducing prices charged at the farm gate, there may be opportunities for retailers to reduce prices by lowering profit margins on fruit and veg or offering promotions.





**Suggestions to
increase consumption:**
CHANGE PRICING

► Above all, cost was the factor most likely to be mentioned by participants as important to increasing fruit and veg consumption:

“Better pricing”

► Participants emphasised that current prices made fruit and veg inaccessible to people on a low budget:

“Prices also need to be lower so fruit and veg is more affordable to all”

► Whilst actual price was clearly seen by participants as a barrier, the perception of price was also seen as something to be changed, perhaps through better marketing:

“Affordability is always an issue, ensuring cheap fruit and veg is advertised clearly”

► Ensuring that local services or retailers remained “affordable” was emphasised. As one participant explained: “Unfortunately I have found smaller retailers or direct delivery from wholesale greengrocers to be more expensive.” Another specified that whilst they enjoyed using a delivery scheme, enabling more people to access something similar “may mean making [them] more affordable and supporting businesses to open and serve more deprived areas”.

► Combining ideas of price and price perception, several participants suggested that retailers could improve accessibility by promoting special offers or deals on fruit and veg:

“When I was getting my own fruit and veg from Leeds Market they have wonderful offers. I don’t believe supermarkets have the same type of deals”

► Giving participants greater control over how much fruit and veg they bought was also seen as important:

“Buying fresh and not pre-packed so people can buy only what they need”



Broader changes to address the affordability of a healthy diet

▶ Whilst lower prices, more local greengrocers and box schemes, education, and local growing were commonly advocated to improve consumption of fruit and veg, many participants had strong views on the need for broader change. They suggested that major structural changes to our food systems were necessary to enable some of the barriers identified above to be overcome in any meaningful way.

Broader changes to address the affordability of a healthy diet

► Some people highlighted the imbalance between the cost of fresh food and of “bad” food as symptomatic of a food system not working for the good of society:

“Lower the cost! Bad food is so much cheaper”

► Where participants regarded food banks as part of a solution, they emphasised that state and third sector providers had a duty to provide good quality fresh food:

“Make emergency food providers give you fresh fruit and veg”

► Several participants considered problems around accessing fruit and veg to be rooted in broader economic structures, suggesting that these needed to change, rather than just the price tag placed on fruit and veg at point of sale:

“This is not only a matter of expensive fruits and vegetables, but also one of economic insecurity and low income”

► Specific market interventions were also suggested:

“A tax on high sugar and fatty foods as these foods may serve as a substitute”

► One participant cited his own struggles to access fruit and veg within the context of economic insecurity and the associated impacts on physical and mental health experienced by many people in the UK:

“If we wish for people to eat more fruit and veg, and to change the mentality of people towards fruits and vegetables, it may be more effective when individuals and household are not considering price first when acquiring food. People tend to go more often for low cost per calorie as they have competing demands, wish to save for future expenses or desire convenience due to stress”

► Several participants saw a role for the government in expanding community growing as described above. For some, this took the form of leading change:

“I want the government to initiate a plan with job centres to offer people on benefits a chance to have access to land and equipment and great tutors, to make courses for the people and grow vegetables in a sustainable way, learn how to care for the soil and have free vegetables and fruit, and study agroforestry and green woodworking and business”

► These participants felt that legislative change and government involvement were required. They saw a strong relationship between access to food and ideas around citizenship and the welfare state:

“A right to food in UK law so that people on low incomes do not have to rely on food banks; possibly coupled with community restaurants”

► Others regarded the state as more of an enabler of change led by individuals or communities, through providing:

“Government support for organic and regenerative farming and further training for farmers into best practice to increase the availability of local, high quality produce. Better access to land, both in private properties and through community buyout schemes to enable local growing of food”

Conclusion

Despite this being qualitative data from a comparatively small non-representative sample, the experiences shared by nearly 100 people from across the UK during the COVID-19 restrictions of spring/summer 2020 clearly demonstrated that:

- being able to buy enough fruit and veg was a problem for those on below average incomes
- more people used local shops and veg box schemes during this time
- price was a barrier
- quality was sometimes poor
- more people grew their own.

When asked about what could be done to increase consumption of fruit and veg, changing prices came out top, followed by improving access to quality produce, more local suppliers and box schemes, more education and cooking, and more people growing their own.

Finally, many pointed out that major structural changes are needed to make fruit and veg comparatively more affordable so that everyone, not just those on higher incomes, can afford a healthy diet and the health benefits it brings.

“Major structural changes are needed to make fruit and veg comparatively more affordable so that everyone, not just those on higher incomes, can afford a healthy diet and the health benefits it brings.”

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Appendix 1

Survey Questions:

1. What's your experience of accessing fruit and veg during coronavirus?
2. What could be done to make it easier for you or other people to eat more fruit and veg?
3. Where do you live?
 - Scotland
 - Wales
 - England
 - Northern Ireland
4. What is your nearest town or city?
5. Which best describes your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say
6. What's your age?
 - 18–24
 - 25–34
 - 35–44
 - 45–54
 - 55+
7. How many people in your household including yourself?
8. Please provide an estimate of your household income per month at the moment.
 - Under 1500 (further broken down into under £500, £500–1000 and 1000–1500)
 - 1500–2000
 - 2000–3000
 - 3000+
 - Don't know / prefer not to say
9. How many portions of fruit and veg did you eat yesterday and what types?

Appendix 2

Respondent breakdown by country:

Country	Number of participants
Wales	41
Scotland	17
Northern Ireland	12
England	27
Total	97

Respondent breakdown by age and gender:

Age group	Gender				Total
	Female	Male	Other	Prefer not to say	
18–24	3	1	0	0	4
25–34	20	5	0	0	25
35–44	19	1	0	0	20
45–54	16	7	0	1	24
55+	19	4	0	1	24
	77	18	0	2	97

Respondent breakdown by household income:

Household Income range per month	Number of participants
less than £500	14
£500–£1000	13
£1000–£1500	20
£1500–£2000	15
£2000–£3000	10
£3000+	7
Don't know/Prefer not to say	18
Total	97

Respondent breakdown by size of household:

Size of household	Number of participants
1 person	14
2 people	33
3 people	25
4 people	19
5 or more people	6
Total	97



Thanks to all those who shared their experiences and ideas.

As part of the work of Peas Please to get the nation eating more veg, over the next three years we will be sharing more people's experiences of accessing fruit and veg, and what they think needs to be done to help increase consumption and hence improve the nation's health.

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