



TACTICS TO TRY FOR EMERGENCY FOOD PLANNING: Voluntary Sector Mobilization for Efficient Food Distribution in Birmingham, UK

The Tactics to Try series of case studies was created to complement the Emergency Food Planning webinar series presented by Food Cities 2022 Learning Partnership. Tactics to Try highlight proven emergency food responses in a format that offers practitioners the most essential points for trying something similar in their own city.

Objective

This Tactics to Try case study highlights the innovative and successful efforts taken in Birmingham, England to rapidly address rising food insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It describes how the voluntary sector worked together—in partnership with the local authority—to solve three key problems in emergency food response: (1) how to rapidly respond to the crisis; (2) how to identify in real-time those in need of emergency food; and (3) how to efficiently distribute and deliver emergency food. The case study shows the tremendous power of voluntary organisations to collectively address an emergency food crisis.

Geography

Birmingham is a large, ethnically-diverse city in the West Midlands region of England, home to approximately 1.2 million people.

Major Participants

- **THE ACTIVE WELLBEING SOCIETY**
(a large, well-established cooperative and community benefit society)
- **INCREDIBLE SURPLUS**
(formerly The Real Junk Food Project, a food distribution charity)
- **THE BIRMINGHAM VOLUNTARY SERVICE COUNCIL**
(one of the largest voluntary sector support organisations in the UK)
- **BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL**
(the local authority)
- **FARESHARE**
(UK's oldest food distribution charity)
- **MKG FOODS**
(a regional independent foodservice distributor)

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread across the globe in early 2020 exacerbated food insecurity in every city in its wake and Birmingham was no exception. The pandemic increased food insecurity rates, and vulnerable populations experienced more severe food insecurity, due to increased unemployment and insufficient emergency food supplies. In January 2021, adults in Birmingham reported experiencing hunger (2.3%), struggling with accessing food (11.8%) and worrying about food insecurity (12.4%).¹ At the onset of the pandemic, the national government intervention was focused only on the approximately 23,000 residents in Birmingham that the National Health Service (NHS) England determined were clinically vulnerable residents (those most at risk for Covid-19 implications), which left out other socially and economically vulnerable residents. A rapid response was needed at the local level that would target all vulnerable residents, but the local authority was also grappling with numerous pandemic-driven crises. The voluntary sector mobilized to rapidly respond to the crisis, which required new methods for identifying those experiencing food insecurity and expanded and more efficient emergency food distribution mechanisms.

¹ Food Foundation and University of Sheffield Institute for Sustainable Food, Research: <https://shefuni.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instance/interactivelegend/index.html?appid=8be0cd9e18904c258afd3c959d6fc4d7>

How it Works

Coordinating mechanisms for voluntary sector mobilization

- Birmingham has a robust voluntary sector, with hundreds of organisations that serve the city's most vulnerable groups (although only a small share have traditionally focused on alleviating food poverty). Before lockdown in early March of 2020, the voluntary sector realized the communities they served were facing a looming food insecurity crisis. They immediately began to share information and informally coordinate a response using WhatsApp. Many of the voluntary organisations had already partnered in various ways with each other and they were used to self-coordinating in response to crises.
- The formalization of voluntary sector coordination, with support from the local authority, was the innovation that happened during the pandemic. The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS), which had the reputation and capacity to serve as an effective mobilizer and leader of this effort in the voluntary sector, was asked by the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) (at the behest of the local authority) to lead a more formal 'Food Group' from the WhatsApp community under the banner #BrumTogether.
- The 'Food Group' initially included approximately 80 voluntary organisations working together to address food insecurity in their communities. The 'Food Group' connected with each other regularly (in-person, virtually and through WhatsApp) to share information on local food demand and coordinate the redistribution of their collective food supplies to serve those most in need. TAWS dedicated one full-time staff member to provide staffing for the 'Food Group' and TAWS facilitated group meetings, drawing from distributive leadership principles (group members assumed leadership on different issues).
- Birmingham City Council (BCC), which at the time did not have a dedicated food team, relied heavily on the voluntary sector to address the food crisis city-wide. The local authority did not have the infrastructure to quickly distribute emergency food. BCC already had a strong relationship with the voluntary sector and open channels of communication, both of which were critical for a rapid response. They knew who were trusted partners, based on previous contracts. BCC turned to BVSC, one of their "go-to champions," to set up thematic leads to coordinate the voluntary sector's community response to various emergency situations, not only food. TAWS, also a trusted partner, was asked to serve as the primary lead for the food response and became the primary point-of-contact for BCC.
- BCC eventually created a 'Food Team' led by their Public Health department in mid-2021 (as part of a larger effort to address food poverty), but initially the emergency food crisis was handled by staff in the Adult Social Care department.

Key partnerships and resources to expand and modify food distribution networks

- Two new food distribution hubs were quickly established to scale up delivery of food to vulnerable residents during lockdown. To serve all socially and economically vulnerable residents, TAWS expanded a small food distribution hub they were operating with Incredible Surplus. This hub became 'central command' for coordinating emergency food distribution and delivery efforts across the city.
- BCC also set up the 'Emergency Community Response Hub' to serve the approximately 23,000 residents deemed 'clinically vulnerable' by the National Health Service at the beginning of lockdown. As such, these residents were targeted to receive free food parcels from the national government. The national government quickly realized they needed local authorities to support a timely distribution of the parcels. BCC's hub operated alongside the TAWS-managed

hub through March 2021 to deliver national government food parcels to the 'clinically vulnerable' during each lockdown.

- TAWS had the capacity and networks to manage a city-wide initiative, but did not have food redistribution expertise. As an experienced food charity, Incredible Surplus had invaluable expertise in food redistribution, including complicated logistics and safe food storage practices, as well as actual food supplies.
- The hub managed by TAWS and Incredible Surplus became the central point for food redistribution throughout the city. Food banks and food charities brought their donated food supplies (surplus food from food stores and businesses) to the hub for redistribution. About 1/3 of bulk food received by the hub was packaged into food parcels, while 2/3 of the bulk food was redistributed back to local, voluntary organisations. The 80 or so 'Food Group' organisations came to the food hub every two weeks for bulk food that they brought back to assemble into food parcels.
- As demand continued to rise with the pandemic, especially for the shelf-stable products included in food parcels, food donations were no longer sufficient. BCC spent well over £1million on three rounds of contracts with organisations to purchase food for distribution through the food hub. The first contract went to FareShare, the second to MKG Foods, and the third directly to TAWS. TAWS and Incredible Surplus also received other government and philanthropic grants and donations to fund food purchasing and hub operations.
- BCC found the hub free physical space for their initial operations in a community health centre. However, as demand and operations evolved during the pandemic, TAWS had to secure new space, ultimately moving their operations three times—using a custard factory and university space. It was challenging finding facilities that were centrally located, accessible, had enough space to serve as a very large warehouse, floors that could endure significant weight and commercial equipment, etc.
- The hub served as the central coordinator for all food aid requests and parcel deliveries in Birmingham. All food aid requests were directed to the hub where staff then mapped out the most efficient delivery methods and routes and gave deliver instructions to local voluntary organisations. TAWS and Incredible Surplus delivered the food parcels packaged at the hub and made additional deliveries as needed to support the local voluntary organisations.
- TAWS also coordinated voluntary recruitment for the hub and for organisations in the 'Food Group.' During peak demand (summer of 2020), the hub was distributing 60 tonnes of food per week. To distribute approximately 15 tonnes of food per week, 6-10 drivers and about 8 packers per day were needed. All of these were volunteers, supplemented by staff from TAWS and Incredible Surplus.

Real-time identification of those most in need

- TAWS set up a phone line that Birmingham residents could call to request food aid. The phone line was publicized through TAWS networks and by 'word-of-mouth.' People who received food parcel deliveries shared with others, who in turn requested support.
- BCC established an emergency control center at the start of the pandemic with a helpline and online form that Birmingham residents could use to request assistance of any type, including food. They received over 1,300 requests for food in the first week alone.² Ward-level coordinators were also tasked with monitoring food demand on a daily basis. BCC referred all food aid requests to TAWS. BCC also publicized the food distribution hubs through their own communication channels, including their website and newsletter.

- TAWS promised to deliver a food parcel within 72-hours of receiving a request, but most deliveries were made within 24-hours. Everyone that requested food was served; the food hub did not ask for proof of need. TAWS established a Food Administration Team to handle food supply and delivery logistics, as well as data collection, with a small team based at the distribution hub managing bulk orders for partner organisations and coordinating volunteer drivers and packers daily.
- Data collected from the TAWS phone line and BCC confirmed that the majority of food was delivered to the most socio-economically vulnerable residents in Birmingham. The data collected included age and ethnicity of person making the request, number of people in their household, and postal code. TAWS reported data every week to BCC, including data on daily deliveries and routes.

Results

- BCC set up their food distribution hub within 48 hours of being asked for support from the national government. TAWS and Incredible Surplus set up the primary food distribution hub within a week of the national lockdown announcement.
- The total tonnes of food distributed to city residents increased by over 200% from March-May 2020. In addition to the approximately 23,000 clinically vulnerable people, it was estimated that food was distributed to about 21,000 additional people each week during peak activity in June 2020.
- The food parcels contained high quality food, including high protein items and tinned vegetables. FareShare provided fresh vegetables when available. Religious requirements and cultural preferences were considered when assembling food delivery parcels. All food parcels were vegetarian and dietary restrictions, such as gluten or dairy intolerance, were also considered when possible.
- The emergency food distribution initiative was the first time that such a diverse set of community based organisations in different neighborhoods coordinated their efforts to address food insecurity in the city. The informal 'Food Group' ultimately became the Food Justice Network, a group of over 200 community organisations who work together to ensure food and basic necessities are readily available to all who are in need. They are working on food justice issues locally and advocating nationally, including support for the Right To Food Campaign, a nationwide initiative to end food poverty.

By working together, instead of trying to manage it individually, the voluntary sector was able to respond to the crisis faster and more efficiently (i.e., they were able to serve more people with fewer resources). Food charities did not have the capacity or resources to easily expand to adequately respond to the food crisis. For other voluntary organisations new to emergency food aid, it would have taken them a longer period of time and significant resources to figure out food distribution.

- BCC's Food Team is collaborating with the voluntary sector to create a comprehensive emergency food plan to make the Birmingham food system more resilient (by addressing food poverty and food justice) and to ensure they are prepared for the next crisis. BCC also continues to improve their data collection on food insecurity in the city, which gives them a more accurate picture of the issue and trends.
- BCC launched the Global Cities Pledge on Food Justice at the 7th Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Global Forum. The pledge emphasizes the need for local, national, and international policies which create and support an affordable, nutritious and sustainable food system for all citizens, irrespective of social or economic grouping.

² Birmingham City Council and The Food Foundation (2020) City of Birmingham COVID-19 Emergency Food Response: A Local Authority and Voluntary Sector Partnership Approach #BrumTogether

Additional Information

The Active Wellbeing Society
(TAWS): <https://theaws.co.uk/coronavirus/>

**Department of Public Health,
Birmingham City Council**
(BCC): https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50119/health_and_wellbeing_board/2414/creating_a_healthy_food_city_forum/3

Emergency Food Plan
(placeholder for link if published)

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The mission of the Feeding Cities Group is to create equitable and resilient urban food systems—globally. To learn more, please visit our website:

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Implications for Emergency Food Planning

Acting early and quickly is critical when responding to any emergency food crisis. Local authorities are unlikely to have the capacity to ‘go it alone.’ They will need to rely on the voluntary sector to both address the crisis and to signal when one arises, since they have daily connections to any city’s vulnerable populations. Likewise, voluntary organisations will need critical support and resources that only the government can provide. The following elements should be included in your city’s emergency food plan to ensure this happens:

1. During any massive crisis, government authorities will be overwhelmed dealing with response and recovery for multiple sectors (transportation, housing, etc.). To ensure a rapid, robust emergency food response, the local authority should establish a dedicated Food Team that will be able to quickly mobilize government resources, establish help lines and online help portals, act as the primary contact for the voluntary sector and collect critical data and information city-wide. This team will bring together key staff from various departments that will be needed to respond to the crisis.
2. Local authorities will not have the resources to fully address a food crisis in the midst of a massive disaster; they will need to rely on the voluntary sector. Emergency food plans should identify the voluntary organisations with the capacity and resources to manage an emergency food distribution hub. Consider food charities with extensive food distribution expertise as well as those not currently focused on alleviating food poverty but that have the capacity to lead a city-wide initiative.
3. The voluntary sector can, and typically does, self-coordinate in response to any crisis (and faster than if the government tries to do so). However, to formalize the coordination with the local authority, a communication and coordination platform should be developed before the next crisis, if one does not already exist. The platform will allow the voluntary sector and the government’s Food Team to strengthen their relationship and provide a means for quickly amplifying food crisis concerns as they arise.
4. Emergency food response is very resource intensive. Being prepared for the next crises requires having the funding in place to adequately support the response being planned. Identify potential sources of public and private funding to support capacity building within the voluntary sector during an emergency food crisis and to purchase bulk food (instead of relying on uncertain food donations). Voluntary sector organizations will need more staff, instead of relying strictly on volunteers, especially for prolonged emergencies. The emergency food hub will need specialized equipment for moving, storing, packing and distributing food. Purchasing food is more efficient, more reliable and allows more control to ensure emergency food is high quality and culturally appropriate. Further, the local authority needs to set up contracts for procurement so they can act quickly because complex government procurement channels can be cumbersome. Local authorities will need to advocate for food justice and the right to food at all times to secure more funding from the national government. Local authorities will not be able to afford funding for the voluntary sector without national government and private sector contributions.
5. Find public and private buildings that could serve as emergency food hubs. They will need to have enough capacity and infrastructure for food storage as well as accessibility for distribution. Develop emergency use agreements for the space for the duration of any crisis to prevent operation disruptions due to moving.



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