

# CITY OF BIRMINGHAM COVID-19 EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE

## A Local Authority and Voluntary Sector Partnership Approach #Brumtogether

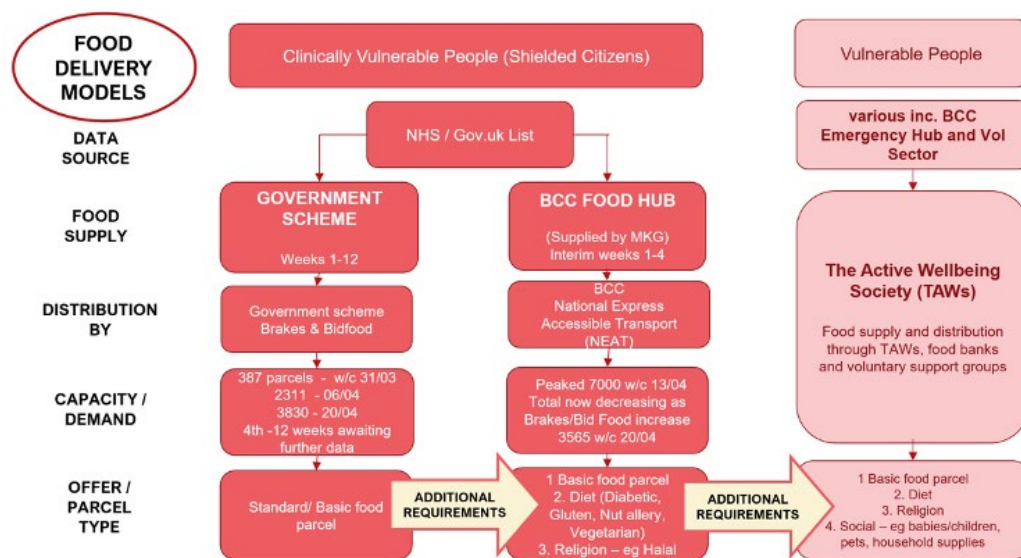
### BACKGROUND

At the start of the Covid-19 emergency, 1.5 million clinically vulnerable people in the UK were advised by the NHS to stay at home for at least 12 weeks to be shielded from coronavirus. By March 29th, the national Government began the biggest effort to deliver supplies to those in need since World War II. National partners, Brakes and Bidfood, were commissioned to assemble and deliver free food parcels including household items such as pasta, fruit, tinned goods and biscuits.

Birmingham City Council (BCC) set up an 'Emergency Community Response Hub' to provide support to the most vulnerable citizens. This service prioritised those in critical need who received a letter from NHS England stating they are in a priority group (described as clinically vulnerable or shielded citizens in the figure below), as well as those who were self-isolating for shorter periods or are economically vulnerable and unable to rely on family or friends for adequate practical support (described as vulnerable people in the figure below). To access this support, citizens

call a helpline or fill in a form. They are then signposted to services offered by the Council or the voluntary sector. The hub was initially promoted via BCC's internal communication channels. It also features prominently on council's dedicated coronavirus webpages and in April was promoted to 118,000 subscribers of an external newsletter. In the first full week since the helpline was launched, the council received 1,310 calls.

The NHS identified 23,000 people in the City of Birmingham as clinically vulnerable. However, early applicants did not all immediately receive food parcels as the national scheme was taking time to reach targets and letters to clinically vulnerable people were staggered. Local Authorities were asked to support delivery and BCC set-up a food distribution hub within 48 hours. BCC also supported and funded the voluntary sector to set-up a second food distribution hub to co-ordinate voluntary sector action across the city to support those who are socially and economically vulnerable (classified as vulnerable people in the figure below).



Prior to lockdown, Birmingham's food scene was vibrant and thriving. However, some communities across the city were also reliant on food support as described in this video produced by Birmingham City Council to engage citizens in the 'Birmingham Food Conversation'.

Over the lockdown period it became apparent that the scale of need amongst the socially and economically vulnerable was much greater than anticipated. This case study describes how BCC worked with the voluntary sector to set up a food distribution hub to rapidly scale up delivery of food to the increasing numbers of socially vulnerable people in the city.

### **BIRMINGHAM'S FOOD HUB FOR THE SOCIALLY VULNERABLE**

Birmingham is described as a super-diverse city. There will be no overall majority ethnic group within a decade. The city's vulnerable groups are supported by hundreds of charities including faith based organisations, womens' refuges and food banks.

One of these charities, The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS), is a community benefit society and cooperative working to develop healthy, happy communities living active and connected lives. TAWS' Directors began scenario planning for a Covid-19 outbreak in January. Chief Executive, Karen Creavin, recalls checking the charity's insurance policy (insured for loss of income but not for global pandemics) which prompted her to speak to commissioners and prepare a business continuation plan in February. This plan focused

on how to continue supporting communities in need in a 'worst case scenario' (i.e. lockdown coupled with increased demand for services).

TAWS is commissioned by BCC and they co-produced a plan to set-up a food delivery scheme so service users could continue accessing the food they were provided with through various community food initiatives including The Real Junk Food Project (TRJFP). TRJFP uses surplus food in community cafes and serves this to communities in need. TAWS and TRJFP started the delivery scheme in the week leading up to lockdown.

### **COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION AND CO-ORDINATION**

Birmingham's Centre for Voluntary Action (BVSC) was also in talks with BCC about implementing a city wide emergency food programme and was directed to TAWS. BVSC asked TAWS to lead a 'Food Group' involving Food Banks, Faith Communities and others involved in tackling food poverty in their communities. There were no restrictions to who could join this group. Before lockdown the group met face-to-face. As lockdown approached, a WhatsApp group and other online/digital resources were used to continue planning. The group 'met' every two days to share intelligence and quickly began to re-distribute the food they were collectively acquiring to ensure that any surplus was delivered to organisations/areas in need.

One of the organisations to join this group, FareShare, is a charity involved in food redistribution. FareShare was established 25 years ago and is the UK's longest running food distribution charity. Prior to the Covid-19 emergency, surplus food from food businesses (including supermarkets, restaurants and caterers) was redistributed by FareShare to charities and community groups. FareShare users (known as members) include hostels, domestic violence refuges and faith-based organisations who use this food to prepare hot meals in community settings to reduce social isolation or support those in most need. Recently, community pantries have also been set-up. Pantries go beyond the food bank model, creating a sustainable and long-term solution to food poverty. Users pay a small weekly fee, typically £3.50, for which they can choose at least ten items of food each week. They are also offered additional opportunities such as volunteering and training.

Since mid-March, FareShare noted a change in demand from existing members. Some members ceased to operate (as social distancing was enforced) but others requested more food. Many existing FareShare members began to repurpose their work to distribute food parcels, which in turn changed the type of food they needed to ambient dry and tinned goods rather than the usual chilled and meat products for cooking. New groups also emerged as they responded to a need in their local community.

As lockdown set in, the Food Group set-up by TAWS also noted that the nature of the food being donated was



changing i.e. long-life products were no longer being donated as individuals were stocking up for themselves. Furthermore, regular supply for some Food Group members was also fluctuating as demand continued to rise. Working with FareShare and TRJFP, TAWS calculated that an additional 20 tonnes of food each week was needed to supplement the food the group was accessing from a variety of sources (retailers donating food surplus and charitable donations).

When Laura Spencer, manager of the West Midlands FareShare Hub, joined the 'Food Group' she mentioned that Warwickshire County Council had set up a contract for FareShare to supply that council's food distribution hub. Karen shared this approach with BCC and within a week the council responded to say they would also become a 'Super Member'. Laura said, 'BCC understood the scale of the need'.

BCC set-up a contract investing over £600,000 for FareShare to purchase food (rather than rely on surplus food donations) and supply it to a food distribution hub managed by TAWS. BCC also provided TAWS with access to the Ladywood Community and Health Centre. TAWS and TRJFP set-up operations at Ladywood and the Food Group members picked up parcels to deliver food across the community food network. If a group or charity ceases to operate or it is apparent that there is new demand in underserved areas, TAWS/TRJFP deliver the food directly.

This is the first time that organisations across ward boundaries and faith communities have communicated, collaborated and co-ordinated efforts to alleviate food poverty in the city.

### **RAPID SET UP OF A FOOD DISTRIBUTION HUB TO SUPPORT SOCIALLY VULNERABLE PEOPLE**

FareShare signed the contract on 3rd April and made their first delivery into Ladywood Health and Community Centre on 8th April. During the intervening period, they secured new warehouse space in Coventry, employed four members of staff and three volunteers to work in the warehouse and as delivery drivers. They also hired all the equipment they required (three vans, a lorry, an inflatable chiller, a forklift truck and office equipment). They set in place all the training, food safety and health and safety practices required to operate a food distribution hub. PPE has always been available for FareShare staff and volunteers. Everyone is issued with hand sanitiser, disposable gloves and high visibility vests and masks.

### **WORD OF MOUTH LEADS TO INCREASE IN DEMAND**

Following BCC's intervention, ward level co-ordinators recruited by the city council monitored and communicated need on a daily basis.

TAWS/TRJFP mapped areas that lack agency/organisation support and delivered to households in these areas directly.



Local Councillors also informed TAWS when food banks ceased to operate so they continued to meet demand in these areas. Bournville Village Trust (BVT) donated two delivery vehicles to support distribution for example. BVT was established by George Cadbury and the Cadbury family. Trust funds are used to support families in need in Bournville and neighbouring areas in Birmingham as well as across the city.

Demand from new households started increasing in areas where people were already receiving food. Karen indicated that this is an example of 'word-of-mouth' establishing trust in any community-based service and added that this the most effective way of promoting a service. People who have received the emergency food parcels shared the experience with neighbours, friends and family also in need who then requested support.

### **THE OPERATION EXPANDS AND EXTENDS**

Initially the contract between BCC and FareShare required a distribution of 19 tonnes of food per week. This increased to 30 tonnes per week when it was clear that the TAWS team needed more food. During the first week of May, FareShare was delivering around 60 tonnes of food to the Ladywood centre each week. This included purchased food using the BCC budget and surplus food from the FareShare network of suppliers including rice, pasta, tinned goods, cereal, fresh fruit and vegetables, chilled food such as yoghurt, ready meals, cheese, butter and fruit juice. The contract was extended to 12th June and after this FareShare will continue to supply surplus food only to TAWS until the end of June.



## 21,000 VULNERABLE PEOPLE RECEIVE FOOD EACH WEEK

Whilst FareShare worked on supplying food for the BCC contract from their new Coventry warehouse, they continued to serve smaller community groups and charities. The increase in supply of surplus food is the result of retailers and other manufacturers and suppliers increasing their donations to FareShare in response to the crisis. FareShare recruited 50 new members in May – five times the normal number of new members in any one month. Most of the new members are based in Birmingham. It is estimated that the food distributed from the Birmingham depot is reaching around 21,000 people each week. This is in addition to the 20,000 people identified as clinically vulnerable and therefore entitled to food through the national scheme.

Laura said 'Even if we manage to get through this and Covid-19 disappears, the economic impact potentially has long-lasting effects in Birmingham and the West Midlands. We, as a collective, have responded to an immediate need but also need to address the issue of people becoming dependent on food parcels. How do we extricate ourselves from that and allow people to gain independence again? It is really difficult and I'm not sure we have the answer yet'.

Both Karen and Laura made reference to the sharing economy as a potential exit strategy and Laura referred to the 'social eating scene' in cities like Nottingham. 'Food is a massive connector. We all have to eat and there is something really special about eating together with friends,

families, neighbours. The challenge is to use this opportunity to find new ways of bringing people together with food and lifting people out of food insecurity.'

## NEW INITIATIVES TO FEED SOCIALLY VULNERABLE PEOPLE

As well as the major food distribution hubs, a number of smaller, local initiatives have been springing up across the city. Councillor Paulette Hamilton, Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care, documented visits to food hubs set up by diverse community groups on her Facebook page.

The Sikh community for example, is well known in the city for carrying out 'seva'. This means 'service' and previous seva activities included feeding the homeless. New groups set up initiatives through donations from community members and businesses. This food is delivered to hundreds of families and individuals who are socially and economically vulnerable. One group identified international students 'stranded' in Birmingham with no access to funds to support their return home or extended stay in the UK. Other beneficiaries include families with no recourse to public funds.

A second example is a charity called 'Home from Hospital Care'. They received additional funding from BCC to scale-up a shopping and befriending service to support individuals returning home from hospital who do not have the support of friends and family. Harborne Food School, a local business, also donated their site to act as a food hub and make it safer for volunteers to pick up pre-packaged food parcels. They reported that their clients are requesting pre-prepared meals rather than typical food items to support them during this crisis.

## PLANNING THE EXIT STRATEGY

As well as tackling food poverty, Karen expressed concerns about the 'mental health pandemic' that is likely to follow the Covid-19 pandemic. After years of working with diverse groups in Birmingham, she has a strong sense that those involved in tackling health inequalities in the city need to consider a 'sharing economy' approach to re-establish the 'five ways to wellbeing' as advocated by the Mental Health Charity, Mind.

Establishing 'cooking and sharing food projects' within communities is a potential continuation for the organisations involved in responding to the current emergency food relief. The concept of sharing food has also been extended to other essential requirements, for example a 'Brum Baby Bank' has been set-up to support mothers with babies to access clothes, food and other essentials. The police have donated space and volunteers to create a 'clothes hub'. Birmingham Race Action Partnership (BRAP) is also involved in discussions about how to involve communities in creating support spaces to allow people to reconnect.

BCC is now working with partners to gather data to map people who are in need now and predict likely need in





the immediate and longer-term future. They are keen to work with the Food Group members to access data from a variety of sources to 'solve food poverty once and for all'.

Councillor Paulette Hamilton, Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care said:

"Birmingham City Council will continue to support the tremendous efforts made by the voluntary sector. We applaud them for their ability to respond to the immediate and urgent need for food in our hardest hit communities. However, as we emerge from lockdown, I am fully aware that this need is likely to increase. People locked in poverty face continuous social and economic challenges. Families who are suffering from a loss of income are less likely to

afford nutritious food and many are unable to prepare it due to lack of skills or facilities.

"Birmingham City Council will prioritise tackling food poverty in the city. Our Public Health Department has a significant role to play but can only move forward by working in partnership with the voluntary sector and other key organisations including those in the food sector. We also need national Government to take urgent action on food poverty. We need to use our collective learning from this crisis to increase affordability, accessibility and availability of healthier food across the city. In the meantime, we will continue to identify citizens, families and communities in need and direct them to appropriate support services."

## COVID-19 TIMELINE

DATE	EVENT
January 2020	The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS) begins scenario planning for a Covid-19 emergency in the UK.
Early March 2020	<b>TAWS starts to distribute food to families in areas of deprivation.</b> BVSC (Birmingham's Centre for Voluntary Action) approaches TAWS to set-up a 'Food Group'. Any voluntary sector organisation can join this group. Food is shared and redistributed across community and faith group organisations.
19 <sup>th</sup> March 2020	<b>Government publishes guidance on 'providing free school meals during the coronavirus outbreak'</b>
23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2020	<b>UK Government announces 'lockdown' and social distancing measures enforced.</b>
W/B 23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2020	<b>Birmingham City Council (BCC) becomes a Super Member of FareShare.</b> BCC allocates over £600,000 of funding so FareShare can purchase food to distribute across the Food Group. BCC also provides TAWS and partners with access to the Ladywood Health and Community Centre to serve as a food distribution site.
27 <sup>th</sup> March 2020	<b>BCC sets up an 'Emergency Community Response Hub'.</b> Citizens can call a phone number or fill in a form to request help. They are contacted within 24 hours and signposted to available services. 1,310 calls received in the first full week. <b>Councillor Paulette Hamilton starts documenting visits to community food initiatives on her Facebook page.</b>
29 <sup>th</sup> March 2020	<b>The national food delivery scheme is set-up.</b> Brakes and Bidfood are the national delivery partners.
31 <sup>st</sup> March 2020	<b>Government Announcement:</b> Michael Gove announces food support to 1.5 million of most vulnerable who are self-isolating.
31 <sup>st</sup> March 2020	<b>Birmingham sets up a food distribution hub to support the national food delivery scheme.</b> Food is supplied by MGK, a wholesaler, and distributed by National Express coaches. This food is supplied to individuals on the clinically shielded/vulnerable list supplied by the NHS.
2 <sup>nd</sup> April 2020	<b>BCC leader, Councillor Ian Ward, writes to The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting support for Birmingham's Covid-19 response.</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2020	<b>FareShare signs a contract to purchase food and supply to the TAWS managed food distribution hub at Ladywood.</b>
8 <sup>th</sup> April 2020	<b>FareShare delivers 19 tonnes of food to Ladywood.</b> This increases to 30 tonnes of food per week during April.
16 <sup>th</sup> April 2020	<b>Minister of State for Housing and Planning responds to Councillor Ian Ward.</b> The letter states that 10,483 deliveries were made to vulnerable people in the West Midlands



<b>27<sup>th</sup> April 2020</b>	<b>Councillor Paulette Hamilton (Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care) writes to Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to express concerns being expressed by BAME communities.</b>
<b>4<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>FareShare delivers nearly 60 tonnes of food to the Ladywood hub this week.</b> This volume of distribution continues each week in May. FareShare expects to recruit 50 new members in May. Most of these members are based in Birmingham.
<b>6<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>Councillor Paulette Hamilton writes a second letter to the Secretary of State to express concerns that the promised Government inquiry into BAME health inequalities during Covid-19 was downgraded to a review.</b> Dr Justin Varney presents Birmingham's food response to the Covid-19 emergency to cities across the UK.
<b>8<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>Environment Minister, George Eustice, announces £16 million fund to deliver meals and support food charities.</b>
<b>11<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>BCC organises a meeting with partners to start planning how to gather data about the immediate, future and long term need for food relief.</b> BCC and Innovation Alliance plans workshops to discuss how data can be accessed from across the city to 'solve food poverty once and for all'.
<b>15<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>Government updates free school meal guidance.</b> Free school meals and vouchers will be available during half-term but not over the summer holidays. Coronavirus: temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to NRPF groups.
<b>18<sup>th</sup> May 2020</b>	<b>BCC invited to present their experience of organising an emergency food response to a EUROCITIES city dialogue on the role of volunteers in responding to this emergency.</b>
<b>June 2020</b>	<b>FareShare - BCC contract ends June 12.</b> FareShare will continue to supply food to TAWS until the end of June using surplus food.
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020</b>	<b>PHE publishes report into UK BAME Covid-19 death rate.</b> Government is criticised for censoring references to the impact of structural racism. The full report is leaked to Sky. BMA and other organisations criticise the PHE report for simply restating increased mortality without presenting practical guidance for protecting BAME communities.
<b>4<sup>th</sup> June 2020</b>	<b>Councillor Hamilton on Channel 4 News:</b> Councillor Hamilton expresses concern about the PHE report 'we must stop running for the hills every-time racism is mentioned...when will black lives matter?'
<b>15<sup>th</sup> June 2020</b>	<b>England Striker, Marcus Rashford, sends an open letter addresses to All MPs in Parliament.</b> Letter is retweeted 161,000 times. The letter asks Government to #maketheUturn and provide free school meals/vouchers over the summer holidays.
<b>16<sup>th</sup> June 2020</b>	<b>Government announces U-turn on free school meals .</b> 1.3 million children eligible for free school meals will continue to receive food over the summer holidays.
<b>16<sup>th</sup> June 2020</b>	<b>PHE publishes full report into UK BAME Covid-19 death rate.</b> Historic racism and hostile environments towards immigrants are considered factors. BAME groups are less likely to seek health advice.