



# ARC BITE

Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

## The impact of Covid-19 on food systems and practices in the East of England

July 2021



**Measures to control the spread of Covid-19 are impacting upon food systems, household food practices, and organisations supporting vulnerable people.**

The ARC EoE Prevention and Early Detection in Health and Social Care is a cross-cutting theme which aims to identify and address ways to support different populations and potentially vulnerable groups to sustain their health and wellbeing.

These researchers at the University of Hertfordshire have been working with residents, community stakeholders and professionals involved in food provision to learn how people in the region are managing with food and what local support they need.

### **What was the aim of the project?**

To understand how Covid-19 is affecting local food systems, household food practices across the life course, and local efforts to mitigate dietary health inequalities in the East of England.

### **What did we do?**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 volunteers and professionals supporting local communities with food, and 38 East of England residents.



## How did we involve people?

Residents across the East of England took part in this qualitative study to share their experiences. PPI colleagues have supported the development of a series of study **policy briefings** to share the findings.

## What did we learn?

Covid-19 and the mitigation measures put in place from March 2020 (e.g. 'lockdown' and social distancing) are serving to amplify existing dietary health inequalities.

Households who are relatively financially secure have been able to spend time improving their diets during lockdown, whereas those struggling financially or in economic hardship have experienced their diets worsening.

Job losses have meant that people in the region have sometimes had to engage with the benefits system and food banks for the first time, both of which were reported to be difficult and disruptive experiences.

Those working with families eligible for free school meals reported that substitutes provided during lockdown, where they were available, lacked quality and could be difficult to access.

Older people in the region have particularly struggled to secure food delivery slots and those with physical impairments and limited mobility have sometimes found supermarkets to be potentially hostile and stressful environments.

Despite ongoing difficulties, local community groups across the region have devised, adapted and operated a range of schemes to support and feed groups of local residents.

Project findings are being disseminated to a range of audiences. The team have produced an interim report on the study findings and the policy briefings were launched at the **2021 ARC EoE Prevention Webinar: Strengthening Communities and Society for Collective Action**.

## What next?

Data collection for the study is now closed. The team are planning an end-of-project short film, involving PPI colleagues and possibly students, to help disseminate the findings and share learning.

In addition to writing peer reviewed publications, the research team have presented the findings to local councils and Trusts in the East of England. They are hoping to work with local councils directly to support learning from the findings.

## What is NIHR ARC East of England

The National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration East of England (NIHR ARC EoE) works with regional universities, NHS trusts, local authorities patient-led organisations, charities, and industry partners to improve health and social care with applied research.

## Find out More

[www.arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk)

01223 465189 / [ARCOffice@cpft.nhs.uk](mailto:ARCOffice@cpft.nhs.uk)