



# Covid-19 Food Study

## Policy Briefing: People Living with Health Conditions

In March 2020, the UK Government introduced a national 'shielding' patient list (SPL) for those who were the most 'clinically vulnerable' to the consequences of Covid-19, due to their health conditions. They were asked to 'shield' and remain at home. People on the SPL could access supermarket priority shopping lists for online food deliveries and received food parcels from Government, until the scheme ended in July 2020. Since then, the 'clinically vulnerable' have been asked to continue 'shielding' during subsequent lockdowns. We interviewed households and organisations about food and eating in the East of England during the Covid-19 pandemic. This briefing summarises the findings about people living with health conditions and/or who are shielding.

### Recommendations for Policy:

Government food parcels were gratefully received but did not always provide enough food or appropriate foods. Shielding and caring for those with health conditions make it difficult to shop for food.

#### We Recommend:



Greater capacity and coordination are required between Public Health England, local authorities and supermarkets regarding food shopping priority delivery slots for those identified as being vulnerable.



It is essential that food parcels contain fresh produce and include enough food for all dependents in the household.



Tailored support is needed for carers of people with health conditions to access food, (not just support for those with a health condition).

### Food and Eating Challenges for People Living with Health Conditions:

- There was confusion expressed about how the Government food parcel scheme worked and if or how to register for it. Those who did receive food parcels, while grateful, were very critical of the content in terms of quality, freshness and healthfulness.

**“They started delivering a food parcel for me... which I stopped after two weeks because it was complete and absolute useless... They delivered the milk and bread, no butter, no fresh meat. The fruit that was delivered was like dried up...”** - Mary, living with visual impairment

- Those who either choose not to or are unable to isolate try to minimise their risk by avoiding leaving home wherever possible. Sometimes this means prioritising trips to pick up essential prescription medications or attend medical appointments over food shopping. As a result, some people have to compromise on their food choices and rely on others to do food shopping for them.
- Trips to the supermarket for those with hidden disabilities can be very stressful as they often experience hostility from other shoppers if unable to wear a face covering. The priority system for online deliveries was confusing and sometimes delivery slots were not readily available.
- People with food allergies and intolerances are finding it particularly difficult to maintain dietary practices and restrictions. For example, gluten-free foods (especially flour) were hard to come by from food parcels or in supermarkets during periods of food shortages. Those with conditions such as coeliac disease have sometimes had to manage without such products.

## Challenges Identified by Support Services for People Living with Health Conditions:

- While people on the SPL were already identified as clinically vulnerable, identifying people with health conditions who were not on the list but who needed support around food was a challenge.
- Government food parcels for people on the SPL only provided enough food for the people on the list, not the other members of their households. Single parents or carers who were shielding were unable to go out and shop for food for other members of their household who depended on them.
- Food shopping presents problems for carers. Those caring for someone living with dementia or autism, for example, are typically unable to get respite care via community groups for an hour or two to go shopping on their own.
- Caring for someone who cannot be left on their own and is shielding or isolating makes it virtually impossible for some carers to go food shopping.

## Case Study: Nicole

Nicole lives with her partner and works part time from home. She cares for her adult son who has complex needs and a care team to support him. Some of her son's carers had to isolate at different times and, as a result, Nicole has had to do a lot more care work and has less time to do food shopping. Nicole is managing by doing online shopping, when delivery slots are available, and using the veg-box delivery scheme run by the village pub. Milk deliveries have continued within her village and she is able to get eggs from a neighbour, who keeps chickens. Nicole thinks she is managing well providing food for herself, partner and son. However, doing so, at times, takes up most of her day and is very stressful, especially when combined with her increased caring responsibilities for her son and her part time job.

## The Impact of Coronavirus on Food and Eating in the East of England:

The information presented here is based on the findings from a study on the impact of Covid-19 on food and eating in the East of England. Since May 2020, we have been interviewing East of England residents, community stakeholders, and professionals about how people in the region are managing with their food and how they are being supported locally. The interim report can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.18745/pb.23113>

More information about the study can be found [here](#). This research is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England. Please visit our website to find out more about our work [here](#). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.