

# Covid-19 Food Study

## Policy Briefing: Older People



In March 2020, all those aged 70 years and over were advised by the UK Government to stay at home and self-isolate. Although not all older people were in the 'clinically vulnerable groups' that received written advice to shield, many have made the decision to shield themselves or have been persuaded to do so by family and friends. We interviewed households and organisations about food and eating in the East of England during the Covid-19 pandemic. This policy briefing summarises the findings from interviews with older people.

### Recommendations for Policy:

Staying at home, isolation and being unable to shop for food forced some older people to change their eating habits and had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

#### We recommend:



Tailored services such as Meals on Wheels have proved vital during the pandemic and need to be made more widely available. Involving older people in planning for future challenges within the food system is essential.



Recovery from the pandemic for older people will need to focus on reducing isolation-related vulnerability, particularly around food. Support will be needed to restore confidence around cooking and eating, to combat malnutrition, frailty and loneliness.



The types of support provided by the third sector need to be funded and scaled-up so that more older people can benefit from services such as transport to the shops and/or doing food shopping for or with them.

### Food and Eating Challenges for Older People:

- There are a range of issues facing older people and many are having to change their eating habits or find new and different ways to source food, including asking family members, neighbours and carers to shop for them. Some feel guilty about relying on others for this and so try to keep shopping lists to a minimum and/or get by on the 'basics'.
- Early on, media reports of panic buying were distressing and some households started to buy and store extra food in anticipation of shortages. Food shopping has become a stressful event.
- A popular strategy is to stick to smaller shops, which are perceived as safer, and to avoid supermarkets.
- Some older people are being supported by local voluntary and third sector groups during the pandemic and are receiving help with food shopping and delivery. Where they are available, Meals on Wheels services are particularly well received and give some older people a sense of security about food.

“...because they assured us that whatever happened they would continue. I wasn't worried at all that I would have no food, no.” - Valarie, who received Meals on Wheels services throughout the pandemic.

## Challenges Identified by Support Services for Older People:

- Food banks report a decrease in older people as volunteers, because of the requirement to shield at home. At the same time, the number of older people using their services is increasing because they are experiencing difficulties accessing food.
- Professionals working with older people say that many have lost weight and that their dietary practices have deteriorated over the period of the pandemic. In particular, eating meals less frequently and eating less fresh produce. This is having a detrimental effect on older people's health and wellbeing.
- Loneliness, sadness and isolation are reported as issues for older people. They are missing eating with family and friends, meeting friends in cafés and restaurants, and attending lunch clubs. Some are eating less and avoid food as a result of being socially isolated.

“...at the moment, they are lonely, they're sad, they miss people, they miss going to the [Supermarket] café for a coffee, it's all those little things that make everyone's life worthwhile, particularly for an older adult.”

## Case Study: Joyce

Joyce is an 87 year old woman who lives alone in a second floor flat and has mobility issues. She has had Meals on Wheels delivered for a number of years, following surgery, as she is unable to carry heavy bags of shopping up the two flights of stairs (there is no lift). Before the pandemic she shopped around three times per week at the local supermarket and regularly met friends for coffee or lunch in the store's café. She reported losing weight since isolating at home and increased her Meals on Wheels provision to daily deliveries. She also used a local charity to do her food shopping and deliver it to her at home. She missed socialising with friends, was feeling very low in mood due to the isolation and has had to access counselling services.

## 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.