

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

The information presented in these policy briefings 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.

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# Covid-19 Food Study

## Policy Briefing: Families with School-aged Children



During Covid-19 national lockdowns, school closures mean many parents are tasked with feeding, caring for and home-schooling their children whilst also working from home. Free school meal replacements include a national voucher scheme or food parcels delivered via schools. These schemes continued during the summer and Christmas holidays in 2020. 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 families with school-aged children, some of whom are eligible for free school meals.

### Recommendations for Policy:

Some families have improved their diets during the pandemic. However, others are deprioritising diet and health in favour of more immediate concerns due to increasing food prices or reduced income.

#### We recommend:



Food parcels and free school meal vouchers restrict families' capacity to make the best choices for them. Families would benefit more from a cash payment via a top-up in their child benefit or Universal Credit payments.



More support is needed to help families navigate the benefits system, especially for those newly unemployed and those who have never had to access the benefit system prior to the pandemic. This is likely to be an ongoing problem given the longer term economic impact of Covid-19.



Low-income families require more support due to food price rises and loss of income. Local authorities and schools must continue to reach out to those at risk of food poverty and ensure those eligible for free school meals are able to receive/apply for them, particularly as unemployment is expected to rise.

### Food and Eating Challenges for Families with Children:

- Parents, predominantly mothers, say they are spending more time preparing and cooking food than before the pandemic. This is particularly difficult for those who are working from home and have younger children, who cannot prepare food themselves.
- Some parents report an improvement in their children's diet because as parents they have more control over what they are eating than before. However, others say their family are not eating as healthily or have gained weight due to the negative impact of the pandemic on their own and/or their child's mental wellbeing.
- Larger families and/or those shopping for other households struggle to purchase enough food when supermarket restrictions are in place, limiting the number of food items. This often means going to great lengths and/or spending more time than usual on planning and purchasing their food shopping.

- Due to food shortages and fewer offers/discounts, it is mostly more expensive branded items that are available in supermarkets, meaning families either buy less or their shopping has become more expensive. This is particularly difficult for larger and low-income families who resort to eating less healthily or eating less food altogether. Others use food banks or community schemes providing emergency food.

“...there was plenty of stuff in the shops but unfortunately it was the expensive branded stuff. So I was getting like half the amount of food shop a week for nearly twice the money... Well we struggled a little bit. Julie [the community scheme worker] was a great help, she sent us... towards the beginning, with like Nando's and stuff, they give food donations to the various groups and what have you.” - Lindsey; low-income family not eligible for free school meals

## Challenges Identified by Support Services for Families with Children:

- Organisations say that diet and health are deprioritised by low-income families, in favour of more immediate concerns such as paying utility bills, housing costs and other necessary bills.
- Food banks are experiencing an increase in the number of referrals, including families who have never used food banks before and those who do not know how to access statutory benefits or community support. Job losses or reduced income mean that families are having to engage with the benefit system for the first time.
- Free school meal eligibility and applications are also increasing during the pandemic and the relevant support services say they are expecting this to increase further. Some local authorities are making considerable efforts to reach out to families who are newly eligible for free school meals.
- There have been administrative issues with the supply of free school meal vouchers. Schools are spending an extraordinary amount of administrative time procuring, processing and distributing vouchers to families. The delays are having a significant impact on low-income families' abilities to access enough food for their children.

## Case Study: Lucy

Lucy is a mother of three children and is a full-time carer for her 10 year old daughter, who has learning difficulties. Her teenaged son, older daughter and grand-daughter also live with her. Her husband is not working and has had to self-isolate due to ill health. She says that the pandemic has been 'quite a challenge' due to the health needs of her family and their low income. Two children are eligible for free school meals and they receive supermarkets vouchers in lieu of receiving meals at school. However, Lucy is unable to use these vouchers online, which means it is difficult to make use of them. Lucy has also found it difficult to obtain enough food to feed her family due to an increase in food prices and food shortages in the shops she visits. She has had to rely on community support to feed her family including food from a local charity and a summer 'brunch club'.

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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.



# 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.

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# 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.

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# Covid-19 Food Study

## Policy Briefing: Mothers with Infants

During the first national lockdown (March 2020), pregnant women were advised to reduce social contact and work from home where possible. Professional and peer face-to-face support for mothers has reduced or is unavailable. According to the Trades Union Congress, 71 per cent of working mothers who requested furlough to care for their children were refused this and were instead forced to take unpaid leave. 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 mothers with infants.

### Recommendations for Policy:

Mothers and pregnant women say they are unable to get the support they would ordinarily receive and their infants are missing out on opportunities that are important for social development.

#### We recommend:



More feeding support for mothers is urgently needed. Covid-19 has limited the support available for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. This is important given the potential benefits of breastfeeding for women and babies and the public health efforts to increase rates of breastfeeding in the UK.



Health Visitors are urged to prioritise checks on mothers' mental wellbeing, as well as their baby's development, to ensure mothers are getting the emotional support they need.



Clear advice should be provided to pregnant women and new mothers about the extent to which they should self-isolate.

### Food and Eating Challenges for Mothers with Infants:

- Some women who gave birth at the beginning or during lockdown say that the restrictions mean they have more time at home with their babies. This valuable time helped some to successfully establish breastfeeding routines and/or introduce solid foods.
- Some women say that Health Visitors appeared reluctant to provide face-to-face contact at the start of the pandemic, and they felt guilty for asking them for more support. Although mothers found it difficult to manage without this, many relied on family, friends and online networks via mobile phone apps and groups on social media. These apps became community hubs that were useful places to find out where to buy nappies and formula milk when there were shortages in the shops.



“ It’s been nice to slow down and I definitely think that breastfeeding [routine] has felt the benefit of it.”  
- Leah; a new mother on maternity leave.

- Mothers who asked for more support with their mental health were signposted to relevant services but often these referrals were not followed-up by the relevant professionals or services.

## Challenges Identified by Support Services for Mothers with Infants:

- Ordinarily Health Visitors carry out face-to-face antenatal and postnatal visits. However, during lockdown, many Health Visitors were redeployed into nursing and administrative roles meaning that they were unable to carry out these visits as normal. Where visits were not cancelled completely, women were sometimes offered remote telephone appointments as an alternative. Health Visitors are currently being redeployed to support the vaccine rollout.
- Mothers are missing the regular face-to-face child clinics where they would ordinarily receive feeding and social support, baby weighing and ‘stay and play’ sessions with other parents and babies. Face-to-face clinics are sometimes offered on a one-to-one basis and by appointment only, meaning there is no social interaction with other parents and babies.
- Support workers have observed that more mothers than usual are disclosing feelings of ‘low mood’ at 3-months postnatal.
- Health Visitors have commented that there has been a sharp increase in the number of mothers asking for food bank referrals since the lockdown. For example, one Health Visitor stated referrals have increased from two every five months pre-Covid, to approximately one every week during Covid-19.
- Services have also reported that mothers and pregnant women are confused about the extent to which they should continue to socially isolate.

## Case Study: Amber

Amber is a new mother currently on maternity leave, with a 6 month-old baby. Her husband is in employment but currently furloughed. Amber said she and her baby are unable to attend mother and baby groups. Therefore, they are both missing out on valuable social interaction and support. She has been unable to get her baby weighed and has found it difficult to get nappies and formula milk during lockdown. She describes feeling ‘robbed’ and worried about her child’s development. She has also said that learning to breastfeed has been stressful, painful and ‘overwhelming’ and she would benefit from more support.

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