Building a more resilient food system in Oxfordshire: an analysis of the local response to the COVID-19 crisis

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Summary of Findings

This report aims to illustrate the response of Oxfordshire’s local food supply chain to the COVID-19 crisis to identify how a more coordinated response could be facilitated in the future. These are the key findings across each group:

**Primary Producers**

- Scaling up production is difficult at short notice
- The business can rely heavily on one person’s expertise
- Community-based models (such as Community Supported Agriculture) have a ready supply of experienced volunteers
- Having a website was important for adapting to home deliveries and accessing new customers
- Home deliveries require access to distribution infrastructure

**Secondary Producers**

- The specific skill-sets required limits the use of a volunteer workforce
- Production does not necessarily stop if there is no demand: businesses need to have an outlet or storage capacity
- Some products can have specific distribution requirements
- Adapting to home deliveries can be expensive or impractical: it is potentially better to collaborate with someone with these expertise

**Box Schemes**

- There is not sufficient local supply to meet demand
- European produce was essential through the ‘hungry gap’
- Having a website was essential, and automated systems made upscaling more achievable
- More coordination between suppliers and distributors may have improved efficiency, rather than everyone diversifying
- Work processes had to be formalised and delegated for businesses to be resilient

**Retail**

- Having extra space was crucial for safely adapting the business
- Having volunteers was crucial
- Responses were not particularly sustainable e.g. highly season- and weather-dependent or too costly
- Local producers were very grateful for a continued outlet
- Collaboration amongst producers and/or amongst markets could improve resilience

**Community Food Services**

- Demand is not diminishing
- The emergency food response was heavily dependent on waste from supermarkets
- There is a need for more fresh fruit and vegetables in the emergency food supply
- A large voluntary workforce was (and is) key
- On-going, stable revenue is vital
- Relationships across the network of community food services was key for logistics
What can be learnt from other Sustainable Food Places?

- Connections with large institutions (e.g. Universities) can be crucial sources of borrowed infrastructure
- Food access maps can be used to identify Community Food Services most in need in order to strategically focus assistance
- Local, organic vegetables can be a convenient and cost-effective option for emergency food provision, provided there is a broker for multiple local producers
- Simple platforms like Whatsapp can be utilised effectively e.g. to coordinate redistribution of surplus food
- Having Emergency Food and Food Surplus Networks established prior to COVID-19 facilitated rapid coordination of Brighton’s entire emergency food response
- Existing relationships with the local council mean lessons from the emergency food response can immediately feed into a new Food Strategy for Glasgow
Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations are a comprehensive list of actions, based on the needs of local businesses and the successes of other cities’ food responses, to increase the resilience of Oxfordshire’s local food supply chain. Following these, a more focused list of actionable points is outlined, taking into account the specific remit and capacity of GFO.

The workforce

- Make volunteers a more regular feature of the local food system so they are equipped with relevant skills
- Connect local businesses with trainee and apprenticeship schemes to increase skilled workforce
- Fund businesses to scale-up sustainably so they can meet local demand and increase their skilled workforce to reduce dependency on individuals

Software and systems

- Establish or identify an online food hub so all businesses can access a platform for online sales
- Build communication channels on appropriate software to share, for example, surplus food or distribution infrastructure between organisations
- Formalise job roles and governance structures to reduce dependency on individuals and to make the business sustainable
- Automate systems that manage ordering and distribution to reduce workload

Managing the network countywide

- Coordinate between businesses to minimise duplication of efforts and help businesses ‘play to their strengths’ e.g. linking distributors with existing box schemes rather than each box scheme establishing their own distribution infrastructure
- Establish a broker through which local food distribution can be streamlined and to create the potential for community food services to bulk-buy (this could be linked to the online food hub, above)
- Construct a ‘good food map’ to increase awareness and connectivity between good food businesses, expanding this across the county to include businesses from all District Councils, given GFO’s new county-wide remit

Infrastructure

- Create an empty-space database and work with local councils on meanwhile leases so storage, processing and market sites can be located easily and rapidly
- Build links with a community transport network to have ready access to distribution infrastructure
- Support the creation of more eco-delivery schemes to improve access to build a flexible, low-carbon distribution network
Local food supply

- Improve storage and processing infrastructure to increase supply of local food and minimise the effects of the ‘hungry gap’
- Increase local production to meet demand
- Assist community food services to access a reliable and diverse supply of fresh fruit and vegetables e.g. by upscaling a community food project or establishing a contract with local producers

Policy

- Work with councils to build food production and access into Local Plans
- Work with local councils to create a Food Strategy

Actionable points for GFO

Going into a second wave, GFO are in a better position to understand and help coordinate the response of the local food supply chain. Below are recommendations for how GFO can begin to build resilience across the local food supply chain and prepare for future shocks:

- Pursue plans to build a ‘good food map’ of local businesses across the county. Use this not only to raise awareness of local good food businesses, but to create opportunities for businesses to collaborate e.g. through shared distribution networks and infrastructure or linking CFSs with producers
- Research and share knowledge about online platforms’ functionality and facilitate collaboration on technological solutions for local food businesses
- Research opportunities for increasing local production
- Work towards a Food Strategy with the County Council and investigate how to include food in other relevant policy
- Research empty spaces and meanwhile leases and work towards building a database of potential temporary storage and processing sites
- Connect with local volunteer networks to establish a more consistent and skilled volunteer workforce for the food sector
Introduction

This research seeks to identify how resilient the local food supply chain is, with a particular focus on how local businesses responded to the COVID-19 crisis. It then outlines some recommendations that could support a more resilient local food system that can respond to future shocks in a more coordinated manner and considers Good Food Oxford’s (GFO’s) role in this. There was a variety of ways that other Sustainable Food Places (SFPs) handled their responses to the crisis, and some of these will also be addressed in the research, in order to inform the recommendations. Nationally, the food system initially struggled to cope with changing demand, but government support for supermarkets guaranteed their profitability throughout the crisis. Local food networks, meanwhile, experienced unprecedented demand, and had to find ways to adapt and survive. The question now, facing a second peak as we go into winter, is whether the local food response was sustainable and replicable, and what can be done to support the resilience of the local food system.

Context

The National Picture

Supermarket shelves across the country were left empty of certain items for several weeks, with peak demand in the week before lockdown at approximately 40% above average (Dimbleby, 2020). Anxieties about food shortages resulted in an extra £1 billion worth of food being stockpiled in people’s homes, and high demand resulted in gridlock in online food deliveries (Nicola et al., 2020). In mid-March, the government announced a package of measures to “allow supermarkets to work together to feed the nation” (DEFRA, 2020, para. 1), such as relaxing competition laws and the rules around drivers’ working hours. There are concerns that local businesses have been left behind whilst “supermarket profits soared” (Sustain, 2020b, p. 2). Meanwhile, “retailers, under pressure from stockpiling, cut back hard on promotional offers,” which resulted in a rise of 2.4% in the cost of food in April when compared with the average across the previous four years (Dimbleby, 2020, p. 25).

Recent research has highlighted how the emphasis of efficiency in managing highly complex international food chains can come at a high cost in terms of resilience (Garnett, Doherty and Heron, 2020). The focus on just-in-time logistics and reducing the supply base tends to ignore the risk of external shocks to the system. For example, supermarkets have ordering systems which rely on next-day delivery, relying on sub-contracted labour abroad and frictionless trade at the border – a process vulnerable to an ill or isolating workforce, and likely to become more complicated after Brexit (ibid.). Moreover, “a large proportion of the fruit and vegetables sold in the UK comes from a relatively small number of growing areas in Europe” (ibid., p. 316), which could be dramatically affected by a
deteriorating situation in Italy or Spain. This could impact the supply of both fresh and ambient food to the UK (ibid.).

Local authorities have been commended for their efforts in the emergency food response, but there are concerns that the reliance on redistributing surplus food has made it difficult to provide food assistance in a dignified manner and that it has helped normalise a food system in which waste and unaffordability are inherent (Sustain, 2020a). There have been concerns about the nutritional content and appropriateness of food parcels distributed by the state for the shielding group, given co-morbidities and varying capacity to cook (Barker and Russell, 2020). Moreover, the national voucher scheme launched for children eligible for free school meals has faced some criticism in terms of families being able to access participating supermarkets, which are scarce in areas with the highest levels of social disadvantage (ibid.).

Emergency Food Response

A study published in April found that food insecurity in the UK had increased fourfold as a result of the national lockdown, with 40% of these experiences accredited to a lack of food in shops (Loopstra, 2020). It was also found that groups at risk of poverty, including Black and Ethnic Minority groups, disabled adults, unemployed adults and adults with children, experienced an increased risk of food insecurity at this time (ibid.). Self-isolation also created a new pressure on food security, with all self-isolating adults at a greater risk of food insecurity, particularly those over the age of 70 (ibid.).

The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) found that between May 2019 and May 2020, independent food banks saw an increase of 177% in the provision of emergency food parcels (IFAN, 2020). In the same period, there was a rise of 135% in the number of people receiving support (ibid.). It is important to note that food banks are not a complete picture of those in need of support even in normal times (ref.), let alone considering the added pressures of self-isolation on access. 60% of those surveyed established a home delivery service during lockdown, with a further 19% already providing this service beforehand. 69% saw an increase in self-referrals, of which 46% reported helping individuals who could not access referral agencies. 15% began accepting self-referrals during lockdown (ibid.).

The Trussell Trust reported an 89% increase in provision of emergency food parcels in April 2020 compared to April 2019, and a 107% in the number of emergency parcels given to children in the same period (The Trussell Trust, 2020). They found that 48% of the increased need was due to a fall in income, and 11% was attributed to ill health (ibid.).
Local Food

Increased demand for vegetable boxes was reported across a number of platforms: Riverford reported its “highest ever number of deliveries outside of Christmas”¹, Better Food Traders witnessed a 35% increase in vegetable box orders, and Big Barn – a local food web platform – had traffic increase from 3,000 to 20,000 users (Sustain, 2020b). The Food Foundation reported that between the end of February and the middle of April, sales across 101 vegetable box schemes increased 111%, with those smaller schemes of fewer than 300 boxes per week experiencing the greatest increase of 134% (Wheeler, 2020). In that 6-week period, the 101 box schemes had delivered 0.7 million boxes of fresh food. 65% prioritised vulnerable groups, key workers, and isolating individuals and 10% developed systems to assist the economically vulnerable (ibid.). The Food Foundation extrapolated this data to find that the 500 box schemes across the UK likely delivered approximately 3.5 million boxes in that period and that, with average waiting lists of 160, total demand would have equated to 5.3 million boxes in the 6-week period (ibid.).

The View from Oxfordshire

On the 11\textsuperscript{th} of March, a local newspaper published their first report of empty supermarket shelves.\textsuperscript{2} By the 18\textsuperscript{th} of March, supermarkets’ online delivery services were reporting that they were running at full capacity, the Waitrose and ASDA websites had crashed and waiting times for Tesco and Sainsbury’s home deliveries in Oxfordshire were three to four weeks.\textsuperscript{3} On March 23\textsuperscript{rd} Oxford Food Bank was reporting that donations had halved and expressed concerns that lockdown would only worsen the situation.\textsuperscript{4} Between March 26\textsuperscript{th} and April 22\textsuperscript{nd}, the Council’s coronavirus support line had received 1,066 referrals and 283 calls including 146 requests for urgent supplies and 99 requests for shopping to be collected.\textsuperscript{5} It was reported on the 12\textsuperscript{th} of June that roughly 40,000 people in Oxfordshire were relying on volunteers who had responded to over 117,000 requests for help.\textsuperscript{6}

GFO (2020) found that the use of Oxfordshire’s Community Food Services had tripled between the start of lockdown and May when the research was carried out, with 58% reporting a considerable

\[^{1}\text{https://wickedleeks.riverford.co.uk/news/health-inequality-farming/coronavirus-sends-home-delivery-soaring}\]
\[^{3}\text{https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18315526.coronavirus-panic-buying-creates-food-home-delivery-chaos/}\]
\[^{5}\text{https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18394948.one-thousand-helped-oxfords-coronavirus-emergency-support-hubs/}\]
\[^{6}\text{https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18512783.40-000-people-oxfordshire-now-rely-coronavirus-volunteers/}\]
increase in provision for families with children. 89% of those surveyed stated that financial difficulties were the most common cause for requiring emergency food provision. COVID-19 also impacted on the services' abilities to meet nutritional needs, and this was exacerbated where services depended on a single supplier (ibid.). As lockdown relaxes, services are concerned about losing their voluntary workforce and do not anticipate a reduction in need (ibid.). Half of the food supply for local CFSs came from FareShare via SOFEA (ibid.), which raises concerns about how much the emergency food response depended on waste from supermarkets.
Methodology
This was a qualitative study aiming to build case studies both across Oxford’s local food supply chain, and of other SFPs. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with:

- 2 primary producers
- 2 secondary producers
- 3 box schemes
- 1 market
- 1 shop
- 2 community food services
- 2 SFPs organisations

The sample is small and not taken to be representative. Rather, they are taken as case studies to illustrate some of the ways businesses coped and ways they could have been better supported.

The aims of the research were outlined at the beginning of each interview. Interviews were recorded and lasted 45 to 60 minutes. Written consent was obtained prior to interview. The content of the interviews depended slightly on the nature of the business being discussed, but broadly focused on:

- How the business functioned prior to COVID-19
- How staff were impacted by COVID-19 and the impacts on the business
- How demand changed during COVID-19
- How supply changed during COVID-19
- How distribution changed during COVID-19
- Whether they collaborated in the wider local food network
- What they would have liked to have done, given appropriate support

Interviews with participants from SFP organisations focused on:

- Identifying their role in the cities’ food response
- Identifying how they collaborated with local food businesses
- Identifying what made their response effective

Interviewees were first sought from GFO’s network, and then from a broader network of businesses that align with GFO’s charter. Interviewees for SFPs were selected from SFPs’ own series of case
studies, selecting those that appeared to have responded well to the crisis and could therefore shape recommendations for GFO.
Primary Producers: Key Findings

- Scaling up production is difficult at short notice
- The business can rely heavily on one person’s expertise
- Community-based models have a ready supply of experienced volunteers
- Having a website was important for adapting to home deliveries and accessing new customers
- Home deliveries require access to distribution infrastructure
Primary Producers Case Studies

The Kitchen Garden People CSA

Background

The Kitchen Garden People (KGP) run a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprise on a 2-acre site at FarmEd. They supply up to 85 boxes per week and have calculated that their members save approximately £200 per year compared to using popular national box schemes. They do not buy in any produce: members receive what is available with the changing seasons. They pay a peppercorn rent but make up the equivalent in time and energy given to interacting with FarmEd’s visitors and educational groups.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff

One of four core staff members was taken ill in March for two weeks. She points out that had two of them been taken ill or had this happened later in the season when there is an increased workload, it would have been very difficult to manage.

“ultimately in growing-time you just can’t afford to not be there”

KGP has, since its beginnings, had a dedicated local group of volunteers who, they believe, would have been able to make up for lost labour. However, much of the planning and expertise relies solely on their professional grower; had he been taken ill, the business would have been in a very difficult situation.

“one of the less resilient parts of our structure is the fact that Dan’s the only grower that knows how to propagate; what time to put things in, take things away... if he was out of commission for a while for any reason, that would be a big problem for us”

The packing barn is small, so to allow for social distancing the staff were required to pack boxes outside. On two occasions, it was so hot that the only way to stop the vegetables from wilting was to pack indoors with the door closed. This meant staff had to be staggered, and the processes were slowed down.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

Demand increased during lockdown, but by March KGP’s crops for the next few months were already in the ground, so there was no way to scale-up at short notice. However, they believe that demand is likely to stay higher in the long term, so are hoping to double their boxes next year. This would allow them to hire a second full-time grower, which would make the business more resilient, in light of their
reliance on their grower. They have already erected 2 more polytunnels this year with the help of local families, using grant money. They are hoping to secure further grants for two more tunnels, which would facilitate extending the season to provide a year-long vegetable box service for their members.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on distribution**

KGP has always functioned on a mix of home delivery and collection from the farm. During lockdown, approximately 30 boxes were delivered by electric car, and the rest were collected from the farm with distancing and cleaning measures introduced. Some members were asked to deliver boxes to self-isolating members living nearby, which they feel helped build relationships in the community.

**Local networks and community support**

The nature of a CSA means that they never have surplus, as members receive the entire harvest. However, they did do some deliveries for local larders on a voluntary basis. They are also planning to streamline their system by packing the same number of boxes each week and donating surplus to local larders if customers are away. Several people approached them for advice on setting up a CSA, which they were happy to provide. Many local people came forward to volunteer their time.

KGP feel that at the time, they would not had benefited from external coordination, as they were focused on meeting the needs of their members and had limited capacity to scale up. With the growing season quietening down, they would now be interested in more coordination. They feel they could have benefited from a service that translated the changing regulations into clear advice for farmers, for example how the limits on numbers of people meeting could impact groups of volunteers. They also feel they could benefit from assistance in terms of funding, so they can scale up to sustainably meet increased demand.

**Summary**

The CSA model had some built-in features that prepared KGP well for the COVID-19 crisis. Had a core member of staff been taken ill at a busy time in the season, they had an experienced team of regular volunteers who they could have trusted to help. They were also already set up for home deliveries and had a collection system that was east to modify in line with COVID safety requirements. Though they were resilient, there was little flexibility in the model to scale up at short notice, so they did not increase membership despite increased demand. Much of the specialist knowledge required for the food production is sourced from a single grower, making the model very vulnerable had this one staff member fallen ill. They feel they would benefit from a service that clearly explained the impact of changing regulations on their farm work and would also like assistance in sourcing funding to scale up
sustainably for next year. This scaling up would employ another grower, making the workforce more resilient.
Emma’s Ewesful Acres

**Background**

Emma has been a tenant farmer at the Earth Trust as Emma’s Ewesful Acres since 2016, and also leases land from other local landowners. She grazes sheep and cattle on conservation grazing and then sells primarily through direct sales of meat boxes, which are mostly collected from the farm. She also has a stall at Wallingford Farmers’ Market. Emma uses a local butcher and surplus goes into the normal food chain. In normal times, she receives orders for 10-15 lamb boxes per month and about 50 beef boxes every 8-12 weeks.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on staff**

Emma has no regular staff but has occasional contract staff to help on the farm. During COVID-19, she had no staff at all, so Emma took on the extra work on the farm.

"I did it all myself, I had no staff... there was a lot of work to be done on my own"

The market where she usually sold her produce had to close, and she began offering no-contact home deliveries of meat boxes. Fortunately, she had a van normally used for markets which was appropriate for these deliveries.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on demand**

Demand increased to about 50 beef boxes every 6-8 weeks, and lamb sales doubled. Fortunately, Emma had planned to expand the business this year so already had more livestock available. Demand is now starting to diminish. There is not too much risk in having excess livestock for next year should demand revert to previous levels, as she is always able to sell surplus into the normal food chain, though she prefers to sell direct.

**Local networks and community support**

Emma was contacted by some local restaurants interested in local sourcing but contact dropped off. She would have happily been involved in a more coordinated response, for example with other producers from Wallingford market. However, there were not conversations about this and logistics would have required third party involvement. With funding, Emma would ideally have a butchery to have more control over portioning for sales. She feels strongly that if producers did not have a website, it was very difficult to cope, and was glad she had put the time in to set one up long before COVID-19 happened. Since the beginning of 2017 until COVID-19, she made about 10 sales through the website. She made the same number of sales through the website within the first week of lockdown.
“if you didn’t have a website then you basically didn’t succeed, in my opinion... there’s a lot of people that didn’t have great sales... people being able to order online made all the difference”

Summary

Emma lost an important point-of-sale when her regular market in Wallingford was closed. Fortunately, she was able to repurpose her van for home deliveries. She was able to respond to increased demand through sheer luck of having increased her number of livestock this year. Luck aside, it should be noted that her business model is resilient to her having excess, as the conventional supply chain always takes her surplus. A little-used website was vital to access this increased demand. Emma had no staff or volunteers and took on the extra work herself. She would be interested in a third party coordinating the response for all of the market stallholders.
Secondary Producers: Key Findings

- Specific skill-sets required limits the use of a volunteer workforce
- Production does not necessarily stop if there is no demand: need to have an outlet or storage
- Products can have specific distribution requirements
- Adapting to home deliveries can be expensive or impractical: potentially better to collaborate with someone with these expertise
Secondary Producers Case Studies
Norton and Yarrow

Background

Norton and Yarrow have been selling cheese since 2016. They are Earth Trust tenants with a herd of 150 goats. Though in the past they have sold through markets, they now work mostly with distributors but still sell to local customers such as Pangbourne Cheese Shop and Sandy Lane Farm. They have found that working with distributors is more environmentally friendly and cost-effective, as they already have refrigerated delivery infrastructure in place. Rachel Yarrow and Fraser Norton work full-time on the business, with four more staff working on cheese and three working with the goats.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff

Fortunately, none of the workforce was taken ill or needed to self-isolate. However, the cheese-making operation is run out of two shipping containers, which makes social distancing difficult. To get around this, the staffing had to be restructured. This was made possible thanks to two sets of two people living in the same household; however, it did make it necessary to make a member of staff redundant. They did, in the end, have to furlough staff, leaving just the two business owners, Rachel and Fraser. Having lost their childcare because of COVID-19, they also had their young children to care for. Fraser had to be furloughed and take sole responsibility for the children whilst Rachel single-handedly took care of the business. This was very demanding on time and energy for both of them.

“Because of the nature of the furlough scheme it wasn’t possible to divide this up between us. Fraser came off furlough as soon as possible though and then we were able to divide things between us in terms of childcare and work.”

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

Demand was down in the first two weeks of lockdown, due to restaurants – which usually account for between a third and a half of sales – closing. For the first three to four weeks, excess cheese was sold through farmers markets. This was demanding on time, especially given milking and the care required for their young children.

Sales picked up again by Easter, and May and June were record non-Christmas months for sales. This was facilitated by their customers dramatically altering their own business models to stay afloat, for example local businesses providing home delivery. These months saw their customer base shift to a much more local market. Sales through July and August have been typical for the time of year. They had planned to expand the business this year by buying in milk but were not able to due to the high workload and low staffing. They led to an estimated loss of £6,000 of sales.
Local networks and community support

Norton and Yarrow were contacted by people setting up online platforms, however the proposed fees or commission were unrealistic, and by the time these platforms were set-up, the problem was meeting demand rather than finding custom. They also tried to work with existing local delivery schemes, however their product proved difficult to transport due to packaging and refrigeration requirements. Rachel feels this problem is not insurmountable, but a solution requires time and investment they lack. If funding was available, they would like the capacity to make hard cheese, to have scope for diverting milk to a more storable product should demand diminish again at any point.

“the situation we had where demand suddenly dropped if you’re making a fresh cheese you only have quite a limited period to get it out the door. If we had the potential to make hard cheese then that would’ve given us a bit more scope to divert milk into another product which had a much longer storage time and could have given us a bit more flexibility.”

They found they were not eligible for government support because they were a farm. They applied to government grants but were unsuccessful on the grounds that they did not lose income on the previous year. However, they are in a growth stage so did lose earnings based on their business model. Norton and Yarrow would be interested in taking apprentices on, but they are not sure whether and how the government’s new scheme would apply to them. They would also be interested in taking on apprentices, in light of the government’s new ‘Kickstart’ scheme but are not sure whether this would apply to their business.

Summary

Norton and Yarrow saw a drop in demand followed by a shift in the market. This reflected businesses who buy their cheese needing time to adjust and also an increase in local demand. Social distancing in their limited space resulted in a staff member being made redundant. Even on furlough, there was no respite in the work, due to increased childcare demands and the need for daily milking. They lost £6,000 in potential sales and were not eligible for government support. The products have very specific requirements for distribution which local delivery services were not able to provide. They would be interested in finding funding to diversify their products and to find a packaging solution for distribution. They feel they could benefit from advice on securing this funding.
Natural Bread

Background

Fourteen years ago, Natural Bread started selling at farmers’ markets before scaling up to wholesale and buying a shop. This was driven by wholesale demand from local cafés, restaurants, pubs and shops who wanted to stock their products. They continue to sell at farmers’ markets every Saturday and Sunday. Natural Bread produce bread, pastries and cakes with local flour from Wessex Mill and no additives. Each day they produce around 300 loaves of bread, with five bakers employed to cover day and night shifts. Natural Bread is a member of Wake up to Woodstock, a non-profit association of local businesses, Bitten Oxford, a directory of local food businesses, and farmers’ markets organising bodies.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff

No staff were taken ill and no staff had to be furloughed. Two extra members of staff were taken on to assist with deliveries.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

Both markets continued to run. In the shop and at market, Natural Bread found they had the same number of customers, though it took slightly longer to serve due to safety precautions. Demand overall remained relatively consistent: demand lost from restaurants and cafés was compensated for by individual customers, and many shops and cafés they supply continued offering takeaway. During lockdown they even acquired four or five new cafés and restaurants to supply.

Impact of COVID-19 on supply

Natural Bread had intended to close their shop when their ten-year lease ran out in May. However, the only other local shop was a supermarket which kept running out of bread. Out of concern for their customers, they arranged to extend the lease for six months, reducing their hours and predominantly selling bread and takeaway coffee.

“With lockdown, I decided I will keep the shop open to help people in Woodstock by bread every day.”

With the majority of their produce only requiring flour, salt, yeast and water, they found their supply of ingredients was largely unaffected. Wessex Mill had no problems meeting demand for flour, though they did struggle to have capacity to package it into retail bags to meet demand, as many local shops began to stock it in response to supermarkets running out. Natural Bread, who were long-standing customers of the Mill, were able to arrange decanting the large bags themselves to meet enormous demand from their own customers.
Impact of COVID-19 on distribution

Natural Bread offered a free home delivery service seven days a week from mid-March until the end of June: “we had to do that to help people.” They covered Eynsham, Cumnor, Botley, and parts of Oxford. Their home delivery customers included roughly 20 extremely vulnerable individuals. Retrospectively, they feel they would have managed this differently, as some customers were ordering deliveries worth as little as 60p. However, they felt that once they had offered free delivery they could not go back, and they had not anticipated lockdown lasting as long as it did.

They also set up a pop-up market every Sunday during lockdown at Botley where they bake their bread. Initially it was very popular, but by August customer numbers had dropped from about 70 to 10. Natural Bread feel customers have returned to their usual shopping habits.

Local networks and community support

Natural Bread have long-standing relationships with multiple charities, and specifically donate a lot to Cancer charities. They were approached throughout lockdown to supply charities for events, and provided surplus to several charities, including Maggie’s Cancer Care charity. They also provided a recipe for a charity cookbook.

Natural Bread supplied other local businesses offering home delivery through lockdown, including Ten Mile Menu, Pedal and Post and the Loose Cannon brewery. They were not approached by any other businesses or organisations to be involved in a more coordinated response but would happily have helped if they had been able.

They also supplied bread to Wake Up to Woodstock, who were offering free deliveries to vulnerable individuals in the Woodstock area using drivers from Blenheim Palace. They felt this was very well organised and would have appreciated more help like this. Deliveries were a particular strain, requiring extra work, early starts, and using new software to coordinate routes.

Summary

Natural Bread extended the lease on their shop and opened a pop-up market to meet growing demand. They offered a free home delivery service, which required them to employ two delivery drivers. They found the home delivery service to be very expensive and very hard work, and were very appreciative of a delivery service provided by Wake Up to Woodstock. They would have benefitted from more assistance with deliveries. They have links with other local businesses and several charities.
Box Schemes: Key Findings

• There is not sufficient local supply to meet demand
• European produce was essential through the ‘hungry gap’
• Having a website was essential, and automated systems made upscaling more achievable
• More coordination between suppliers and distributors may have improved efficiency, rather than everyone diversifying
• Work processes had to be formalised and delegated for businesses to be resilient
Box Schemes and Distribution Case Studies

Cultivate

Background

Cultivate is a co-operative greengrocer focused on supplying ethical food, primarily sourcing local and organic vegetables, but also working with other local, ethical businesses to supply other produce such as honey and juice. They run a vegetable box scheme, delivering to homes within the ring-road, mostly by bike and re-using packaging to make delivery low waste and low carbon. They prioritise working with community organisations who provide food, such as Elder Stubbs community allotment, Oxford City Farm and FarmAbility. Before COVID-19, Cultivate supplied roughly 30 boxes per week, with 3 part-time staff running the operation. They also had roughly 4 staff a week helping with packing, and one or two helping at market.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff

For the first two weeks, one of the core 3 team members had to isolate but she was able to work from home. By the second week, they saw the huge surge of community response. At the peak of demand, their workforce expanded to roughly 30 people working part-time mostly on a voluntary basis. By the end of August, Cultivate was running on 10-12 part-time staff, including 5 on a voluntary basis.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

There was more demand than Cultivate were able to supply. They decided to cap the number of boxes at 220 to continue to provide a good service and to make the response sustainable. It was an incredibly busy time and they were working flat-out:

“It was relentless. It wasn’t just for a few weeks; it was for a number of months.”

Wytham Farm generously lent barn space for free, which enabled them to safely pack boxes with social distancing. They have now been asked to vacate and have returned to their offices in South Hinksey where they are working between three portacabins.

Customers were asked to self-identify as priority need, or whether they were able to give up their boxes and go out to the shops.

“People were volunteering to give up their place... it was amazing... it was a massive community response.”

Cultivate guaranteed a box to anyone vulnerable and in need within the week.
“We said throughout that if anyone was in urgent need, we’d give them a box whatever... Everyone who needed a box at home got a box.”

Their ordering system had to be massively upscaled. This was organised by one of the original core team members using spreadsheets. Orders did not reduce as quickly as expected and were still at 150 boxes by the end of August. August is usually a quiet month, with people away on holiday and harvesting their own produce from allotments. Cultivate think some people have also left Oxford since lockdown eased and feel that the reduced numbers are not necessarily reflective of customers returning to supermarkets.

Impacts of COVID-19 on supply
Cultivate had great difficulty sourcing locally to meet demand. Many of their usual suppliers had their own box schemes and, as they were experiencing increased demand themselves, had no produce remaining for Cultivate. Cultivate were obliged to buy wholesale to meet demand, and in the first couple of weeks were not able to source organic or local, using a conventional wholesaler. By the third week of lockdown, their usual organic wholesaler, Choice Organics, was able to meet roughly 60% of the order, who had themselves been struggling to meet increased demand until then. Most produce was coming from the EU, as is normal at that time of year during the ‘hungry gap’. Despite putting out adverts for new suppliers, very few came forward. Cultivate suspect they are already in contact with the majority, and that there simply are not many more producers in the area.

Impacts of COVID-19 on distribution
Cultivate’s usual delivery company could not offer extra delivery slots and no one else in Oxford was offering eco-delivery. Fortunately, volunteers were able to do home deliveries in their own cars, and in time Cultivate were able to source bicycle trailers from the Library of Things and others to return to a low carbon delivery system. They had never had to manage their own delivery operation before but were able to use online software to plan routes.

Local networks and community support
Cultivate expected to lose more volunteers than they did more quickly following the easing of lockdown and the furlough scheme. There was a good relationship amongst volunteers, who seemed to enjoy the work and were hugely appreciated by Cultivate. They have begun to pay some of those volunteering with them and will continue to do so provided the demand does not diminish. Despite high demand, costs have also increased, so Cultivate must manage this to remain viable.
Before COVID-19, Cultivate regularly supplied local business Waste2Taste with surplus. However, they closed their usual operation during lockdown and Cultivate instead supplied surplus to Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA). They plan to share the surplus between both organisations when Waste2Taste resume their normal business. They also lent OMA their van at reduced rates. Cultivate had spoken to the local council about funding for bikes and trailers but this has so far been unsuccessful.

Cultivate feel they are already well connected with the local food network but would be open to having some support with coordination between businesses to minimise replication and help everyone play to their own strengths. In practical terms this would have been most effective over the phone, as they feel making time for Zoom meetings would have been too demanding on time. They are, regardless of COVID-19, having to refuse requests from large customers such as Oxford colleges as they cannot find sufficient supply of produce that meets their requirements in terms of locality and means of production.

Summary

Cultivate expanded their box delivery scheme nearly tenfold curing the COVID-19 crisis. They had a large group of regular volunteers, and over time were in a position to pay some of them. They were loaned barn space for free. They struggled to find local supply of vegetables, as many of their producers had their own box schemes and there seemed to be few other producers in the local area. They could not use their usual distributor for their extra deliveries, but were able to source volunteers, bikes and trailers to create their own low-carbon delivery system at no cost. They feel they might have benefitted from a third party negotiating between businesses.
Ten Mile Menu

Background

Ten Mile Menu (TMM) is a vegetable box scheme run in partnership with Sandy Lane Farm, an organic family farm 10 miles from Oxford. TMM also work with a small number of other local suppliers to provide other staples such as bread and eggs. Their model allows them to order from the producers only what is ordered by customers, with the exception of eggs, a few of which are carried over to the following week. This keeps waste for the vegetable boxes very low, which minimises costs.

Before COVID-19, TMM were delivering around 280 boxes per week. They employ one or two drivers, and three to four people work on the boxes a few days a week. However, no one was actually on payroll, with drivers employed on a freelance basis and other workers being paid through the farm.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff

The businesses were very dependent on Steve at TMM and George at Sandy Lane Farm, with little provision to delegate tasks and few systems down on paper. They were both very concerned at the start of lockdown that if one was taken ill, the other would not be able to fulfil the others function, both due to the long hours they both worked and also simply not knowing how.

TMM had to take on more staff and now has four people on payroll, including a general manager who works across both businesses and someone working to improve processes and automation.

On the busiest days, there were 13 to 14 people packing boxes, or 18 including people harvesting. Some were volunteers, though for most of the time these were mostly paid workers. This required four times the usual packing space to allow for workers to be safely distanced. Despite taking necessary precautions, the realities of work on a farm did leave George and Steve concerned about their employees safety.

They advertised for back-up drivers in case their regular drivers were taken ill and received over 100 applications in 24 hours. Though farm work often attracts a lot of volunteers, Steve expressed concern that a volunteer has no obligation to turn up to work or stay long-term. He indicated that this is not an issue in normal times but, given the extremity of the situation, they needed predictability.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

Just before lockdown was announced, TMM were inundated with orders. The initial response relied on Steve shutting down the website, despite being away from work at a funeral. The workload was large, due to the process largely having to be handled manually. The normal online shop was replaced with a list of what was available, from which customers emailed their orders, and Steve had to personally go through the website to place every order.
Steve described feeling **an enormous sense of responsibility** to not let down existing customers, and to support vulnerable customers, and to feed people.

“I felt very overwhelmed at that point... you feel such a weight of responsibility.” He was receiving well over 100 emails a day: “regardless of what they actually said, they were effectively saying ‘help me’.”

Over 1,000 customers that set up a new account with TMM were **never able to receive a box**.

They determined that their capacity was 500 boxes per week, whilst maintaining COVID-secure work conditions. In reality, at the peak they were delivering closer to 530 boxes each week, to ensure everyone that needed a box would get one. They feel they could have arrange to have done up to triple that number of boxes if they rented vans and hired more staff, but were wary of capitalising on the situation, did not want to dilute their quality of service, and wanted to find a sustainable level of supply.

TMM asked customers to group themselves based on whether they were new customers, whether they were vulnerable or self-isolating, and whether they were key-workers. This then determined who was prioritised to receive a box. Ten Mile Meu made sure to deliver boxes to “anyone that was vulnerable in any way”.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on supply**

To deal with the initial demand, TMM reduced their range to just two box options, with no option of swapping out items. For the majority of lockdown, the customers were able to select from three vegetable boxes, two types of bread, two fruit options and eggs.

For most of the year, 85-100% of vegetables in the boxes are grown at Sandy Lane. COVID-19 unfortunately coincided with the ‘hungry gap’: a period of a few weeks when TMM are obliged to source up to 50% of their vegetables from Europe even in normal times. The spike in demand also meant that the supply from Sandy Lane Farm did not stretch as far as normal, which increased their reliance on imports.

There were stresses on the supply chain from Southern Europe, such as the impact of COVID-19 on workers and unseasonal storms in Spain, which increased the price pressure on TMM and Sandy Lane Farm. Unseasonal hot weather also meant that produce did not always arrive in the expected condition, and there was no way to replace it. There were also issues buying by weight produce sold per unit, for example individual heads of broccoli weighing nearly twice what was expected, leaving some boxes without and some filled to more than their value.
The scale and complexity of buying so much produce in made it difficult for the businesses to know whether they were making or losing money. To share the risk, Sandy Lane Farm intentionally over-ordered, and any surplus went into boxes and was paid for by TMM. By July Sandy Lane Farm were growing nearly 100% of the vegetables for the boxes, and only in October did they begin supplementing boxes with other UK produce, putting some of their own produce aside for winter storage.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on distribution**

Fortunately, TMM had bought a van in January which had essentially sat empty most of the time. They had also signed up to a local bicycle delivery scheme shortly before COVID-19. In combination, this allowed them to add 300 boxes to their delivery capacity very quickly, despite car dealerships being closed down. They had already planned on buying an electric van, which was not possible during lockdown, but which was added to their fleet at the end of August.

TMM feel that:

>“the technology we use is quite a bit beyond what other schemes currently use.”

They use automated processes to plan box contents and manage margins, picking lists and packing logistics. They also rely on software to process orders, plan deliveries, communicate delivery slots, track drivers, and to communicate with customers, who place orders online. Some software has been specifically developed by the business, and some bought-in. This allows them to deal with complexity and therefore offer more choice to customers. They feel that this enabled them to scale up the volume of customers and communication much more easily and efficiently than other schemes.

They found it difficult to explain to customers that increased orders did not translate to increased profits. However, TMM used frequent, frank blog posts to keep customers up-to-date, and were transparent about any issues with ordering. They found this to be an effective approach, which the customers trusted and appreciated.

>“After the initial panic was over, we stopped getting 100 emails a day saying, ‘help me’ and we started getting 30 emails a day saying, ‘thank you so much for what you’re doing’.”

**Local network and community response**

TMM feel it would have been opportunistic to increase scale more than they did and says the current farm capacity would not have allowed more boxes. They did have the capacity to deliver more but felt that bringing in more products would undermine their values of creating links with local farmers and promoting local produce. Other local producers who had lost routes to market did approach them to
make use of their delivery infrastructure. Though they would have been interested in helping, TMM
did not have the time to arrange the logistics, already felt overwhelmed, and did not feel that the
specialty products being offered were a priority given these constraints.

TMM have gained new customers that would have been expensive to acquire through advertising,
which has pushed the small business to a point where they can employ permanent members of staff
and formalise processes to allow for delegation. They feel they have been pushed to profitability after
8 years of working on “good principles and margins [that] are therefore lower”. This has given them a
platform to start a meat box scheme based on similar principles of locality and quality.

Summary
TMM relied heavily on the knowledge and experience of Steve and George, with few processes on
paper and limited capacity to delegate their roles. This meant the businesses were highly vulnerable
to these two individuals falling ill. However, they have since formalised and streamlined processes,
and hired permanent members of staff. TMM had the delivery infrastructure to scale-up, but
vegetables through the hungry gap were largely sourced (as always at this time of year) from Spain
and Italy, making the supply dependent on these trading routes. There was a large emotional burden.
TMM mostly relied on paid staff rather than volunteers due to concerns about reliability and long-
term commitment. They felt good communication with customers maintained trust when there were
supply issues, and that technology was key to scaling quickly and efficiently. They would have need
logistical support to be part of a more coordinated response.
Riverford Oxford

Background
Jake owns the Oxford franchise of the Riverford vegetable box scheme. He orders produce from Riverford farms based on local customers’ orders. Riverford is phasing out the franchise system now it is employee-owned, as the two models are not very compatible. Riverford Oxford normally deliver 850 boxes per week, with three vans delivering daily. They work with several local chefs and cafés, for example to host pop-up lunches. They have also been working with a local bicycle delivery system for the last year, who deliver about 100 of their boxes per week. Jake likes the concept and hopes to move towards this system but finds it slower, slightly more expensive, and does not want to put his drivers out of work.

Impacts of COVID-19 on staff
Jake was ill for several weeks with suspected COVID-19 for about four weeks. He works from a home office so social distancing was not an issue. No other staff members were impacted, and work in their warehouse continued as usual, with distancing measures. The packhouses had to be changed nationally to allow for social distancing, but overall, everyone stayed in employment.

Locally, they had a queue of willing helpers offering to help with deliveries, particularly from the hospitality and events industry who had been laid off. Riverford Oxford do not use volunteers, and instead took on two employees – one on a temporary basis who has returned to his old job, and a second who still works for them. Nationally, the main farms and pack houses were not able to employ many extra helpers due to the limitations of space.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand
When lockdown was announced, they were inundated with orders and had to close the website, refusing orders from any new customers. They did allow dormant customers with accounts to make orders. They also made allowances for vulnerable people requesting help, which contributed a couple of dozen boxes. Despite accepting no new customers, their orders increased to 1200 boxes per week. In normal times, it costs about £100 to acquire a new customer. Nationwide, orders were up by 65-70%. Riverford Oxford’s customers dropped off slightly, settling at between 950 and 1000 per week in September. Jake thinks that had they accepted new customers who were unfamiliar with the system, they may have lost the majority by now.

Impacts of COVID-19 on supply
They were obliged to reduce the range of products on their website from about 250 extras to 10, reverting to a simpler pre-set vegetable box system where previously they had been more akin to an
online supermarket where customers could pick and choose. The majority of customers were very happy with the service, with a small minority who were disappointed to lose their choice. They stopped ordering dry goods, but these suppliers had demand elsewhere and so were not impacted. They are now beginning to increase their range of products again.

Riverford is a co-operative, with producers in long-term sustainable contracts. Riverford is therefore committed to buy whatever their farmers’ produce for them, provided it meets their standards. The farmers were therefore protected. Lockdown started during the hungry gap, so Riverford was mostly sourcing from their producers in Italy and Spain and their own farm in France. This produce mostly comes through smaller ports and was impacted very little.

Local networks and community support

They do not feel that local production would work in their model and could increase their carbon emissions by losing efficiencies of scale and centralisation. There was little new coordination with other local organisations, although on occasion they lent their vans for Oxford Mutual Aid and had given some donations to local charity The Porch.

Jake feels that Riverford could be a good model in a socially distanced world, but how it works should be carefully considered, for example decarbonising deliveries. Electric vehicles are already used on deliveries in London and could be scaled up to other areas.

Summary

Riverford had existing relationships with farms in Spain and Italy, from whom they were able to source vegetables through the hungry gap. The ports were, in this case, unaffected. Long-term contracts with all their farmers gave a level of protection to producers, even if they struggled in this period. Scaling up their deliveries relied on extra help: they were able to employ two new members of staff, one of whom they have kept on. They feel that more localised food production would reduce the efficiency and environmental sustainability of their enterprise.
Retail:
Key Findings

- Having extra space was crucial
- Having volunteers was crucial
- Responses were not particularly sustainable: e.g. highly season and weather dependent or too costly
- Local producers were very grateful for a continued outlet
- Collaboration amongst producers and/or amongst markets could improve resilience
Retail Case Studies
The Market Garden and Wholesome Earth Café

Background
The Market Garden is a shop selling local produce in Eynsham. They also own Wholesome Earth café which serves a vegetarian and vegan menu and encourages plant-based eating. The primary supplier to both businesses is their market garden next door. The land for the garden had been gifted at low cost to a family member, and the business owners used to sell their vegetables on a market stall before expanding to the shop and café businesses. Where ingredients cannot be sourced from their own garden, they source organic, local and British. They do not purchase anything that is air-freighted. Before COVID-19, the café served about 40 tables per day and under the government’s Eat out to Help Out scheme have been serving up to 52 tables. Customers are largely elderly people, ‘eco-minded’ families, and people curious about trying plant-based diets.

Impacts of COVID-19 on supply
The market garden is usually mostly managed by volunteers from FarmAbility, which had to disband over lockdown. Therefore, there has been no food growing this year at all, meaning they were not able to supply the café or the shop with their own fresh produce. This has not had much of an impact on income due to the high costs of growing vegetables on a small-scale.

At first they tried to keep the shop open with social distancing, but after the announcement of lockdown, they went online and started a vegetable box scheme. They fortunately already had a website, having previously attempted to run a vegetable box scheme in the past which they stopped due to the high costs of home delivery.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand and distribution
Their website was in a bad state and on a slow server. Within a couple of days of lockdown, the website crashed and the phone was ringing constantly. The website was moved to a faster server and was key to their continuing trade. They closed the café, and used this as warehouse space to pack boxes, using the same suppliers as they had for the café and shop. Initially, they offered bespoke orders but quickly moved to pre-set boxes. They limited the scheme to a 5-mile radius and a minimum £20 order but were still overwhelmed by demand. In response, they set up a triage system, asking a list of questions to identify and prioritise the most vulnerable customers. They were anxious about losing their regular customers, some of whom were upset not to be prioritised. For the most part, customers were very supportive.
The shop is now open, with 3-4 boxes still delivered daily. The customer base has largely recovered. They attempted to run both businesses simultaneously but it was difficult to manage stock. Looking forward, they would only set up another box scheme in exceptional circumstances. Financially, they are relatively unscathed. This would not have been the case were they only a hospitality business. They had a massive drop in turnover but **no staffing costs**.

*Local networks and community response*

They had a large response to a call for volunteers on social media. They limited the number of people packing to 5 and tried to find volunteers from less ‘active’ households, such as those where all members were furloughed or elderly. They found the home delivery model to be very expensive and, **without volunteers, uneconomic and not possible**. They feel they could have benefitted from a more joined-up response for delivery, provided it was organised by a third party. They would like a trade union to exist for Zero-waste shops.

*Summary*

Though the garden and café had to close, The Market Garden was able to adapt to new circumstances well. This relied heavily on already having a website, being able to repurpose the café space, and having a large volunteer response. Setting up home deliveries was demanding on time and money and relied heavily on volunteers. They feel they would have benefitted from more support and coordination in this.
East Oxford Farmers’ Market

Background
East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market (EOFCM) is a Community Benefit Society run by a committee and volunteers. The market uses a school building and grounds and hosts a number of primary and secondary producers, prioritising those from within a 30-mile radius of Oxford, producing seasonal and organic food.

Impacts of COVID-19 on the market
A number of other local markets were obliged to close during lockdown. The Committee of EOFCM were nervous for a while that they would have to close, and even after the government confirmed markets could continue, there were anxieties about complying with regulations. Their usual site includes an outdoor space, which facilitated them moving the entire market outdoors in order to continue trading. Customers and suppliers were happy with this change and felt safe being outside. This did require that they borrowed more gazebos which are vulnerable to the high winds that their location can experience. They were fortunate throughout lockdown to have good weather – in different circumstances the adjustment may not have been so easy.

Impacts of COVID-19 on suppliers
In April the market was down to 12 stalls from around 21, but the number increased again through June and July. This reduction was due to stallholders having to self-isolate or feeling it was safer for themselves and their household if they did not come. The dairy stall would have continued but dry weather had reduced their grass growth, which had, in turn, reduced their milk production. The vegetable, meat and bread stalls all continued to trade. Four cake stalls reduced to one, and most of the cosmetic stalls ceased trading.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand
Custom was consistent throughout, down by about one third from normal levels to about 300 customers per week. They retained around half of their usual customers, and the rest were made up by new customers, some from the other markets that had closed. The customers were generally very supportive and pleased the market was able to continue.

Local networks and community support
The market had a small number of very regular volunteers sourced from the committee and their acquaintances, recruited by a volunteer co-ordinator. The school has given the market permission to be indoors since 20th June but moving back indoors will require a large number of volunteers and a lot of coordination to assess risk and safely manage customers. The original response was fuelled by
a “defiant energy” to stay open at the start of the pandemic, which they worry might not be there again for another large adjustment.

“We’re going to have to approach going back inside with a different attitude. There’s no energy to go back inside – it’s just going to be work.”

They might be interested in coordinating with other markets to share supply chains, but there is understandably a level of protectiveness to each market. A member of the committee has expressed that greater coordination might be interesting to explore more, for example working with collectives of producers, provided it was in line with their manifesto insofar as the stallholder was directly involved with producing the product for sale.

Summary

The market was able to move fully outside on the same premises, though the success of this was highly weather-dependent. Many other local markets had to close. The number of stalls reduced, with primary producers making up the core of those remaining. Volunteers were key for making the new system a success, but there are concerns about having the same energy to coordinate the move back indoors.
Community Food Services: Key findings

- Demand is not diminishing
- There is a need for more fresh fruit and vegetables
- Redistribution of surplus food is resilient so long as there is waste in the system
- A large voluntary workforce was (and is) key
- On-going, stable revenue is vital
- Relationships across the network of community food services were key for logistics
Community Food Services Case Studies

SOFEA

Background

SOFEA was set up as an education charity in 2013 focusing on young people who needed a more therapeutic approach to education. This involves skills development and vocational training. SOFEA now runs an operation redistributing food from FareShare which connects to a national network of supermarkets and wholesalers who donate surplus, which otherwise would be disposed of. The stock is made up of non-perishable goods as well as fresh fruit and vegetables.

Their stock is then distributed by SOFEA to:

- ‘Community Food Members’ – those with their own cooking facilities such as homeless shelters, community cafés and care homes – at low prices, who then cook the food for their communities.
- community larders, where members pay a fee to select a set number of food items, typically valued at five-times the cost of the fee.

The operation is mostly organised at a warehouse staffed by young people who have come through SOFEA’s education and training programme. Prior to COVID-19 they had about 45 staff members.

Impacts of COVID-19 on demand

SOFEA also changed the larder system to a free food box delivery scheme on the 23rd March, which ended on the 31st August. Demand over this period increased dramatically: last year 700 tonnes were distributed in the entire year; in just May and June alone, 500 tonnes were distributed. Having increased from 7 distribution points to 71 across the Thames Valley and South Midlands, SOFEA is about to increase its warehouse capacity three-fold. 109,000 boxes of ambient food and 109,000 bags of fresh fruit and vegetables had been provided by the end of August.

Impacts of COVID-19 on supply

During COVID-19, SOFEA also received non-perishable food stock from DEFRA, which had been divided centrally between FareShare and the Trussell Trust, who then distribute it through local partners and community organisations. They have received around 45 pallets per week from DEFRA, which amounts to between a third and a half of all stock. SOFEA received around £700,000 of funding, including a large grant from the National Lottery and many smaller donations from local groups and individuals such as £3,000 from the Didcot Rotary Club.
**Impacts of COVID-19 on distribution**

Foodbanks became distribution points for boxes, as did churches and gazebos in car parks. The City Council volunteered their own drivers and vans for distribution. The box scheme would have been impossible without their team of over 200 volunteers giving almost 7,700 hours of their time. SOFEA has borrowed additional warehouse space to facilitate the scaled-up operation.

**Summary**

SOFEA’s model is based upon distribution of surplus food and is sustained through subscription fees paid by Community Food Member organisations as well as private individuals at the community larders. During COVID-19 they upcaled provision and removed subscription fees, which have now been reinstated. Their response relied on borrowing warehouse space, loaned vans from the Council, the increased provision of surplus through DEFRA, securing large grants and a large number of volunteers. It was possible to work with foodbanks and community fridges to repurpose the venues as collection points for boxes. The infrastructure facilitated an efficient, large-scale response to the crisis.
Oxford Mutual Aid

Background

Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA) was set up in early March 2020 in response to the impacts of COVID-19 by a small group of friends already involved in community organising and local activism. They could see deprivation, gaps in provision and isolated people such as migrant communities that were anxious about going to the state for help.

They were not previously involved with a community food network, but very early on reached out to other organisations to determine how they could support and compliment one another’s functions. This included non-food organisations such as colleges. They believe this facilitated their being able to scale up to the organisation they are now. Lots of local organisations and individuals wanted to help but did not know how, and OMA were able to provide the logistics to enable their collaboration.

OMA had no infrastructure to begin. They had an online form and phone line set up very quickly and received hundreds of applications from volunteers. Fortunately, some volunteers had specific relevant experience such as logistics, finance or legal. A hall that was lent to them for free, but they recently had to leave and begin paying rent on a new space.

Demand

OMA are made up of a food parcel delivery scheme, delivering around 120 parcels per week, and the Kitchen Collective who cook and deliver 750 meals per week. This involves organising ingredients, chefs, drivers, packaging, allergen labels and more, which is coordinated through dedicated groups of volunteers on online platforms. They call all individuals in need of support to check in and determine what they need, to tailor their deliveries as much as possible. They supply necessities other than food, such as toiletries and cleaning products. ‘Sunday Baby’ is a weekly programme that provides baby food and other useful items for new parents. They also provide more complicated casework, such as re-homing survivors of domestic abuse and helping homeless people. They assist other charitable organisations that may need food, and have noticed a particular scarcity of fresh, cooked food for vulnerable groups, who largely receive donations of heavily processed food of low nutritional value. They also make masks.

People can receive support from OMA through contacting them directly or through referrals from the council, GPs and other charities such as Age UK. Some communities were struggling to access, for example, Halal emergency food provision through official routes. Collaboration with local businesses allowed them to work with these communities to link them with the food they needed.
**Sourcing**

Initially, most of the food was sourced from the wholesaler Bookers. Since then, they have been able to access free surplus food from FareShare and food banks. They also still buy items, particularly non-food items, that need to be included in their parcels. They also receive donations of fresh produce from Oxford City Farm, Abundance Oxford, Cultivate and Neighbourly. For the longer term and to ensure the nutritional diversity of the food parcels, OMA are hoping to partner with local food growers that could supply a predictable and diverse supply of fresh fruit and vegetables in a large enough volume. Even from local suppliers, surplus, whilst vital, is unpredictable and rarely fresh.

**Funding**

OMA are currently receiving around £1,200 per month in regular pledged donations. They are hoping to increase this to £2,000 per month, which would cover all costs. This would make their funding more sustainable and one-off donations would be able to be used for, for example, expanding capacity. They have also received larger, one-off donations, for example from some of the Oxford colleges. They have not received any council funding or donations from other charities, despite applying. They also rely heavily on volunteers, and so have been streamlining processes to reduce this requirement. OMA feel that working on the basis of solidarity rather than charity – with many volunteers also receiving support – builds longer term sustainability into the model.

**Resilience**

The need is increasingly massively now government support is being removed, and OMA were already seeing an increase in numbers in mid-August. OMA are interested in providing support to existing larders to create a more resilient, cooperative space. The challenge now is to scale sustainably and to continue to formalise systems that had to be deployed rapidly during the emergency response.
Sustainable Food Places’ Crisis Response
Prior to COVID-19, Good Food Oxford (GFO) had a relatively balanced focus on six key issues within the Sustainable Food Places (SFP) Programme: strategic approaches to good food; building public awareness; tackling food poverty; creating a diverse and sustainable food economy; transforming catering procurement and the local supply chain; and tackling the nature and climate emergency through food and farming. They were also working on two additional projects, the Food Power project focusing on food poverty, and increasing vegetable consumption through the Veg Cities programme.

At this stage, there were varied levels of engagement from GFO network members, with some key players attending network meetings and approaching GFO with ideas. There were some benefits to the connectivity of the network and there was sharing and collaboration between network members, but it is hard to say the extent to which GFO facilitated those relationships.

Defining the role of GFO

In the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, the focus came to be around food access, triggered by the food access map that GFO had already constructed, which listed all food banks, larders, and community food outlets. GFO recognised the value of this for the crisis response and began promoting, updating, and expanding the map across the whole of Oxfordshire. Very early, GFO began working with those community food services (CFSs) and building connectivity through multiple Zoom meetings. GFO also made key strategic introductions, for example between SOFEA and several CFSs that SOFEA were able to supply with surplus food. GFO feel that already having this map tool in place was an excellent springboard for strengthening the network in this area.
During the COVID-19 response, some network members did reach out to GFO more. The markets in particular looked to GFO for assistance, who were able to link the markets with Public Health and Environmental Health Officers so that they could access direct advice on staying open safely. GFO also intervened in some negotiations around planning, for example by bringing Public Health representatives to meetings to clarify means of safely keeping markets open.

Generally, business increased for local producers and suppliers and they were not losing work. GFO therefore prioritised supporting the emergency food response. GFO did conduct some analysis of different sales platforms for local producers, and recommended the Open Food Network to them, but they did not provide much more in terms of facilitation or coordination. They feel their response in this area could have been more robust. There was a sense that local businesses are quite entrepreneurial: “they are can-do and get on with things,” which arguably limited the extent to which GFO were able or needed to assist them. There is also an element of competition between businesses as they are still essentially profit-making, even if they are community-minded. However, GFO also suggest that had the network been stronger in the first place, individual businesses may more naturally have come together in a coordinated response.

**Working with the Council**

GFO feel that a stronger relationship with the Councils has been one of the most positive outcomes of their COVID-19 response.

> “The councils didn’t see food as a thing before, they never discussed food. And suddenly it became a thing and they’ve realised that actually this is really fundamental.”

Only from March 2020 did GFO expand to a county-wide remit, having previously been dealing primarily with the City Council. Through developing the food map and hosting fora, GFO were able to establish themselves as the coordinator of the county’s community food response, prompting the Council to request that they carry out a piece of research on the community food response. The Council provided the help of two people to develop the research and the food map. GFO surveyed Oxfordshire’s CFSs about what services they were providing, how demand had changed, and what sort of support and funding they needed. GFO were then able to use this to propose ways for the Councils to support the food response. For example, the CFSs expressed a need for their workforce to have food poverty training, and for there to be more training in cookery skills locally. The Councils have subsequently funded GFO to provide these services.
Early on in the response, GFO hosted a food bank forum to bring all CFSs on the food map together, but it became apparent that more localised coordination would be more practical. Out of this, the Councils have supported GFO to set up Community Food Networks in each of Oxfordshire’s districts, in which the local CFSs meet regularly to discuss how to support one another. The Councils continue to provide GFO support 2 days a week whilst the CFNs are in their early stages. From this engagement at a district level, GFO has found greater interest in the county-wide steering group they are setting up for delivering their SFP programme.

“When I talk to people now they know what we’re talking about because they’ve been involved in a community food network.”

GFO feels that this high level of engagement and understanding across the county from a range of stakeholders has put them in a good position to broaden the agenda beyond the community food response. Community food access has given them an avenue through which to bring local producers and retailers on board and work on a more holistic approach.

This has also been a stepping-stone for more senior engagement across the county. For the first time food has been included in the Climate Action Plan that will be taken to the Cabinet in October, and having a county-wide Food Strategy no longer feels unrealistic.

**Looking forward**

There is interest from within the CFNs to transition from an emergency food response to a more sustainable food response, with interest in procuring more fresh, local food. The focus within the City remains largely on tackling food poverty as the levels of need remain significant. In the Districts, whilst the need to provide emergency food remains, the scale of need is less and there is perhaps more opportunity to initiate an integrated local food response particularly as the rural nature of some of the Districts includes a wider range of producers. Oxford Mutual Aid are a notable exception in the City and are actively trying to source a regular supply of fresh fruit and vegetable locally. From the district communities, Cherwell Larder are already in contact with local farms to supply excess food, and others have started their own growing projects or expressed a will to connect with local farmers if they had sufficient donations available to. Not all the CFSs are thinking long-term or strategically, but the lead council members in each CFN “get the idea of a more integrated food system.”

GFO’s impression of the overall response was that local communities did a good job of keeping markets open, increasing box deliveries and scaling up production.
“There was a tremendous response, it felt that it came at huge personal cost to a lot of people but this crisis came out of nowhere… it was actually quite inspiring to see what people could do.”

GFO feels people responded very quickly, but that people’s ability to adapt was to some extent dependent on the position they were in to start with. Their impression is that the response was quite individualised, with a focus on how to maximise service without thinking more broadly about how it could be done more efficiently. There was a sense that it was not initially obvious what GFO’s role was, but that:

“for a second time I think we would be well positioned to bring that coordination role together.”

GFO are interested in the idea of having a central processing hub from where to manage distribution for several local suppliers but feel this is a long way off. They are interested in identifying an interim or facilitating role they could play in this. The success of the CFNs highlight the importance of having a tangible offering to start with, so GFO are considering building another map tool of all local producers and suppliers. They feel this could put them in a better position to increase connectivity and offer a tangible service.

GFO’s role as a facilitator put them in a different position to other food partnerships at the start of the crisis. Those with an operational presence were essentially able to physically coordinate the entire food response - something more akin to the role SOFEA played in Oxford. GFO feel that perhaps if they were more embedded as the facilitator in the network with strong enough links, they would be more integral if another crisis were to hit.
Glasgow’s Response

- Key strategic allegiances with Glasgow University and Community Transport Glasgow provided vital distribution infrastructure
- Expanding an existing community food map early on enabled Food For Good Glasgow to identify where their support was most needed
- A local social enterprise acted as a single point of contact for multiple local fresh food suppliers – this made local, organic vegetables a convenient and cost-effective option for emergency food provision
- An already existing surplus food Whatsapp group was easily expanded to help coordinate redistribution across the city
- Glasgow City Council were already working with the local Community Food Network on a Food Plan, which will now incorporate lessons learnt from the COVID-19 emergency food response
- The City Council are also due to launch a Food Growing Strategy

Background

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, Food For Good (FFG) Glasgow was set up to coordinate and assist the city’s emergency food response. FFG is a coalition of Glasgow Community Food Network (GCFN), Glasgow Food Policy Partnership (GFPP), Slow Food Glasgow (SFG), Strath Foodsharing, and other partners from the third sector. They had vital support from Glasgow University and Community Transport Glasgow (CTG). They have focused on providing organisations most in need with transport capacity and any donations they were able to source, setting up an informal coalition to facilitate bulk buying of fruit and vegetables for community food services. CTG supplied three vehicles, and the University of Glasgow were able to provide packing and storage space, a fleet of six delivery vans and a team of furloughed staff to assist with packing and distribution.

FFG was initially funded by a crowdfunder and donations, but later managed to secure considerable funding from the Scottish government. This later funding allowed FFG to continue their work and to hire staff, which enabled it to grow to be its own collaborative partnership. FGG emphasise the scale and enthusiasm of the community’s response, crediting Glasgow with being an incredibly friendly city. There were already multiple food banks in Glasgow: officially approximately 40, but many more informally, for example in churches. Some of these had to close in response to COVID-19, due to volunteers self-isolating or a lack of food donations. This varied across different parts of the city. Many new projects were set up to assist the emergency food response, some sourcing government grants and others funded through social media campaigns.
Defining the role of FFG

Initially, it was very difficult to identify what was happening and so it was difficult to know where FFG would sit. This also meant that there was some duplication of efforts early on, but FFG feel this would not be an issue again. An existing food provision database – the Urban Roots Food Map – was rapidly updated by FFG to map the emergency food response, which identified approximately 200 separate organisations providing an emergency food service. 20 were identified as being most in need of support, due to a lack of consistent supply of fresh healthy nutritious food and or needing extra capacity for transport.

Supply and sourcing

At the beginning, FFG identified considerable surpluses that could be redistributed, for example from the university and schools. The local business Locavore was also key for supply. A social enterprise working to build a more sustainable local food system, Locavore had saved an emergency food fund and were able to hand £5,000 to FFG, they provided surplus food to FFG, and they acted as a single point of contact to access multiple local producers, which made accessing fresh, local food feasible and more efficient. FFG were also able to support some urban market gardeners when produce was available.

FareShare had acquired funding to provide fresh as well as non-perishable food. This was available for free on the condition it was collected from the warehouses, a service which FFG provided to projects which lacked the vehicles and staff. There were some concerns about the consistency of quality and supply, and FFG wanted to base their model on supporting local suppliers. After carrying out a price comparison, FFG identified that local, organic vegetables purchased from Locavore – focusing on staples such as potatoes, carrots and onions – were comparable in price to the cheapest they could purchase wholesale. Organic dry goods, such as lentils, pasta and rice, however, were considerably more expensive than a conventional alternative. They chose to source non-organic dry goods, but purchased them through the Glasgow-based, worker co-operative wholesaler, Greencity Wholefoods.

Coordination between the vast number of Community Food Organisations was vital. A Whatsapp group, originally set up by the Interfaith Food Justice Network, was – and continues to be – used to redistribute any surpluses in the city, ensuring that:

“If there is surplus food in the city, it will get to someone that needs it.”
**Going Forward**

All of this work is undertaken in a different policy landscape to Oxford, with the Land Reform Act improving access to land for food production and the Community Empowerment Act requiring all City Councils to produce Food Growing Strategies. GFPP were already working on the Glasgow City Food Plan with colleagues from the Glasgow City Council, NHSGGC, Glasgow HSCP and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health. This Plan covers a number of issues from food procurement for public bodies to creating community food growing spaces. GFPP, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, contacted all 78 people and organisations from 6 Working Groups involved and redrafted the Plan based on their experiences and recommendations. There has been particular attention paid to the ‘Food Economy’ strand of the Plan due to COVID-19, which concerns local hospitality businesses as well as opportunities for food growing in the city. The Food Poverty theme of the plan has also been revised based on findings of increased food bank use and insecurity because of the pandemic. The draft plan was also sent to approximately 40 uninvolved parties, such as key figures from Public Health and other experts to receive broader feedback. The draft plan is going out for public consultation the end of September and will be launched in Spring of 2021.

By the end of August FFG was running out of funding and mostly functioning on a staff of community response officers who liaise with communities to identify their needs and report back. They are also working on research on the COVID response and how organisations are transitioning to a ‘just’ recovery. In a survey of community food providers carried out by FFG, they found 100% of respondents found FFG’s service invaluable, and that without them they had to reduce the volume and consistency of their offering. This is particularly concerning given that FareShare’s free fresh food offering to non-members will also end at the end of September. FFG are continuing to look into improving access to fresh local food, sustainable transport and shorter supply chains.
Set up in 2003 to build a more coordinated food network, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP) are now hoping to become the UK’s first Gold SFP. They act as a central meeting point for local businesses, charities, council and community gardens, and help the community to launch a variety of projects. They also run several of their own projects, such as community gardens and a community kitchen. They run several courses out of these, including cookery courses designed for individuals with limited access to equipment and ingredients, some of which are provided at a discounted price. They have just acquired some land where they have developed a well-being garden.

BHFP also plays an important facilitation role in the Emergency Food Network, the Surplus Food Network and a Green Wellbeing Alliance of Community Gardens, with a member of staff in each group to coordinate regular meetings, agendas and actions. BHFP have connections with local producers through other network members, such as community supermarkets. They have developed a list of local suppliers for people to access local produce through.

Defining the role of BHFP

BHFP were fortunate to already have emergency food network and surplus food network to mobilise in the emergency food response. They were able to have a meeting with the networks early on to plan what a response might look like. After consultation with the local council and other stakeholders, they decided to crowdfund for a central food hub to bulk purchase food and distribute to community food enterprises. They raised £50,000 from crowdfunding, and also had substantial funding from the council. Lots of new food hubs were set up in the community, and some food banks were repurposed to provide distribution. Most of the local food hubs in the area put in a weekly order to BHFP’s hub based on their number of referrals, and BHFP was then able to order the necessary amount of food.
Infrastructure
BHFP were originally loaned the use of the Brighton Centre’s premises, which was well equipped with industrial fridges. They were later offered the use of a school’s sports hall, out of which the main operation was run. Distribution was mostly carried out by volunteer drivers with their own vehicles who were on furlough. They were loaned vans and drivers from multiple organisations such as the local council and the Albion football stadium. BHFP worked closely with the council to organise referrals, to work out how many emergency parcels were needed. The council later set up a dedicated helpline to coordinate this. At peak, 3200 adults and 1300 children were helped in one week.

Supply and Sourcing
Food was ordered through wholesale outlets. They included fresh vegetables, focusing on less perishable items like carrots. Community gardens were able to supply some surplus to food banks and local schemes cooking hot meals for the community. Local producers more than doubled their customer base. They were having to buy in food during the hungry gap, buy extra delivery vehicles, and scale up their production. This all required considerable investment. BHFP are looking at ways to continue to support local production and have carried out a survey of local consumers about their experience of changing shopping habits.

BHFP found that pre-existing networks and close relationships in the community were vital, as were volunteers, funding and space for running the food hub. They emphasise that they were really impressed with local organisations’ ability to adapt, and eagerness to contribute to the emergency food response, citing an example of a street market that had to close which established a buy-one-give-one box scheme. They are very proud of the level of local engagement:

“there are just a lot of people willing to give their time and support to each other.”

BHFP have relocated the food hub and intend to continue this service but are conscious that they cannot sustainably rely on fundraising. They are interested in building relationships with local suppliers to make the hub more sustainable and to support the local economy.

Going Forward
BHFP recently updated a Planning Advice Note (PAN), which had originally been developed in 2011 with Food Matters and the City Council. A PAN is technical guidance for developers, rather than policy, and this PAN on Food Growing encourages the inclusion of food growing spaces in new developments. This update has been in development since 2018 with developers, frontline planning officers and planning agents. They have also developed a new Health Impact Assessment Checklist which developers will be required to complete. This builds on an already existing Sustainability checklist and checks whether the development provides opportunities for food growing, and a number of other
food access issues such as access to fresh food outlets and allotments. They are also working on incorporating food growing and food access into a new Urban Design Framework Supplementary Planning Document, which is more authoritative than a PAN.
Summary and Recommendations
Summary

Of 11 respondents, 7 relied on extra space being made available, either by repurposing their own premises or sourcing a new space to work in. This was due to a combination of scaling up their operation and needing to socially distance their workers. In many cases, spaces were found and offered for free – however, this was inevitably short-lived. For enterprises who have scaled up permanently, some were able to invest in new spaces, however others still seek funding in order to increase the size of their operation before they can respond to increased demand, such as the Kitchen Garden People CSA.

Of 11 respondents, 8 relied on a volunteer workforce. Some expressed concerns about losing their volunteer force as the furlough scheme ended and people returned to work. This was a particular concern for community food services who are experiencing increasing demand. Volunteers were of less use to enterprises that needed guaranteed, long-term commitment or specific skill-sets and experience. The Kitchen Garden People always have volunteers from their membership, so have a source of voluntary labour who are already familiar with the business.

Ten Mile Menu, Riverford Oxford and Cultivate employed permanent, new members of staff in response to a sustained increase in demand, and the Kitchen Garden People CSA are hoping to secure funding to hire a second grower. Those able to hire new, permanent staff have increased their resilience by formalising and delegating work processes, which means they are less dependent on a single member of staff being well and present. Norton and Yarrow are interested in taking on an apprentice through the new ‘Kickstart’ scheme but need clarity on how this would work.

7 businesses explicitly referred to the importance of appropriate software to coordinate their response. Many had their own websites, which were fundamental to receiving and coping with orders, OMA coordinated all their operations through Slack, and the Open Food Network (OFN) online food hub was vital for Cultivate, who were running their operation through OFN even before COVID-19. Some businesses, such as Cultivate and Ten Mile Menu, made reference to lengthy, manual processing of orders or constructing large, complex spreadsheets. Many relied on technology but took time to find or set-up the appropriate systems.

Aside from the primary producers and East Oxford Market, all of the businesses referred to issues of sourcing locally. In most cases, this was primarily an issue during the ‘hungry gap’ of late Winter and early Spring, when stored fruit and vegetables are short in supply and the new season’s crops are not yet ready to harvest. This gap can be shortened by extending the growing season in polytunnels or
hothouses, and by having larger stores of crops. The CSA model functions on an agreement with members that risk is shared, and an understanding that some months the boxes will be overflowing and sparse in others. The year-long subscription means the value of the boxes are essentially averaged-out over the year, but the CSA can receive a steady and pre-determined income. Other box schemes, such as Ten Mile Menu, rely on providing of a box of set value, which necessitates buying produce in from Europe during the hungry gap. They expressed concerns about the resilience of this supply route and were able to return to local sourcing after the ‘hungry gap’. Cultivate have requests for orders from large customers, such as Oxford Colleges, which they are not able to meet because they cannot find local producers that meet their requirements.

Another issue with local supply was coordination. Some producers who had lost their direct contact with customers at markets set up or expanded their own box schemes. Other businesses, such as The Market Garden, needed to set up a home delivery scheme in order to keep running their business. In some cases, this put a strain on existing box schemes whose distributors did not have extra capacity. Many businesses coped well and found their own solutions, but the result was relatively ad-hoc. Distribution infrastructure, in particular, was in many cases a matter of luck or dependent on volunteers’ cars. ‘Eco-delivery’ (i.e. by bike and trailer) was difficult to access due to lack of providers and lots of competition for existing capacity.
Recommendations

The Workforce

Most businesses need a ready supply of volunteers should there be another shock to the system. They cannot necessarily rely on future furlough schemes to create an abundance of willing volunteers. A more embedded, permanent voluntary workforce within the food system could provide some flexibility and prepare volunteers with necessary skills and experience before a crisis hits. **GFO could create or collaborate with an existing volunteering scheme to make volunteers a more regular part of the local food system.**

One business is specifically interested in taking on an apprentice, and SOFEA’s model relies fundamentally on training young people into the business. This provides resilience by investing in the next generation of people working in the food sector. **Local businesses could benefit from advice on accessing apprentice or trainee schemes.**

The increased demand in the sector has provided opportunities to hire new staff to share workloads and expertise, making the business less reliant on a single staff member. Some businesses need funding to expand before they can meet this demand. **Local businesses could benefit from advice on where to source loans and grants to scale-up in a way that meets demand sustainably.**

Software and systems

Many businesses expressed relief that they already had their own websites, saying that they would not have had time to set one up at the start of COVID-19. Cultivate coordinate orders through the Open Food Network (OFN), an online platform for selling local food. **An online food hub would give all local food producers access to an online platform and software for managing orders.**

Communication software was key to coordinating the emergency food response, such as Slack for OMA or the Interfaith Food Justice Network’s Whatsapp group for Glasgow’s response. **Local businesses could benefit from communication platforms for coordinating food surpluses, volunteers, or shared distribution infrastructure.**

Systems to formalise processes and get them “onto paper” were key for the resilience of many of the businesses, by allowing them to delegate, efficiently upscale and to reduce the administrative burden. Some community groups may need to formalise staffing and governance structures to be resilient going forward. **Local enterprises could benefit from accessing funding and training for formalising and automating processes and establishing governance structures.**
Managing the network
There was some breakdown in communication across the network, duplication of roles and missed opportunities for collaboration. This is costly for efficiency and can impact relationships within the network. **GFO could build relationships within the network to act as a mediator and to coordinate roles of individual businesses to help everyone ‘play to their strengths’**.

Glasgow’s ability to access local, organic produce as a staple provision in their emergency food response relied on having a single broker for multiple local suppliers. This supported local producers and a local wholesaler, contributing to a resilient local food system. Riverford Oxford works on a similar principle and are able to provide secure contracts to their producers. BHFP themselves acted as the broker for most of the emergency food ordering and distribution. **The local food network could benefit from having a broker for local producers that could provide processing and distribution infrastructure, handle orders, and facilitate bulk-purchasing for local institutions and CFSs.**

GFO feel they need to offer something tangible to better connect with local food businesses and be more embedded in the network. GFO are looking to develop a good food map to provide tangible benefits for local food business, such as increased footfall. **GFO could look to create further benefits from a good food map, such group-purchasing schemes or shared distribution infrastructure.**

Infrastructure
Borrowed space was fundamental to the local food network’s response. Again, the availability of space was ad hoc and short-term. **A network and database of local landlords of large properties (warehouses, universities, schools) would facilitate rapid contact and coordination should the need arise again. This could be linked to local Councils’ work on Meanwhile Leases.**

Delivery infrastructure was key, and relied heavily on borrowed or rented vans, bicycles and trailers. Glasgow was able to utilise strong links with the University and Community Transport Glasgow. **Local CFSs and food businesses could benefit from links with Oxfordshire’s community transport network.**

Local food supply
Local supply through the hungry gap was a particular issue, so businesses relied on more precarious supply chains from Europe. **The local food supply could be made more resilient if local producers had funding for infrastructure to store and preserve produce (e.g. Norton and Yarrow making hard cheeses, or local growers storing root vegetables through winter).**
There was some concern that there is not sufficient local supply to meet demand. **GFO could research barriers to local food production and utilise their network to facilitate and support new local growers.**

CFSs were not always able to access a regular and nutritionally diverse supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. **CFSs could access more fresh fruit and vegetables through building links with existing producers and community vegetable gardens.**

**Policy**

Glasgow City are already working on a Food Strategy and a Food Growing Strategy with the local food partnerships. BHFP have integrated food into the local planning system to increase food production in the city. **GFO could learn from other cities’ Local Plans, Residential Design Guides and Food Strategies and continue their work with local Councils to push for food being a fundamental priority in local policy.**
Conclusion

Many local food businesses coped impressively with the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, but the response was ad hoc, largely uncoordinated and in some cases, unsustainable. Several said they would not be able to undertake the same effort again. There are several fronts on which GFO could assist in creating a more coordinated response and in building a more resilient local food system generally. Labour, infrastructure, and appropriate software all took time to coordinate and skills that many businesses had little experience in. Lack of communication resulted in duplicated efforts and strains on part of the system, such as deliveries, which businesses had to resolve individually. Producers are not in a position to scale-up at short notice and need funding to extend their seasons and expand to meet demand. There is insufficient production of local food to meet demand, which requires further work to identify and remove barriers to potential new producers. SFPs that coped well had a very clear picture of the response to the crisis early on and themselves played a key role in ordering food for distribution. In Glasgow’s case, this provided vital support to local businesses. A range of short- and long-term responses will be required to improve the resilience of the local food supply chain and prepare it for future shocks.
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