

Debate: Food supply and security in the UK in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

House of Lords, Thursday 14 May 2020

Independent Age and COVID-19

At Independent Age, we have seen the COVID-19 outbreak significantly impact people in later life, due to both the effect the virus has on them physically, as well as the impact of the societal measures put in place to tackle it.

We have taken steps to adapt our support for people in later life to address the challenges they are facing during the COVID-19 outbreak. This includes providing relevant information and advice, partnering with the bereavement organisation Grief Chat, moving all friendship services to telephone, setting up a crisis emergency food and essential items fund for those in desperate need, and referring vulnerable people to the NHS responder scheme as a Royal Volunteering Society approved charity partner.

We recently ran a survey on access to food that received 1,836 responses. This allowed us to ask people about their concerns around getting sufficient food supplies. This survey ran from 22 April to 06 May.

There have been positive efforts in response to the outbreak, at both a national and local level, however we have several concerns which must be addressed by government.

Points to raise with the Minister

The Government is providing support to people who have been identified as 'clinically extremely vulnerable'¹ and are therefore more at risk of coronavirus, due to a range of serious health conditions. Our access to food survey highlighted problems for people in this group, as well as for those outside of this category.

Clinically extremely vulnerable group

While we welcomed the Government's proposals to provide free food parcels to the 1.5 million clinically extremely vulnerable people in the high-risk category, who were being asked to self-isolate for 12 weeks, we have identified concerns and gaps in this support:

- 29% of respondents to our survey who get food parcels do not believe there is enough food included to sustain them until the next delivery.
- There is confusion about who to talk to if there are problems with the food parcels. 51% of those receiving food parcels do not know who to contact when they have concerns.
- 23% of respondents receiving food parcels felt that their dietary needs are not being met. There are issues meeting medical, dietary or religious requirements.

'I am a diabetic and some foods have sugar in them. There is no fresh food.' – Access to food survey participant

¹ Who's at higher risk from coronavirus, NHS, 2020. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/> Last Accessed 05/05/2020

Will the Minister confirm that the Government will work with local authorities to better coordinate distribution of food parcels so that people at risk are not exposed to unnecessary delays in food provision, and are not left having to skip meals or go hungry until their next delivery?

Can the Minister confirm whether the Government will send follow up information to all those identified as 'clinically extremely vulnerable', who opted out of receiving food parcels, or have not replied to the initial letter, including advice and information about who they can contact if they now require one, or have any questions?

Will the Minister ensure that the composition of the food parcels across the UK include a healthy mix of foods, including fresh produce, and that modifications will be made to the food parcels to ensure they meet individual medical, dietary or religious requirements at no extra cost to the recipients?

People outside the clinically extremely vulnerable group

Although some people have family who can help them access food, many don't. For example, there are an estimated 1.5 million older people in England without children.²

48% of survey respondents outside the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' group said they had problems accessing food. Of these respondents:

- 56% said they couldn't get food due to low supermarket stock levels.
- 34% reported that they were skipping meals, reducing the amount of food they ate, or cutting down on the essentials.

Recently, DEFRA has created a consolidated list of different commercial options for people who are struggling to access food in order to help Local Authorities and charities signpost customers. This is a welcome initiative and it's important that the information is kept up to date, with any changes highlighted.

Will the Minister ensure that everyone who is struggling to access food, including those who are not classed as being in the 'clinically extremely vulnerable group', is made aware of their local food provision scheme and supported to access it through a simple system?

Will the Minister confirm that the Government will work with supermarkets to ensure customers that are digitally excluded are aware of support systems other offline methods of accessing food delivery, for example by phone?

For more information please get in contact by emailing publicaffairs@independentage.org or call 020 7050 6517.

² *In Focus: Experiences of Ageing in England*, Independent Age, April 2020