

Independent Age submission to EFRA Committee on Food Supply and COVID-19
– January 2021

1. About Independent Age

We offer regular contact, a strong campaigning voice, and free, impartial advice on the issues that matter to older people: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility. Our mission is to ensure that as we grow older, we all have the opportunity to live well with dignity, choice and purpose.

For more information, visit www.independentage.org. Registered charity number 210729.

We are happy to give oral evidence.

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2. Summary

This is an additional submission of evidence to the EFRA Committee's inquiry into Food Supply and COVID-19. Our submission will answer all three questions asked by the Committee and will focus on people who are deemed "clinically extremely vulnerable" (CEV), "clinically vulnerable" (CV) and those that we define as "Non-Shielding Vulnerable" (NSV). Although we are no longer seeing people face the scale of issues accessing food that we saw in the first national lockdown between March – July 2020, there are still some specific concerns that we would like to highlight.

Summary of recommendations:

Recommendations for the Government:

- **Publish the local and national support available to access food for those who are CEV, CV and NSV** and make this easily accessible online, so that people who are concerned can see the range of support that may be available to them.
- **Target communication about how to access food, both offline and online, towards CV and NSV people who could benefit from support.** So far, this communication has only been extended to CEV people, and we are concerned that some groups are still unaware local support to access food is available to them.
- **Continue to include information on access to food support in all communications with the CEV group.**

Recommendations for supermarkets:

- **Continue to put measures in place to ensure older people feel safe while shopping in-store**, including clear communication to customers about the rules around social distancing and mask

wearing, having staff on hand to assist customers in need, and encouraging customers to be sensitive to the needs of others. Supermarkets should also revisit schemes such as 'priority shopping hours' where appropriate.

- **Suspend delivery charges and reduce minimum spends for those with online priority delivery slots.**

3. Definition of CEV, CV and NSV

To discuss our recommendations and concerns we first want to define who we are speaking about. We will be focusing on:

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV): People who are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus because they have one of a specified list of conditions, for example people who:

- are undergoing cancer treatment
- have a severe lung condition.

and/or have been placed on the Shielded Patient List by a clinician or a GP. This group was told to shield during the first national lockdown March – August 2020 and have been told to shield again since 9 January 2020.

Clinically Vulnerable (CV): People at higher risk from COVID-19 including people who:

- are 70 or older
- have diabetes
- have a condition affecting the brain or nerves

Non-Shielding Vulnerable (NSV): Anyone unable to access food or other essential supplies due to a COVID-19 related change in circumstances. This includes people who:

- are clinically vulnerable
- are clinically extremely vulnerable
- are self-isolating and unable to leave the house
- have disabilities or long-term health conditions and whose usual food delivery arrangements (by shops or their social network) are disrupted
- are unpaid carers

Independent Age is primarily focused on the 65+ age group however we recognise that many of these issues apply to younger age groups, particularly to working-age disabled people, and to younger carers. We therefore urge that these issues be considered in the round, rather than focusing on specific age demographics.

4. Accessing Food

During the first national lockdown from March to July 2020, safe access to food was a major issue for people, particularly in England, and we highlighted our

concerns in our first submission. Those in CEV group could access formal support through the shielding programme, including free food parcels delivered to their home and access to priority supermarket delivery slots but we still had concerns about nutrition, choice, and sufficiency of the food they were given in food parcels. We also heard from many others who were unable to safely shop but had no formal support, as well as those facing new practical barriers to shopping due to COVID-19. This included those in the NSV group as well as the CV group.

Our survey on access to food in April/May 2020 illustrated the scale of the problem - nearly half (48%) of respondents in the NSV group said they had struggled to access food. The survey also revealed problems and inconsistencies with how support was being offered and communicated, to people in both the NSV, CV and CEV groups.

While we have seen an improvement for the people who fall into each of these groups, concerning their ability to access food, we still have some concerns. These are:

- Consistent communication about the support available for those in the NSV group.
- Anxiety about going to the supermarket and other shops.
- Increased costs of accessing food – delivery charges and minimum spend.

5. Communication of support available

In April 2020, we took part in joint activity with a number of charities and sent a letter¹ to George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment of Food and Rural Affairs. We wanted to ensure our concerns during the first lockdown were brought to the Minister's attention. After this the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) agreed that a wider group than just those in the CEV group needed Government support to access food. The Government set up an online portal to enable local authorities and selected national charities to refer those who fell into the NSV group to a range of support options, including access to priority supermarket delivery slots, phone delivery slots and volunteer matching. We were concerned that uptake of the scheme by local authorities was slow at the beginning of the scheme but by November 2020 we were pleased to see more than 80% of local authorities in England were signed up (and others may have had alternative support arrangements in place).²

This support is much needed, but we still feel it is crucial that better communication of this support happens to those in the NSV group. In our April/May 2020 survey, 63% of respondents said that the Government had not communicated well about how people could access food, with some people feeling forgotten or unsupported.³ In addition, a Which? survey published in July

¹ Independent Age (April 2020), *Joint Letter to Secretary of State for DEFRA*, <https://www.independentage.org/news-media/press-releases/jointletter-disabled-older-carers>

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2925/documents/28142/default/>

³ Independent Age Access to Food survey (May 2020)

revealed that only 1 in 4 respondents struggling to access food had contacted their local authority.

"I feel I've been forgotten about. I'm not in the super-critical group...but I've been left to fend for myself. I don't want to go shopping where people are ignoring the social distancing rules." – Anonymous, April/May 2020 Independent Age survey

We are also concerned that there may be some people who have recently become part of either the CEV group or the NSV group – for example through bereavement, new diagnosis or worsening health conditions – that might not be told about the support that's available to them. We are keeping a close eye on this alongside other charities that represent people at high risk of COVID-19.

Recommendations for the Government:

- **Publish the local and national support available to access food for those who are CEV, CV and NSV** and make this easily accessible online, so that people who are concerned can see the range of support that may be available to them.
- **Target communication about how to access food, both offline and online, towards CV and NSV people who could benefit from support.** So far, this communication has only been extended to CEV people, and we are concerned that some groups are still unaware local support to access food is available to them.
- **Continue to include access to food support information in all communications with the CEV group.**

6. Anxiety about visiting the supermarkets and feeling safe while shopping

We know that people in later life have felt, and continue to feel, concerned about going to the supermarket during the pandemic. Our survey August – September 2020 revealed that even in the early autumn when cases of the virus were relatively low, over half (57%) reported being very or somewhat uncomfortable going to the supermarket.⁴ Recent statistics from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show that in January over 70s are the most likely to feel uncomfortable leaving their home and nearly twice as likely to report having trouble accessing essentials like groceries than younger age groups.⁵

⁴ Independent Age (December 2020), Home Truths: The experience of people in later life during COVID19, <https://www.independentage.org/campaigns/covid-survey>

⁵ ONS, COVID statistics 7 – 10 January 2021, 26% of people over 70 reported troubles accessing essentials compared to 14% of people aged 16-29.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata>

This is a legitimate concern. Data from the NHS Test and Trace app analysed by Public Health England showed that in early November 2020, when restrictions were increasing again, supermarkets were the primary setting where the disease was transmitted.⁶

When asked what would make them feel more comfortable, respondents particularly highlighted mask-wearing for customers and staff, enforced social distancing with clear signage in supermarkets, and clear communication to other customers to be sensitive to those who may be taking extra precautions with social distancing.

"Keep the one-way systems in the supermarkets. I felt safer with everybody going the same way, not as it has returned to with people crowding round certain areas and two-way traffic down the aisles!" – Anonymous, Independent Age, August 2020 survey

Recommendations for supermarkets:

- **Continue to put measures in place to ensure older people feel safe while shopping in-store**, including clear communication to customers about the rules around social distancing and mask wearing⁷, having staff on hand to assist customers in need, and encouraging customers to be sensitive to the needs of others. Supermarkets should also revisit schemes such as 'priority shopping hours' where appropriate.

7. Increased costs of accessing food through online shopping

Many people in later life, and people in both the CEV, CV group and NSV group, have moved to online shopping. This is because they have been told not to visit shops if they are shielding, they do not feel safe to do so, and/or Government has advised them to take 'particular care' as they are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and shouldn't go out unless it is essential.

In our August – September survey people told us shopping online is more expensive. This can be because they have to buy more than they normally would to reach the minimum spend, spend more on delivery costs or have less opportunity to 'shop around' and get offers, with cheaper products often selling out quickly. For those shopping locally, some felt that prices were higher in small local shops compared to supermarkets and thought the price of food and other essentials had gone up in general.

"Everything costs more and having to pay for food deliveries, and paying others to do things for me." Anonymous

"Cost of living has increased, sometimes (most times) I have to take items off my grocery list because I can't afford them." Anonymous

⁶ Public Health England (Nov 2020),

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936672/Weekly_COVID-19_and_Influenza_Surveillance_Graphs_w47.pdf

⁷ NB we note that some people are exempt from wearing a face masks, and we agree this should be in place. This recommendation is for people who should be wearing face masks and do not have an exemption.

People in the CEV, CV, and NSV groups who have accessed online delivery slots through either the government's National Shielding Service Support (NSSS) or the local authority supermarket scheme now have access to **priority online delivery slots**. However, we are concerned that the cost of delivery charges and high minimum spend thresholds mean that people in these groups are being unfairly financially penalised for the cost of shopping online.

We are now in a third national lockdown and people who are in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable group have been advised to shield again. This means the Government guidance explicitly states that "you're advised not to go to shops or pharmacies" and tells you to shop online instead.⁸ For many others in the CV and NSV groups - who have been advised to take extra care and avoid mixing and trips outside - who are already accessing priority delivery slots online shopping is the safest option to get food. For many of the people we've spoken to, before COVID they would have gone to the shops by car, public transport or on foot and got the shopping they needed. Whereas now their options are limited and people are telling us that the cost of delivery slots and high minimum spends mean they are being negatively financially impacted as a result. We are concerned that people living on their own are particularly struggling to reach minimum spends. While supermarkets point to the fact that most deliveries they make are free, that is in part due to people having to hit minimum spends to get free delivery, when if given the choice they would prefer not to spend to that level.

"Online shopping is more expensive - when I've needed groceries and was supposed to stay in I had to spend £60 for a delivery (if I could get a slot) so I tended to buy things I didn't really need. That and the actual extra cost for delivery." – Eleanor

As a result, on the 14th January, we co-signed a letter to all seven supermarkets participating in the priority delivery slot scheme alongside 22 other charities including Scope, MS Society, Anthony Nolan and Age UK, to call for the suspension of delivery charges and a reduction in minimum spend for customers accessing priority delivery slots.⁹ Some of the supermarkets suspended delivery charges during the first lockdown between March – August 2020. We are asking them to do this again. We are yet to hear back from all of the supermarkets but we will continue to campaign on the issue.

Recommendation for supermarkets participating in priority delivery slot schemes:

- **Suspend delivery charges and reduce minimum spends for those with online priority delivery slots.**

⁸ Gov.uk, Guidance for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, published 8 January 2021, accessed 25 January 2021, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/advice-for-people-at-high-risk/>

⁹ Independent Age, Joint letter on unfair costs to safely access food, January 2021, <https://www.independentage.org/news-media/press-releases/2021/joint-letter-on-unfair-costs-to-safely-access-food>