

VCSE Food Providers' Support Needs – COVID-19 and Beyond

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While local authorities are taking on a major role in coordinating food provision to people in need (over and above Greater Manchester's share of the 1.5m people classed as "extremely vulnerable") during the COVID-19 crisis, VCSE sector food providers are adding much value to these LA-led schemes, and in some cases they remain the predominant providers. Pre COVID-19 there were more than 200 food banks, food clubs, providers of free cooked meals – [mapped here](#) – and the infrastructure organisations that provide strategic support and that acquire and distribute food throughout the sector should also be included. Already [providing millions of meals per year](#) across GM before COVID-19, they have the infrastructure, expertise, local knowledge, and although this is at risk during the COVID-19 crisis, the capacity to help tackle hunger on a huge scale at this time.

Greater Manchester Poverty Action's survey of food support providers early in the COVID-19 crisis showed increased demand for their services, but a major decrease in volunteer capacity that will have worsened since the lockdown started. Furthermore, there are serious concerns about supply of food as the usual business supply chains are disrupted and donations from the public decimated. Meanwhile, LA-led food provision, if not coordinated with the VCSE sector, risks causing confusion and duplication. We know in fact that there are many good examples of partnerships between LAs and VCSE food providers, some that have been working for many years and some that have scaled up in a matter of days.

From our experience coordinating the [GM Food Poverty Alliance](#), and in particular from several conversations with the largest VCSE sector providers during the COVID-19 crisis, we outline a series of good practice recommendations that will help these partnerships to achieve their potential.

Recommendations

1) Assuring a robust supply of food (especially ambient such as tinned food, as availability of chilled and frozen food is unusually high at the time of writing) – from borough's and GM's COVID-19 food acquisition activities, as well as coordinating with those activities to ensure that all offers of food are taken up by the organisations best placed to redistribute them.

2) Helping to provide access to facilities for storing and distributing chilled and frozen food

3) Funding and in-kind resource to maintain and expand activities:

- It is increasingly difficult for VCSE organisations to maintain operations, as noted in Anne Lythgoe's "Capacity and sustainability of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector in Greater Manchester" paper. VCSE food providers experience all of the challenges outlined in that paper, in addition to those addressed here
- Additional staff time and infrastructure support is needed to adapt to the current crisis, and to evolve to more sustainable systems as the crisis recedes. Examples include the resources required to:
 - Expand opening hours, for example opening at weekends
 - Recruit and train large numbers of new volunteers, or paid workers where necessary, for example supervisory roles – please see more detail under "Additional volunteer capacity"
 - Work strategically with public services and other VCSE sector food providers
- Where there are agreements for LAs to pay VCSE food providers e.g. to source food, the cash should be paid upfront as the providers' cash reserves are running lower than usual
- Funding for cleaning services and PPE to minimise risk while dealing with increased throughput

4) Additional volunteer (and in some cases, paid) capacity:

- Public & private sector workers being redeployed to VCSE sector food providers and distributors
 - Understanding that support for food provision will involve more risk than working from home, in line with risks experienced by other key workers. However also feeding back constructively and flagging up any unnecessary or excessive risks
- GM residents who offer their time through centralised volunteer schemes to be offered. Clear understanding and messaging, consistent across GM around "formal" and "informal" volunteering opportunities, so people know where to go to make best use of their skills, time and capacity.
- A digital space where organisations' specific needs can be matched with volunteers who have specific skills
- If the above channels come up short, funded agency staff where needed
- Support in training large numbers of volunteers

5) Reliable health and safety guidelines and measures

6) Coordination between public services and VCSE food providers:

- Clear communications from borough-led food provision activities, about the role of VCSE sector providers and how to complement or join forces
- An understanding of the scale of food poverty before COVID-19 (already affecting an estimated 350,000 households across GM), and the ways in which COVID-19 is increasing this
 - Inclusion of people at risk of food poverty in definitions of “vulnerable” people
 - Agreement between LAs and VCSE food providers about who is placed to help which cohorts of people, and systems in place to refer people in need to those organisations best placed to offer support
- Communications to the wider public about where and how to access support including LA-led and VCSE sector provision
- Coordination of provision between services to ensure the people most in need are offered the most support, and to avoid inefficiencies and duplication
- Effective triaging of people applying for support, so those in need of support (such as from Local Welfare Assistance Schemes) other than food are not prioritised for food support, reducing the strain on food providers.

7) When the immediate crisis slows down, meaningful open conversations about the desired long-term set-up, how to tackle the underlying causes of food poverty, and the sustainable roles of local government, VCSE sector food providers, and other stakeholders.

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