



Bristol

Food Disaster Risk Planning Project

Findings report

September 2026

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Photo credit: Bristol Food Network

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how unprepared the UK is for major crises affecting food security, particularly for the most vulnerable citizens. With the rising likelihood of further and compound crises – pandemics, extreme weather and conflicts disrupting global supply chains, production and prices – there is an urgent need for plans that focus on minimising risks to food insecurity and harm to vulnerable communities during such disaster scenarios.

The *Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023-2026* explored Bristol's emergency food provision during COVID-19, drawing on 22 in-depth interviews and four participatory workshops with community food organisations, local community groups, Bristol City Council and local businesses. The project was delivered by Bristol Food Network (BFN), Feeding Bristol, (FB) the University of Bristol (UoB) and the University of the West of England. (UWE)

Our findings, discussed in depth in this report, are organised across four themes:

- **Networks and Partnerships:** Existing and newly formed community networks and relationships were critical in facilitating and coordinating the emergency food response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Knowledge and Information:** Community knowledge and trusted relationships helped identify vulnerable communities, share information and connect people to services.
- **Funding and Resources:** Government, philanthropic and crowdfunded funding and resources were key to the rapid mobilisation of community groups, enabling them to pay staff and buy food.
- **Wellbeing and Burnout:** Intense and sustained pressure on those delivering emergency food support contributed to high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout for those working on the frontlines.

A clear message runs through these findings: community organisations, with their trusted local relationships and deep understanding of community needs, were the backbone of Bristol's response – and their capacity to respond to future crises depends on sustained investment in their everyday work, not only emergency funding.

From these findings, four recommendations emerged for those developing and implementing disaster response plans in the UK (national government, local authorities, emergency services and infrastructure organisations).

Four recommendations for UK disaster response planning



1. Establish and sustain a central food crises coordination group in each local authority area



2. Sustain investment in the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector



3. Deepen knowledge sharing and strengthen communication between community food organisations



4. Integrate worker and volunteer wellbeing support into food crisis preparedness plans



Photo credit: Ben Pryor

Introduction

This report summarises the findings of the *Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023-2026*. Through this project we explored Bristol's emergency food provision during COVID-19 (specifically the period February 2020 – March 2021). The project aims to record what worked well, what was learned and what should be included in a Food Disaster Risk Plan to respond effectively to future food crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility and inequality of our current food system. Its effects deepened existing vulnerabilities, increasing household food insecurity and driving a rise in demand for emergency food support, both in Bristol and beyond. In response, a range of activities were introduced or expanded. This involved Council

teams, schools, voluntary, community and charitable organisations, as well as grassroots community efforts to fill gaps in emergency food provision at both national and local levels.

It is essential that we learn from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Longer-term pressures on our food system are growing, and people's ability to reliably access affordable and nutritious food is increasingly at risk. These pressures include climate change and extreme weather events, the loss of biodiversity, rising levels of pests and disease, cyberattacks and other technological vulnerabilities, the threat of future pandemics, and uncertainty around trade and global politics, all of which threaten food security. These threats may act individually or

together as overlapping events creating a polycrisis. We are already seeing the impact of these pressures. Events following the COVID-19 pandemic have deepened the fragility of our food system. A series of conflicts have disrupted global supply chains, production and pushed up prices. These sit alongside more structural pressures – the lasting effects of the pandemic and the impacts of Brexit – which have increased the strain on the UK's food system. Together, these shocks and structural pressures are contributing to vulnerability and a rising cost of living that disproportionately affects those who are already at risk.

These drivers of risk are part of a wider system. They interact with local conditions, such as infrastructure, transport, governance, economic resilience, communities and levels of poverty, increasing their impact. The way these pressures play out varies depending on the specific hazard, with each having its own scale, behaviour, and trajectory. Despite these complex challenges, food has historically featured only minimally, if at all, within key UK resilience plans, work associated with the National Risk Register, UK Government's National Resilience Framework, and work associated with the National Preparedness Commission (Lang, Neumann & So, 2025).

With the *Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023-2026* we as a project team responded to the growing understanding that food should be a key part of disaster risk planning. Understanding the COVID-19 emergency food response - its successes, challenges and learnings from actors involved - is essential for preparing for future crises and building

stronger, more resilient systems. Food provision must be clearly incorporated into disaster and resilience planning at both local and national levels. Our analysis aims to root disaster risk planning in local contexts, experiences and structures in ways that are adaptable, practical and relevant across different crisis scenarios, while staying aligned with national policy. This is important for building practical Food Disaster Risk Plans that can guide communities, as well as local and national government, in preparing for and responding to future crises.

In the report that follows, we identify key themes that shaped Bristol's emergency food response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular focus on:

- Exploring the significance of **food networks** and the relationships involved.
- Examining the role of **knowledge and information**, including how these are developed and shared.
- Understanding how **funding, resources, and infrastructure** contributed to the response.
- Capturing **collective experiences**, including pressures such as wellbeing and burnout.

In the sections that follow, we set out the methods we used to co-create learning through multi-stakeholder workshops and interviews. We explore the themes that emerged, and key actions needed to support emergency response, with recommendations for building resilient food systems in the face of future threats.

Background

This project originated from the co-creation of Bristol's Good Food 2030 Framework for Action, which identified two key areas within the city's good food governance that required particular attention: gaps in food systems data and preparedness for food-related disasters. The case for prioritising disaster preparedness was strengthened by direct frontline experience of the COVID-19 emergency food response, which highlighted the need for more structured planning ahead of future shocks.

The project was delivered by our cross-disciplinary team made up of representatives from Bristol Food Network, Feeding Bristol, University of the West of England and the University of Bristol. Together, we contributed expertise in food systems, food inequality, disaster risk reduction, community engagement, structural inequality, and deep knowledge of Bristol's charity sector and wider food landscape. This project supports and builds on Bristol's existing strategies, including the Bristol Good Food 2030 Framework for Action and the One City Food Equality Strategy and Action Plan, both of which highlight the need to prepare for future crises.



Photo credit: Melanie Vaxevanakis

Methodology

This report is the outcome of the research process, which involved:

1. A review of existing literature on food security during COVID-19 and disaster risk reduction.
2. Participatory workshops and one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders.
3. Thematic analysis of the workshop and interview data.

Drawing on our collective experience – spanning food systems, food inequality, disaster risk reduction and community mobilisation – we identified background literature on disaster responses and vulnerabilities and developed and implemented a question guide for interviews. We then identified and approached appropriate contacts, designed and delivered workshops and undertook analysis of our data. Findings were shared with participants, generating insights to inform preparedness for, and response to, future food crises. Key stakeholders for workshops and interviews were identified by project team members from Feeding Bristol and Bristol Food Network, based on their role in the design and delivery of the emergency food response in Bristol between 2020 and 2024.

With this project we sought to address the following questions about Bristol's food response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. What happened?

- What activities and structures were established to enable emergency food provision in Bristol at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Who was involved and how?

2. What changed?

- How did these activities and arrangements develop and evolve during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What changes occurred as the direct impacts of COVID-19 began to diminish after 2022?

3. What was learned?

- What were the key strengths and limitations of emergency food provision during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the key elements of this response that should be strengthened or built into future disaster risk planning?
- What gaps or inefficiencies were identified that should be addressed in planning for future emergencies?





Photo credit: Alice Peperell

We designed the project activities to be participatory, drawing on the diverse experiences of a wide range of stakeholders, including food businesses, charities, NGOs, volunteers, community groups, funding bodies, policymakers, and experts. Co-production and trust-building were central to how the interviews and workshops were delivered.

Additionally, we designed the project activities to be complementary and build on one another. Interviews were used to capture detailed accounts of the COVID-19 provision, documenting the actions and experiences of key actors. The workshops, meanwhile, were a space to collaboratively share experiences, explore the timeline of the pandemic, sense check and build on our findings, and build trusted relationships. Early interview findings shaped the co-creation of the timeline in Workshops 1 and 2, while participants in Workshop 3 helped deepen understanding of how tasks and responsibilities were prioritised and linked to different stakeholders. Figure 1 summarises how the activities were sequenced and connected.

Within the workshops, the timeline established the sequence of events across actors, providing context for the interview conversations. Network mapping built on this by showing the connections between key stakeholders, adding a further layer of context to both the timeline and interviews. Findings from across these activities were then synthesised to identify

actions that would increase preparedness. Finally, a scenario game tested the strength of networking in a new imagined crisis. Trusted relationships were central in allowing open and in-depth conversations throughout.

As a project team we recognised that revisiting the pandemic would be difficult for some participants. To ensure a safe and supportive environment we undertook trauma-informed training and employed professional project management.

The research activities are summarised in Table 1 and Figure 1. In total, we completed 22 individual interviews between 2023 and 2025, each an in-depth conversation guided by a set of open-ended questions. The four workshops were structured around participatory activities, including:

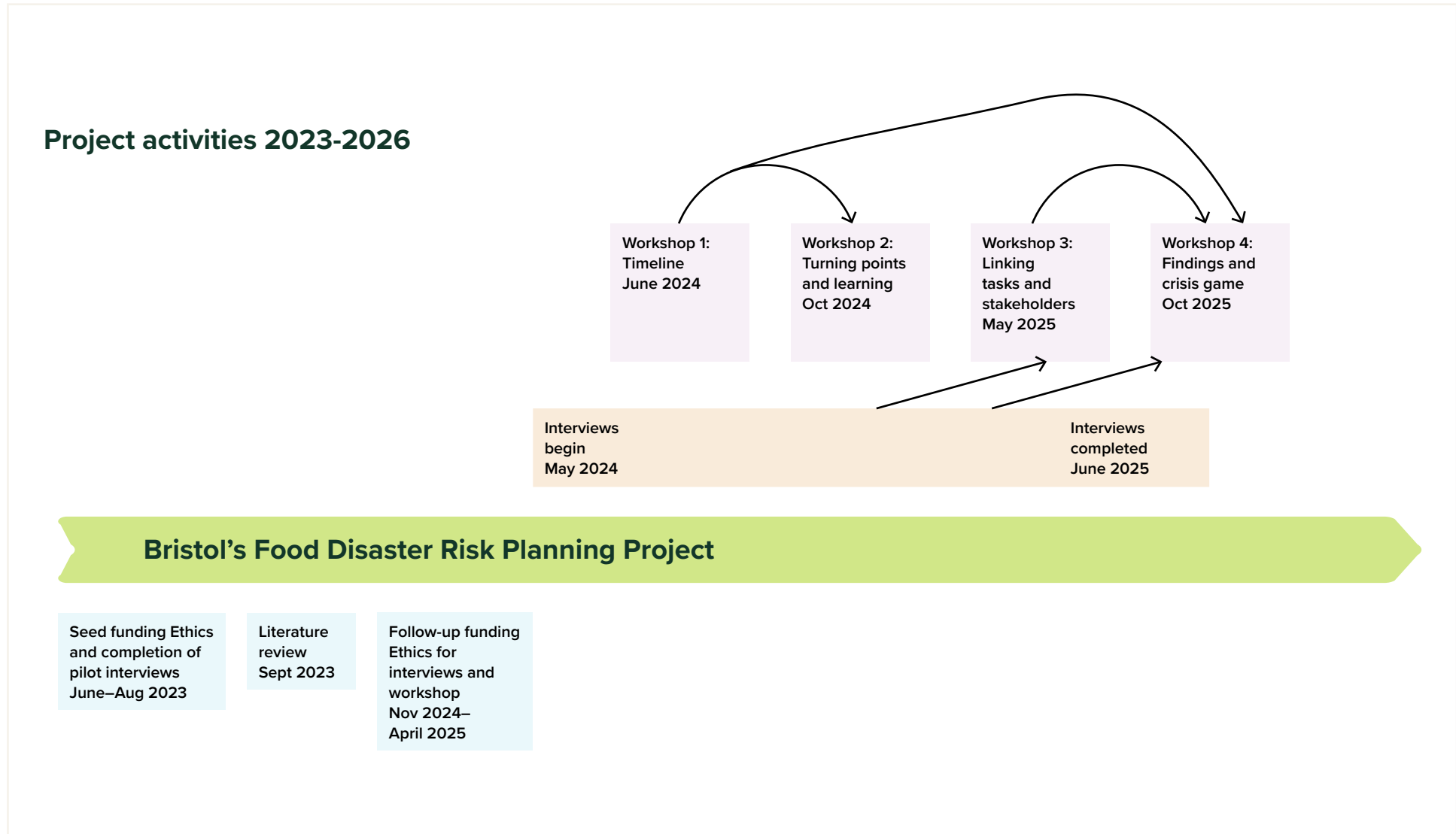
- The co-creation of a Bristol COVID-19 food emergency response timeline, with participants organised into groups based on their role in food supply. This was followed by an exploration of what worked well and less well.
- An exercise matching key activities in food provision to the organisations and individuals responsible for them.
- A scenario-based game in which groups had to respond to disruption to Bristol's food supply and identify the actions needed.

Table 1. Research activities undertaken during the project

Activities	Aim of Activity	Details	Statistics
In-depth interviews (2023-2025). Workshop 1 (June 2024) <i>What happened when? What were the important turning points in the COVID-19 timeline?</i> Workshop 2 (October 2024) <i>What worked well? What did we learn? What would we keep/do differently?</i> Preliminary analysis of interviews.	Document the knowledge and experience of emergency food provision during COVID-19.	Interviews were in-depth and conversational, guided by a set of open-ended questions (see appendix for summary of questionnaire). Workshop 1 participants were shown a timeline of 2020-2021 (see appendix for Workshop 1 timeline) and asked to explain what happened when. Workshop 2 presented participants with a revised timeline (see appendix for Workshop 2 timeline) showing turning points identified in Workshop 1. They were asked to recall activities and decisions made in response to food needs during COVID-19. This was focused on what worked and what could be done differently.	22 interviews (23 participants) Workshop 1: 22 participants Workshop 2: 21 participants See Appendix 1 for full stakeholder recruitment figures.
Workshop 3 (May 2025) <i>Identifying key stakeholders and tasks.</i> Analysis of interviews and workshops 1–3. Workshop 4 (October 2025) <i>Project team presented findings and challenged participants with a crisis game.</i>	Share and deepen understanding of initial findings.	Workshop 3 widened participation to include councillors, policymakers and other decision-makers, alongside stakeholders from earlier research stages (see appendix 2 for a list of participant organisations). Participants organised key activities and roles identified from Workshops 1 and 2 and the interview data. (See appendix 3). Workshop 4 brought together findings from the thematic analysis, timeline analysis and the network mapping. Participants then took part in a disaster scenario game, where they were split into teams playing key actors in emergency food provision and guided through a crisis requiring a cross-team response. This exercise highlighted the layered, ongoing nature of a food crisis and the importance of understanding the relationships and different roles within a local food system.	Workshop 3: 20 Participants Workshop 4: 26 Participants

Activities	Aim of Activity	Details	Statistics
Analysis: <i>Thematic, timeline and network mapping.</i> Dissemination: Policy brief, Findings Report, Summarising Findings, Two online webinars and one in-person workshop (planned for winter 2026/27.)	Share key learnings and recommendations.	Three types of analysis were undertaken. ● A co-produced timeline – a recognised tool in participatory research that helps to time-locate and sequence recollections across different groups. ● Thematic analysis of workshop and interview data – a recognised approach for identifying and analysing patterns across qualitative data. ● Network mapping – a tool for understanding the relationships between different individuals and organisations involved in the response. These online webinars and in-person workshop planned for summer/autumn 2026 will be a space to share the findings of this project more widely.	

Figure 1. Sequencing and information exchange between different project research activities



Findings

1. Timeline of the COVID-19 Emergency Response

In Workshops 1 and 2 we focused on co-creating a timeline with participants, outlining the actions taken by different groups in response to food supply disruptions and government restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Timelines are a commonly used tool in disaster forensic investigations, helping participants recollect key actions and how they intersected with the evolving crisis and the actions of other organisations (1). A simplified representation of the timeline is shown in Figure 2.

The intensity of actions has been grouped by themes which emerged from participant discussions:

- **Networks and Partnerships**
- **Knowledge and Information**
- **Funding and Resources**
- **Wellbeing and Burnout**



Photo credit: Bristol Food Network

1 Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K. and Dupuis, A., 2011. Timelining: visualizing experience. *Qualitative research* , 11(5), pp.552-569

Figure 2. Timeline of activity levels during Bristol's emergency food response to COVID-19, February 2020 – March 2021. *Darker colour shading represents higher levels of activity as described by workshop participants. UK Government COVID-19 policy measures are shown for context.*



There are three notable periods of high intensity of activity across all themes:

- **Start of crisis: March to June 2020**

Intense activity at the start of the crisis reflected the three urgent needs: to rapidly collate and share information about the locations and circumstances of those needing emergency food; to share that information and build networks for obtaining, storing and distributing food in accordance with rapidly changing health guidance; and to secure and deploy relatively abundant funding made available in the national government's emergency response. Long hours, the need for rapid decision-making and concerns for personal health contributed to high levels of stress.

- **End of second wave: November to December 2020**

At the end of the second wave, central government funding decreased and the decision to ease restrictions over the Christmas period created significant challenges to food supplies. Participants reported that accumulated fatigue and a growing recognition that the crisis would not be short-lived, were affecting their wellbeing.

- **End of third lockdown: March 2021**

At the end of the third lockdown, funding that supported the collaboration of Bristol's community food groups ended, and government intervention decreased as the UK transitioned to vaccination rollout. These shifts resulted in increased stress for emergency food providers as demand for their services was still high.

While Bristol's response was shaped by local conditions, the timeline of activity reflects common patterns seen in other disaster response contexts. Typically, at the start of a crisis, the focus is on *response* to the threat – learning, finding solutions and managing emergency funding. Over time, the focus switches to *managing* the threat – sustained working, attention switching to livelihood maintenance and longer-term planning, reduction in emergency funding, and fatigue (2).

Recognising these dynamics supports more effective disaster risk planning and helps to identify what elements are likely to be most important at different stages of future crises.

We intend for the timeline to highlight patterns, overlaps and shifts in activity rather than provide a comprehensive account of what happened. It does not capture the full picture of how activities were carried out, what worked well, or the barriers encountered. These dimensions are examined in section 2 of the findings.

2. Thematic Analysis

Drawing on our thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews and workshop discussions, the following four tables present findings across four themes: 'Networks and Partnerships', 'Knowledge and Information', 'Funding and Resources' and 'Wellbeing and Burnout'. These tables expand on the timeline by highlighting the actions taken and their impact, and outline key lessons learned. This includes what worked well, what the challenges and gaps were, and how these can inform practical recommendations for future disaster risk planning.

2a Networks and Partnerships

The networks and partnerships that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic were widely viewed as a major strength of the response. Both pre-existing relationships and newly formed connections improved coordination and facilitated the sharing of knowledge, specialist skills, and resources across sectors (Table 2). Participants noted that the strengthening of Bristol's community food network now makes them feel better prepared for future crises.

2 López-Carresi, A., Fordham, M., Wisner, B., Kelman, I. and Gaillard, J.C., 2014. Disaster management. *International Lessons in Risk Reduction, Response and Recovery*. London: Earthscan.

Table 2. Networks and Partnerships findings and recommendations

Observation	Action	Outcomes of action	Recommendation
Relationships between third sector and other sectors.	Donations of gifts in kind (e.g. volunteer support, infrastructure and food).	Gifts in kind helped to reduce operational costs.	When creating a Food Disaster Risk Plan, build in clear ways for organisations across different sectors to connect and work together. This could include a simple system for matching those with resources, such as food, funding, or capacity, to those who need them, ensuring support reaches the right places quickly.
Cross sector partnerships.	Community groups partnered with schools, the hospitality sector, supermarkets, logistics providers and others.	Partnerships enabled organisations to work within their specialist capabilities, contributing to a more coordinated and efficient response. For example, local chefs worked with charities bringing their experience of large-scale catering allowing charities to focus on coordination, fundraising and delivery.	Strengthen and formalise cross-sector collaboration frameworks. This could be a task for the food disaster coordination group explored below.
Existing relationships and new connections.	Existing relationships were mobilised and new networks and groups were formed during the pandemic, focusing on food provision.	Relationships between key stakeholders across the food system were strengthened, supporting coordination and food redistribution. See network map in section 3 to explore the kinds of relationships.	Establish a food disaster coordination group to support coordination across stakeholders and maintain network connectivity. See section 4 recommendations for further explanation.

Our findings highlight that networking and collaboration between diverse stakeholders is an important part of an effective disaster response. Bristol's networks have grown and strengthened in the post-pandemic period, reflecting stakeholders' recognition of the importance of connection and partnership. These findings were further explored in Workshop 3, where participants identified a potential response structure, as discussed in the Recommendations section of this report.

2b Knowledge and Information

Limited knowledge and experience of large-scale disaster responses presented a significant challenge at the beginning of the pandemic. The new and unexpected nature of COVID-19, combined with the need to rapidly scale up emergency food support, created numerous practical pressures, requiring intense on-the-job learning. Participants explained that this learning has improved their understanding of what is needed and what works under crisis conditions, making them feel more prepared for future crises. However, many also suggested that future crises are likely to bring new challenges requiring further learning and adaptation. The findings and recommendations are shown in Table 3.



Photo credit: North Bristol and South Glos Foodbank



Photo credit: Alice Peperell

Table 3. Knowledge and Information findings and recommendations

Observation	Action	Outcome of action	Recommendation
Uncertainty over who needs support.	In response to this need, the 'Food Resilience Monitoring Group' was established, making use of local knowledge and existing databases.	The 'Food Resilience Monitoring Group' was able to identify community vulnerabilities and match them with offers of support. However, this process had limitations and gaps.	Map community vulnerabilities and maintain this information in an accessible and regularly updated format. Community organisations should be included in preparedness planning processes due to their knowledge of their communities and experience working on the frontlines of disaster provision.
Distribution of information to key groups.	Key stakeholders used trusted channels of communication to reach at-risk groups (e.g. older people, those in quarantine and unable to shop). Additionally, a community anchor network model connected Bristol City Council with many of Bristol's communities to support information sharing.	Information reached key groups and communities through a variety of targeted methods. Community anchor network and community exchange group remains in place for information sharing.	Identify trusted communication routes for use during future emergency responses.

Observation	Action	Outcome of action	Recommendation
Lack of culturally and dietarily appropriate food in government provision.	Community projects, equipped with local knowledge, stepped in to provide appropriate food.	A food hub was established to supply community groups supporting global majority and racially minoritised communities with culturally appropriate food. The pandemic sparked wider conversations about the need for culturally appropriate food in emergency provision, leading to improvements in how food support is delivered. Initiatives such as Food Equality Strategy Action Plan (FESAP) are actively working to address these gaps in access.	Ensure dedicated funding mechanisms to support culturally and dietary appropriate food provision in disaster responses. Increase understanding of what types of food should be in emergency provision for different individuals and communities. Community organisations should be included in preparedness planning.
The unprecedented nature of the pandemic meant many individuals and communities were poorly prepared both mentally and logistically for the disruptions.	This unpreparedness led to fear and panic buying.	This led to many people, particularly vulnerable people, unable to access the food they needed.	Create ‘preparedness training’ and awareness raising exercises for communities prior to future crises. Develop clear communication and messaging processes that supports residents to manage their expectations in future scenarios.

A key aim of this project was to capture key learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic and the community food response to strengthen planning for future crises. As such, it is important that any food disaster risk plan incorporates ways to capture, share and reflect on learning. A key learning from the COVID-19 pandemic is the value of mapping and understanding vulnerabilities and community needs prior to a disaster. This mapping (Table 3) facilitates a quicker and more effective response. Additionally, the value of community organisations with trusted relationships and community knowledge cannot be overstated. Any food disaster risk plan needs to be co-created and implemented with community organisations.

2c Funding and Resources

The availability of funding from local funders, government sources, philanthropists, and community crowdfunding was key to the quick mobilisation of community groups. In addition, furlough and lockdown conditions resulted in some individuals having more time and money, leading to increased donations of money and food, as well as people volunteering their time. While funding was vital for the COVID-19 emergency response, participants raised concerns around the equitability of funding distribution and limited funding available for administrative and coordination roles. Finally, participants noted that post-pandemic pressures and reductions in funding pose ongoing risks to their organisations' resilience and their ability to respond to future crises. Table 4 reveals these findings and recommendations.



Photo credit: Joseph Turp

Table 4. Funding and Resources findings and recommendations

Observation	Action	Outcomes of action	Recommendation
Concerns about equitable distribution of funding.	Community partners with knowledge of Bristol's community food networks supported funding allocation decisions.	This highlighted the need for communities to be involved in decision-making around funding allocation. This has been recognised through the One City Food Equality Strategy and Action Plan and projects such as Bristol Local Food Fund and Shaping Places for Healthier Lives adopting more inclusive practices.	Ensure coordination group includes community representatives who also have clear oversight of and decision-making role in funding.
Need for funding to cover operational and coordination costs.	Many organisations relied on volunteer support or found creative ways to operate on a very small budget.	While volunteer support was vital to the COVID-19 food response, as that support reduced, it left a significant gap, placing strain on organisations still trying to meet increased demand.	Future disaster funding frameworks should explicitly include provision for logistical support, administration, and coordination roles.
Diminishing funding post pandemic.	Many projects continue to find creative ways to maintain operations on a small budget; however, some loss of services has occurred.	In Bristol, the Household Support Fund and Crisis Support Fund have been awarded to community-based food projects to continue supporting those most affected by the cost-of-living crisis, however, this approach has not been adopted nationally and is vulnerable to policy changes.	Long term investment in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector is required to support ongoing preparedness and emergency response capacity.

Observation	Action	Outcomes of action	Recommendation
Limited infrastructure capacity for scaling up (e.g. storage, cooking spaces, packing spaces, transport).	To scale up, projects either bought new infrastructure, had infrastructure donated, or relied on organisations with established infrastructure.	Infrastructure capacity was built up over the course of the pandemic, however some of this infrastructure has now been lost. Both locally and nationally, large-scale food warehousing was identified as a key need – not only to support those experiencing food insecurity in everyday circumstances, but especially in the event of a crisis. This is being progressed within Bristol with the creation of a major food and essentials distribution hub for the South West.	Map and inventory existing infrastructure. Disaster funding frameworks should ensure funds for infrastructure purchases. Invest in the city's food storage capacity. Strengthen cross-sector networks to facilitate infrastructure sharing.
Food inputs from surplus redistribution were inconsistent, limiting planning (particularly for cooked food providers).	Emergency food providers used emergency grants allocated from governments and charitable giving to buy food.	Buying food enabled community organisations to have consistent inputs to plan provision and provide culturally appropriate food.	Ensure disaster funding for buying food for local and community-led food support providers.
Inconsistencies in the flow of volunteers presented a challenge in providing a consistent response.	Volunteers were incredibly helpful, but projects that relied too heavily on volunteers struggled, while projects with more paid staff were less heavily affected.	Current continued inconsistency in volunteers.	Recognise the need for emergency funding to cover the core staffing costs of community organisations and continue to recognise the staff of these organisations as key workers in the emergency response.



Photo credit: Ben Pryor

Equitably shared disaster funding is essential to an effective community food response. Our findings highlight the importance of community knowledge in fair funding allocation, so that money reaches the areas and communities that need it the most. While short-term disaster funding makes emergency responses possible, longer-term investment is needed to strengthen the VCSE sector. The impact of the pandemic, the rising cost of living and decreased funding opportunities have left many organisations feeling strained.

2d Wellbeing and Burnout

The rise in food insecurity during the pandemic and the increased demand that is placed on service providers were key challenges. These pressures contributed to the high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout of those working on the frontlines of emergency food provision. Participants spoke of several factors that put pressure on their wellbeing: the speed at which organisations had to scale up food provision, the challenges of working with limited resources, the length of the pandemic and the insecurity of funding.

Participants also described elevated levels of anxiety and stress in the early stages of the pandemic, reflecting the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 and its potential impacts. The slow buildup of the crisis caused ongoing stress as everyone tried to prepare for a situation that wasn't clear or stable. Table 5 shows the findings and recommendations.

Table 5. Wellbeing and Burnout findings and recommendations

Observation	Action	Outcome of action	Recommendation
The reduction in funding following the pandemic, combined with continued high demand on services, placed considerable strain on the wellbeing of service providers.	Some organisations provided wellbeing support to staff or implemented mechanisms to ensure people took time off.	Funding insecurity contributed to increased organisational stress.	Sustainable funding mechanisms are required to support organisational stability and staff wellbeing.
Burnout associated with intense demand on service providers during COVID-19 and the increased cost-of-living.	Some organisations provided wellbeing support for staff or implemented rotas to ensure staff and volunteers took time off (see Vignette). However, there was a general feeling that wellbeing was not adequately prepared for.	Participants suggested that burnout poses a potential barrier to future emergency response capacity. Increased awareness of wellbeing needs within the VCSE sector was also observed.	Wellbeing considerations should be integrated into disaster planning frameworks. Mechanisms for sharing effective wellbeing practices across the network should be supported.
COVID-19 posed a risk to the health of staff and volunteers through infection.	Stakeholders put in place health and safety measures such as setting up A & B teams, Personal Protective Equipment, and risk assessments.	These measures helped safeguard staff and volunteers, limiting the spread of COVID-19.	Establish a coordination group to develop clear, ready-to-use health and safety guidance for a range of disaster scenarios, so organisations can act quickly without having to develop this from scratch.

Although we didn't explore this theme through specific interview questions, the frequent mentions of wellbeing and burnout suggest it's a significant issue that requires more research and that systems to support wellbeing should be included in disaster risk planning.

Vignette - Managing Wellbeing and Burnout

A key part of any disaster response is managing the health and wellbeing of the workforce, both paid and voluntary. The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that these processes were often not yet in place. Alongside this, the emotional toll of the emergency response was often underestimated with processes often being developed after burnout had set in.

The Avon Community Collaboration (pseudonym), a network of residents, charities and organisations working together to support a community in a particular area of Bristol, experienced the emotional and logistical challenges in safeguarding the wellbeing of their workforce. From the beginning, the Avon Community Collaboration (ACC) thought about wellbeing, responding to the ever-changing landscape of COVID-19 and the health and safety concerns it posed for volunteers and paid staff. This included considering the logistical challenges of how volunteers could gather to pack food parcels, risk assessments of the safety of those going leafleting or delivering food and the financial safety of both volunteers and residents in purchasing food. In this last case, to safeguard against financial mishandling, the ACC, with support from a local funder, issued supermarket vouchers.

The emotionally challenging nature of on-the-ground emergency food provision put pressure on volunteers and paid staff alike. To support the emotional wellbeing of the workforce, ACC implemented external supervision of volunteers to provide space to discuss the emotional impact of the work. Additionally, ACC brought in wellbeing trainers as many of their partner organisations were reporting burnout, poor staff wellbeing and mental health.

The ACC stakeholder highlighted the importance of building in wellbeing processes to mitigate stress and emotional distress before it becomes burnout.

'We had to bring in external supervision because people were hearing quite challenging things.'

The knock-on effects of COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis and reduced funding have put continued strain on the VCSE sector. Going forward, embedding wellbeing processes within the VCSE sector and any emergency response is vital in building resilience against future disasters. However, this work should be done alongside work considering what is being asked of the VCSE sector and how we properly resource them to respond.

'They are all operating on a shoestring.'

3. Network Mapping

The networks and relationships that facilitated the COVID-19 emergency food response were a major strength. Figure 3 maps the networks and connections operating during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on our analysis of the interview data. It identifies the types of actors and relationships described by interviewees. This is not intended as a complete map of the network; rather it illustrates the main patterns and types of connections involved. We carried out this analysis after early findings highlighted the importance of mapping this kind of work, to:

1. Highlight the types of actors, roles and relationships
2. Surface dependencies and bottlenecks
3. Consider network equity
4. Explore coordination

The map serves as a prompt for disaster risk planning and informed the development of Workshop 3's activity, where participants explored key actions, roles and emerging stakeholder response structures (see Methodology section).

Bristol Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023–2026





Photo credit: Ben Pryor

The role of community organisations

Through the *Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023-2026* we explored Bristol's emergency food provision during COVID-19, focusing on the period February 2020 – March 2021. As a project team we used an interlinked approach combining interviews and participatory workshops with associated thematic, timeline and network analyses. Our participants predominantly represented Bristol's community food organisations; consequently, our key findings and recommendations here focus primarily on their roles, relationships and networks.

During the early stages of COVID-19, these organisations played a critical role in responding to food supply challenges across the city. They did this because, outside of crisis situations, many of these organisations address specific food needs, supplying food to marginalised communities across Bristol. Their actions during COVID-19 included:

- Providing direct routes for farms and food producers to supply Bristol communities when existing commercial food distribution networks were compromised by staff and food shortages and operational constraints.
- Establishing coordination mechanisms to share information, knowledge and resources, helping to ensure all their clients continued to receive support.

- Coordinating donations from national food suppliers, including access to warehouse space and coordinating food supplies when these became available.
- Organising volunteer-led food delivery networks and providing vehicles to support food distribution.
- Stimulating and supporting grassroots community actions to address gaps in food provision.
- Using their detailed knowledge of local communities to identify vulnerable individuals, understand their needs (including dietary, health, mobility, cultural and religious requirements), and provide appropriate support.

This report has explored our findings across the project activities and highlights the critical role of these community organisations in preparing for and responding to crises affecting food. The recommendations below translate these findings into actionable steps for future food disaster preparedness planning.

Recommendations

These recommendations are for those developing and implementing disaster response plans in the UK: national government, local authorities, emergency services and infrastructure organisations (e.g. water, energy, transport).

1. Establish and sustain a central food crisis coordination group in each local authority area

Our primary recommendation is to support and sustain collaboration across the food system through the establishment of a central coordination group in each local authority, tasked with preparing for and responding to future food-related crises.

This coordination group would bring together local government, community food organisations (nominating their own representatives) and key partners, and build on collaborations formed during COVID-19. The group should oversee preparedness and response — coordinating information sharing, maintaining operational plans and ensuring equitable distribution of resources — with dedicated, sustainable funding and should align with national emergency food plans (Defra).

This recommendation draws on our findings from Workshop 3 where participants prioritised key network roles and tasks identified from the analysis of the interview and workshop data. Findings are summarised in Figures 4 and 5. The diagrams do not represent the organisational structures that operated during the pandemic; instead, they show potential coordination arrangements based on stakeholder reflections.

In this proposed model, a central coordination group would provide strategic oversight while maintaining strong links with organisations performing specialised roles. Organisations within the wider ‘delivery network’ would contribute distinct but equally valuable roles, including food distribution, storage, transport, funding, advice and community support.

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of strong connections between the local government, community organisations and the wider voluntary sector, viewing these relationships as critical to an effective response during future food crises. Our findings identify the key tasks and roles a coordination group should include. The specifics, though, should be co-produced locally to ensure the group meets the needs of its area. In Bristol, potential next steps include working with key stakeholders to co-produce the scope, membership and governance arrangements for a central coordination group.

Figure 4. Proposed network roles

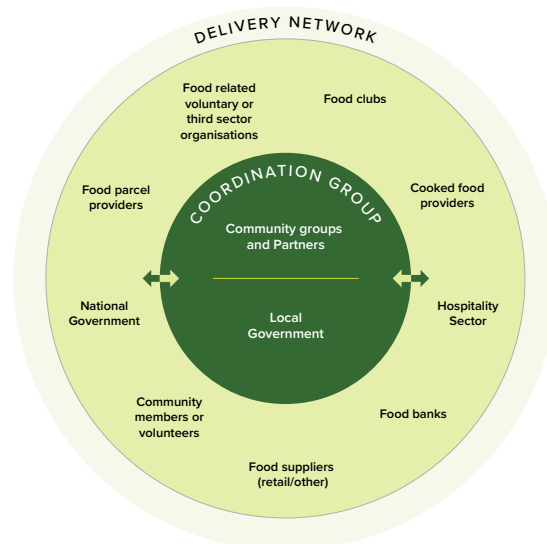
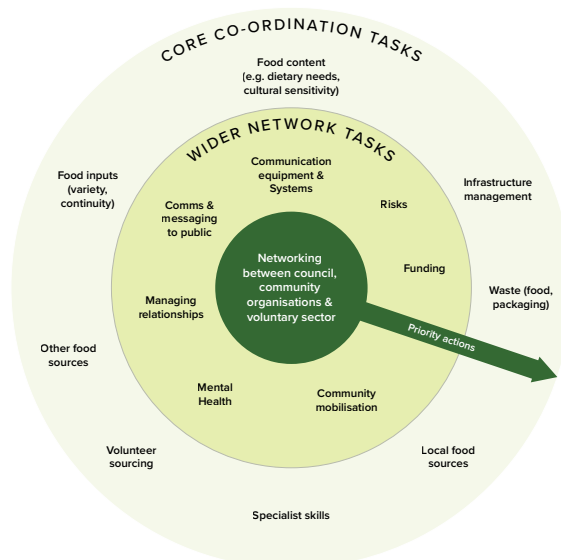


Figure 5. Network tasks



2. Sustain investment in the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector

Our second recommendation is to sustain investment in the VCSE sector to strengthen self-determination and its capacity for emergency preparedness and response. National and regional funding for food crisis preparedness and response should include dedicated support for community food organisations to:

- Map and log existing infrastructure, equipment expertise and organisational capacity across Bristol's food supply system. Dedicated funding and resource should be provided to regularly review and update this information to ensure it remains accurate, accessible and operationally useful during emergencies.
- Map, strengthen and sustain cross-sector networks to facilitate knowledge exchange and resource sharing before and during crises. Ongoing support should be provided to maintain these networks and associated datasets, recognising that their value depends on relationships and information remaining current.
- Provide logistical support, administration and coordination support during a future crisis, in addition to direct food service delivery.
- Procure, prepare and distribute food during future crises, including funding paid staff roles to reduce over-reliance on volunteers and increase organisational resilience.

3. Deepen knowledge sharing and strengthen communication between community food organisations

Our third recommendation is to deepen knowledge sharing and strengthen communication among community food organisations to improve preparedness for future crises. Specific actions include:

- Mapping community strengths, assets and vulnerabilities and maintaining this information in accessible, regularly updated formats.

- Identifying community needs and ensuring adequate funding for culturally appropriate food provision.
- Developing accessible guidance on appropriate food provision for diverse individuals and communities during a crisis.
- Delivering preparedness training and awareness-raising exercises for all food network participants and local communities.
- Identifying a range of potential disaster scenarios and developing coordinated and coherent preparedness plans across community food groups.
- Establishing and maintaining trusted communication channels for use during emergencies.
- Developing clear communication and messaging plans to support information sharing within the food provision network and public communications during disasters.

4. Integrate worker and volunteer wellbeing support into food crisis preparedness plans

Our fourth recommendation is to embed worker and volunteer wellbeing into food emergency planning. This is especially important given the diverse range of roles undertaken, by staff and volunteers across food supply during emergencies. Specific actions to support this include:

- Embedding wellbeing, health and safety considerations into emergency preparedness and disaster response frameworks, recognising that support needs may evolve at different stages of a crisis.
- Developing mechanisms for sharing effective wellbeing practices, resources and lessons learned across the emergency food sector.

Concluding statement

Community organisations with trusted local knowledge, established relationships and a deep understanding of community needs are integral partners in food disaster preparedness and response. Their ability to respond effectively during future crises depends on their continued presence and stability within the everyday food supply landscape.

This requires sustained investment in their core, non-crises activities to maintain the knowledge, networks, infrastructure and organisational capacity needed to mobilise rapidly and effectively when emergencies occur.



Photo credit: Melanie Vaxevanakis

Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary of stages

Stage 1: Recruitment for Interviews, Workshop 1 and Workshop 2

One of the project partner organisations, Feeding Bristol, was uniquely positioned to be able to identify key stakeholders for this research due to its central role in Bristol's COVID-19 food response. During the pandemic, Feeding Bristol played a significant coordinating role in community-based food provision across the city. This entailed mapping and monitoring the available food provision on a weekly basis, connecting groups and organisations to streamline support, identifying gaps in provision and facilitating the sharing of resources where appropriate.

Participants for the interviewees and Workshops 1 & 2 were selected based on their involvement in Bristol's COVID-19 food response. A stakeholder list was developed to represent the diversity of organisations, groups and individuals involved across the city. Stakeholders were selected to reflect:

- Geographical location (e.g., locality-based organisations operating in areas such as Knowle West, Lawrence Hill, Avonmouth etc.).
- Communities of interest served (e.g., people experiencing homelessness, refugees and asylum seeker and older people).
- Types of food provision offered (e.g., food parcels, cooked meals, community freezer, vegetable boxes, meal kits).
- Cross-sector collaborations, including partnerships with organisations from outside the community food sector, (e.g., hospitality businesses providing cooked meals).

In total, 87 stakeholders representing 63 groups and organisations were identified. Of these, 73 stakeholders (representing 51 organisations) were invited to participate in the research. 37 stakeholders (representing 33 organisations) ultimately engaged in at least one research activity, including an interview, Workshop 1, and/or Workshop 2.

Stage 2: Workshop 3 and Workshop 4

For Workshop 3, all stakeholders who had previously participated in the research (through interviews, Workshop 1, or Workshop 2) were invited to attend. In addition, 30 new stakeholders were identified as key decision-makers within Bristol City Council and other strategically important organisations.

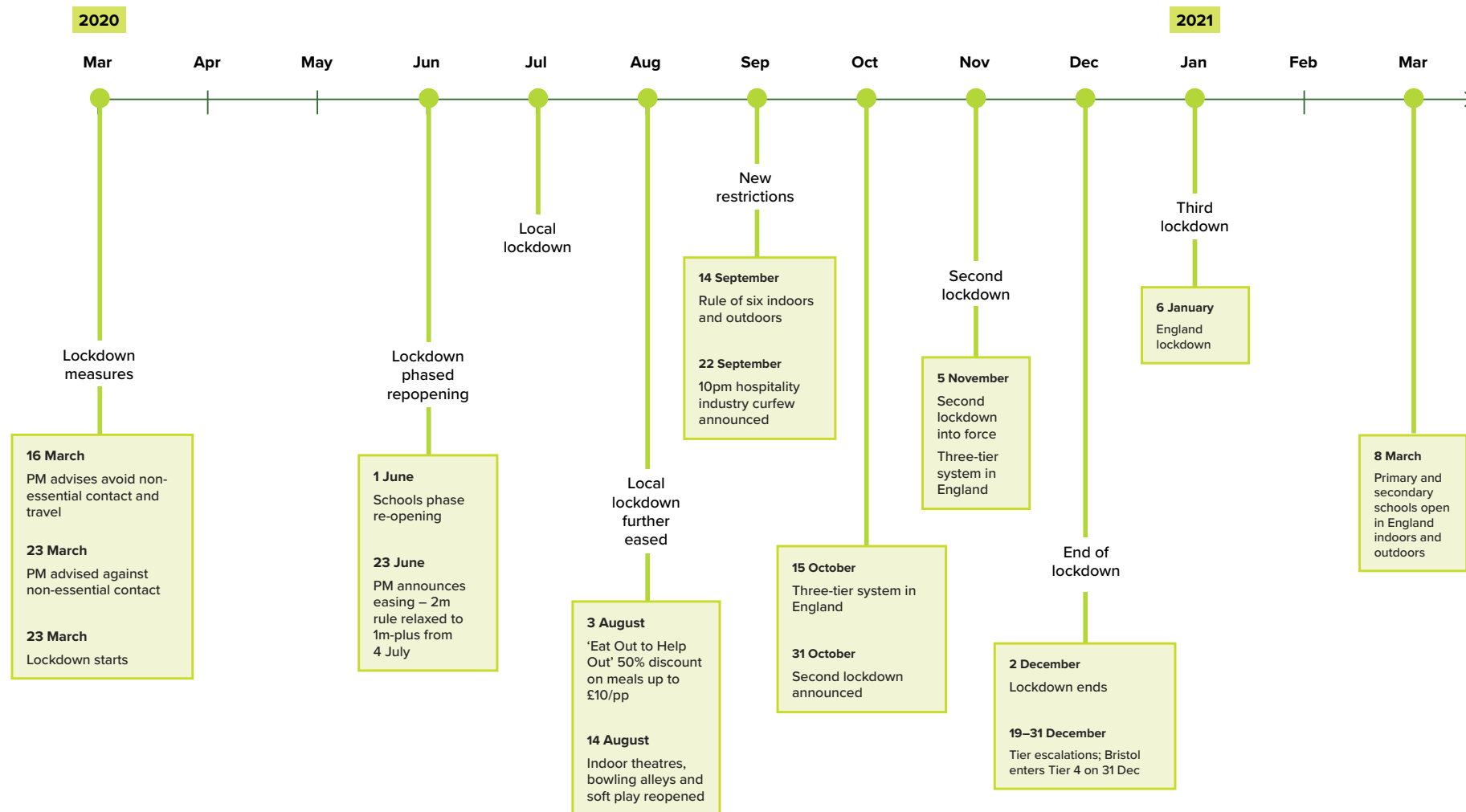
These additional stakeholders were identified by Feeding Bristol and Bristol Food Network through their existing work on food inequality, food security and local food system change. Of the 30 new stakeholders invited, 14 were Bristol City Council officers, four were councillors and the remainder represented organisations and sectors with responsibilities relating to resilience, inequality, poverty and community wellbeing. Despite efforts to broaden participation, only three of the 30 newly identified stakeholders participated in Workshop 3.

Stage 3: Further engagement

A national webinar sharing the project's findings and recommendations has recently taken place, with over 30 attendees from a range of cities and disciplines. A second webinar to share findings and recommendations is planned for September 2026. Planning has also started for a further workshop to bring together the project's stakeholders in 2026, to start shaping what a local food disaster risk coordination group and function might look like. It is hoped that additional funding will be secured to allow the project's recommendations to be fully implemented in Bristol; potentially in collaboration with other places in the UK or Europe who are working on similar projects.

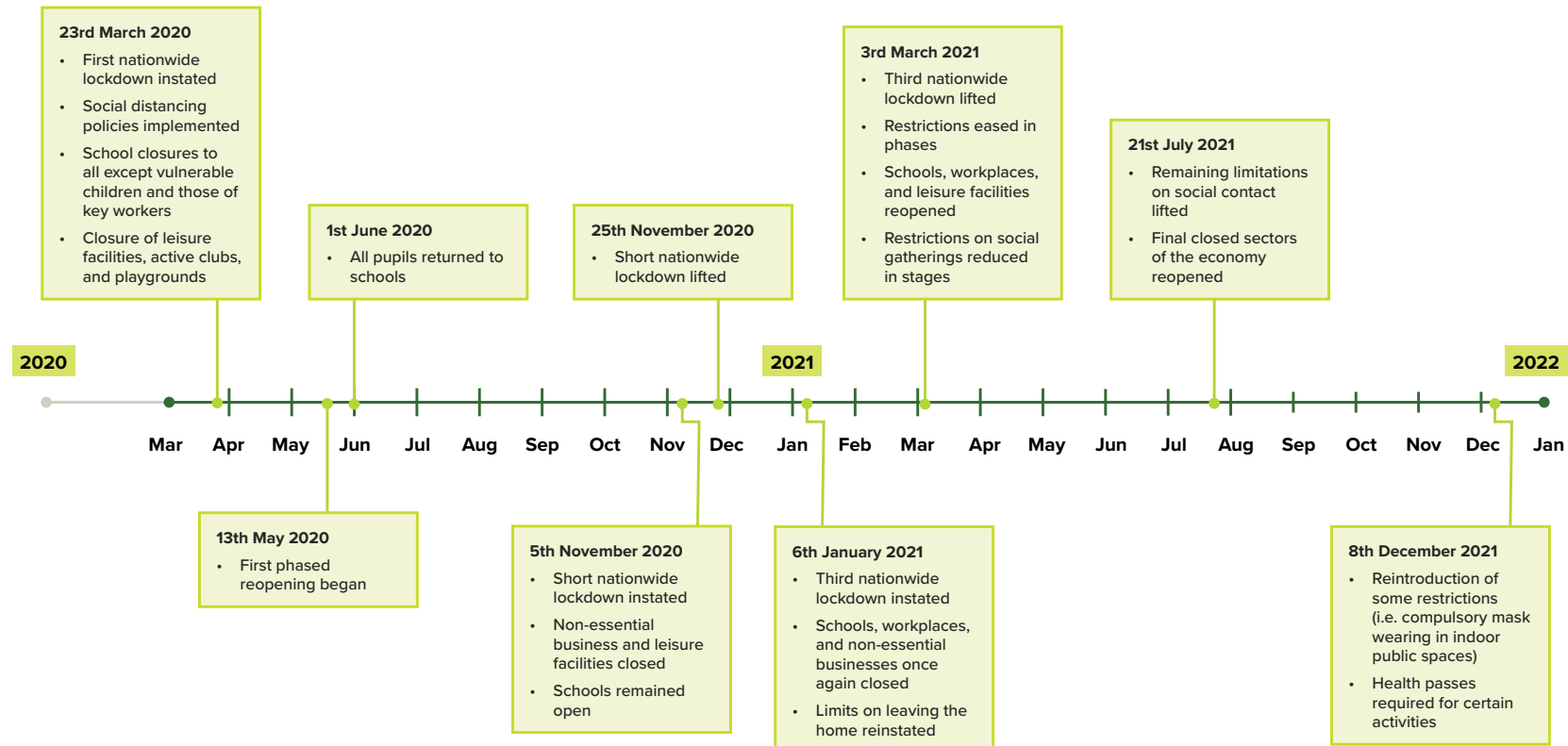
Appendix 2: Timeline prompts

Figure 6. Timeline of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and data collection used as a prompt in workshop 1



3. Amended from <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf> and <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362323318> Health behaviour change among UK adults during the pandemic findings from the COVID-19 cancer attitudes and behaviours study

Figure 7. Timeline of UK Government COVID-19 lockdowns and measures (March 2020 to December 2022) used as a prompt in Workshop



4. Amended from Walker, R. & House, D., Emm-Collison, L., Salway, R., Tibbitts, B., Sansum, K., Reid, T., Breheny, K., Churchward, S., Williams, J., de Vocht, F., Hollingworth, W., Foster, C., Jago, R. (2022). A multi-perspective qualitative exploration of the reasons for changes in the physical activity among 10–11-year-old children following the easing of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in 2021. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 19. 10.1186/s12966-022-01356-3.

Appendix 3: Participant information

The tables below summarise the stakeholders who participated in the project's interviews and workshops. To preserve participant confidentiality, individuals and organisations are not named; instead, participants are described by the type of role they played in Bristol's food response, the localities they served and the communities they supported. In total, 37 stakeholders representing 33 organisations took part in at least one research activity (see Appendix 1 for full recruitment figures).

Table 6. Type of stakeholder involved in interviews and workshops

Types of stakeholders
Food parcel providers
Charities/organisations supporting particular communities with information or coordination
Funder
Cooked food providers
Local retailer
Venues that hosted food provision activities
Food surplus redistributor
Community hubs
Veg box providers
Meal kit providers
Researchers

Table 7. Localities served by participating organisations

Localities served
City wide
East central
North
South East
South
East

Table 8. Communities served by participating organisations

Communities served
Refugees and asylum seekers
Older people
Bristol residents at risk of or experiencing food insecurity
Global majority communities
Disabled people
Somali residents
People experiencing homelessness
Families with young children
Young people at risk of food insecurity
Meal kit providers
Researcher



Photo credit: Jo Ingleby

Questions for interviews for FDRP project

Context

Our project aims to create a disaster risk management plan for the city of Bristol (*with potential for use by other UK cities*). We will build from the learnings gained during the COVID-19 lockdowns to create a workable plan that will ensure a quick and reliable supply of acceptable food to vulnerable people come the next disaster.

To support this work we are interviewing members of some of the key organisations involved in the response to the lockdowns. We aim to interview a representative spread of different types of organisations, feeding different cohorts of people. We will not be able to interview every actor in depth. The purpose of these interviews is to capture details not covered in the existing reports, including practical details about the sources, storing, preparation and distribution of food and about the communication with and identification of the service users the food was given to.

Following these interviews we plan to run workshops where key actors will discuss what they would've liked to see for future disasters. We hope to use the experience gained during the lockdowns to inform our future plans with the direct input of the people who did the work.

Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed. As discussed, I'll record and transcribe the interview, but it will be fully anonymised. As a reminder, if there are any questions you're uncomfortable with, you can say you'd prefer not to answer and don't need to give a reason. I anticipate this will take up to an hour – I'll keep track of the time but let me know if you need to leave by a specific time.

Warm-up question:

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself – how long have you lived in Bristol, how you came to end up working/volunteering with X organisation, and what type of work you did for them?

- 1.1.** Can you remember when you started working with the organisation, and when you finished?

2. What needs were organisations providing food support during the COVID-19 pandemic aiming to respond to?

- 2.1.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how was your organisation involved in the provision of food support, if at all?

» Can you summarise the kind of support you were providing?

- 2.2.** Please could you provide a brief overview of the food support your organisation provided during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- 2.3.** How was the support you provided during the pandemic different to the support you were providing before the pandemic?

» What influenced these changes?

» Why do you think no changes were required to the support you were offering?

- 2.4.** How was your organisation formed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- 2.5.** What were the primary needs you were trying to meet for people using your service?

3. What were the operational strengths and limitations of these responses?

- 3.1.** How would you characterise the overall performance of the food support provided by your organisation?

- 3.2.** Are there any aspects of your support provision that you felt worked particularly well?

» Can you tell me about the reasons you feel this was successful?

- 3.3.** Are there any aspects of your support provision that you felt did not work so well?

» Why do you think that was?

- 3.4.** How did you communicate with people who were using your service during the lockdown periods?

- 3.5.** What kinds of challenges did you face when trying to communicate with people using your service?

- 3.6.** Can you tell me about the volunteer resources you had?

» Were you able to secure enough volunteer resource to meet your support needs?

- 3.7.** How would you characterise the food storage space available to you, if any? Please comment on both the benefits and problems.

- 3.8.** How would you characterise the food preparation space available to you, if any? Please comment on both the benefits and problems.

- 3.9.** What challenges did you face in sourcing food that met the requirements of your clients?

» Were you able to readily source food that met their requirements?

4. How might the changes to food provision since the pandemic affect responses to acute food need in the future?

- 4.1.** Would your organisation consider providing food support for in the event of a future scenario creating sudden very high food insecurity?
 - » What kinds of scenarios and conditions can you imagine providing (or not providing) food support in future?
 - » Why do you think you would/wouldn't?
- 4.2.** If lockdowns like those in COVID-19 were to occur in the future, what kind of position do you think your organisation or others like it, would be in to respond compared to 2020?
 - » Do you think it would be a better or worse position?
- 4.3.** Based on your experiences, what learnings from the COVID-19 food response would you like (be most useful) for your organisation or others like it, to act on in the event of a future scenario of sudden high demand for food support?
- 4.4.** To what extent would your organisation or others like it be in a position to implement these learnings?
- 4.5.** Can you tell me about any changes in terms of the food supply chain that you feel would positively or negatively impact future provision of food support?
- 4.6.** Can you tell me about any changes to the funding situation that you feel would positively or negatively impact future provision of food support?

Closing question/wrap-up:

- 1. Those are the main questions and topics I wanted to cover. Is there anything else you'd like to add or share?
- 2. Is there anyone else who you worked with during the COVID-19 that you would suggest we talk to?
- 3. Where are you working now and on what projects?
- 4. Thank you again for your time and sharing your experience...

