

Local communities must be involved in disaster risk plans for food security

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About the research

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how unprepared the UK is for major crises affecting food security. 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 disaster risk plans focused on food security for the most vulnerable. National (Defra) and local authority stakeholders are now developing emergency plans, making this a critical moment to act on lessons from COVID-19.

The Food Disaster Risk Planning Project 2023-2026 examined Bristol's emergency food provision during COVID-19, using interviews and participatory workshops with community food organisations, local community groups, Bristol City Council, and local businesses. It is the first study of Bristol's food response to the pandemic and the only published city-level account aimed at improving community-centred, place-based disaster risk planning.

Disasters play out locally with communities acting as first-line responders and providing critical local knowledge. Future plans must build on and sustain their capacity to support those at risk of food insecurity. Learning from the experiences of these organisations – and sustaining them – is vital to mitigate future shocks. Though focused on Bristol, the findings apply to all local-level preparedness everywhere.

Policy recommendations

These four recommendations are aimed at those developing and implementing disaster response plans in the UK, including 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**
- 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**

Implementing our recommendations and involving communities will support an effective response as well as bring efficiencies and savings. We suggest funding should come from Defra as lead agency for food supply disruption, in coordination with local authorities.

Key findings

Findings draw on a literature review, 22 interviews and 4 workshops held between 2023-2025, focusing on the COVID-19 response, particularly February 2020–March 2021. The full methods and findings can be read in our report: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/food-disaster-planning/>.

Community organisations played a critical role in the initial response to Covid-related food supply challenges in Bristol during the early stages of the pandemic. They did this because, in non-crisis times, they serve a specific need in supporting marginalised communities.

The findings from this research are organised across four key themes::

- **Networks and Partnerships:** Existing and newly formed community networks and relationships were critical in facilitating and coordinating the emergency food response to COVID-19.
- **Knowledge and Information:** Community knowledge and trusted relationships supported identifying vulnerable communities, sharing information, and connecting them to services.
- **Funding and Resources:** The availability of government funding, philanthropic funding, and successful community crowdfunding was key to the quick mobilisation of community groups, their ability to pay staff, and buy food.
- **Wellbeing and Burnout:** Pressures on frontline food support providers due to increased food insecurity and health risks contributed to high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, compromising sustained support.

Community organisations with local knowledge are integral partners in food disaster responses. Their continued role in crisis response depends on sustainable funding for their everyday work: this is what maintains knowledge, networks and organisational stability and the capacity to respond rapidly and effectively in times of crisis.



Photo credit: Alice Peperell

Further information

This has been a collaborative project co-led by researchers at the University of the West of England and University of Bristol and non-profit organisations Bristol Food Network and Feeding Bristol. The full list of contributing authors is in the report.

The full report provides detailed methods, analysis and references and is intended to support evidence-based preparedness planning. Read the report here: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/food-disaster-planning/>, hosted by UoB primarily, linked widely.

This project was funded through the following awards between 2023-2026: Research England Third Sector Impact Seedcorn Fund, University of the West of England Collaborative Seed Fund, ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Impact Award, UWE Higher Education Incentive Fund.

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