



Have the measures announced by the Government to mitigate the disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic been proportionate, effective and timely?

Plunkett Foundation is a national charity that supports and represents the network of rural community businesses across the UK. Within this network, there are 400 rural community shops and 130 community pubs. The network of rural community businesses are playing a vital role during this crisis as they are supporting vulnerable members of rural and isolated communities across the UK. We have seen community businesses respond to the drastically changing needs of their communities during lockdown and at a time when the most vulnerable members of our society are self-isolating. They have adapted their services to run home delivery services, takeaway services and introduced new and enhanced retail services to ensure members of their communities can access fresh and essential groceries, often utilising supplies that otherwise would be serving the catering industry. Our network are investing significant volunteer hours to run these services as they are aware that lives will be put at risk if local residents continue to visit and shop at larger supermarkets.

Despite the vital role our members are playing, they are experiencing great difficulty in accessing basic and essential groceries and have been failed by national wholesalers. Our members have reported that wholesale deliveries and orders have been cancelled outright, and if they do receive deliveries, they are short by about 60%, with the same items not being supplied time and time again (tinned food, pasta, rice, cleaning products, flour etc). Many have adapted and are sending volunteers to wholesale cash and carry depots, but again finding shelves greatly depleted. Sending volunteers to a depot is not a solution as it is generating additional journeys and outings that should be avoided during a time of social distancing; it is time consuming and tiring for the volunteers involved, increases fuel usage which is costly and not environmentally friendly – and these visits often greatly disappoint in terms of what supplies are available.

At the time of writing, Plunkett and our members are unaware of measures introduced by government that will help address and rebalance this supply crisis, let alone seeing new measures alleviate their concerns and challenges. However, we are aware of a national narrative that is encouraging the public to utilise larger supermarkets that have replenished shelves and removed product purchase limitations. On behalf of our members, we ask why supermarkets are receiving essential groceries, whilst independent rural retailers continue to be cut off from the provision of basic supplies?

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

Again, we are unaware of any measures being implemented that are addressing the needs of independent rural retailers and community shops. Where they have managed to adapt their service and source alternative supply to alleviate the pressures put upon them to meet increased demand from local vulnerable residents, this has been down to the innovation, flexibility and ingenuity of staff and volunteers within the community businesses – not down to any government schemes or interventions. The response of rural community businesses across the UK needs to be recognised, valued and actively supported by central government and the groceries industry.



During this crisis, we are witnessing local suppliers and producers step up and expand and enhance their services to supply rural community shops. The networks that provide fresh healthy produce to rural retailers have proved to be loyal and resilient and a vital source of supply during this time.

However, access to healthy food is vital, but access to nutritious food for all ages needs to be recognised. Many older residents, or those in poor health may not be able to prepare nutritious meals from scratch, and in fact access to basics such as tinned soups, for example, is what is keeping them nourished and healthy. For those vulnerable members that require additional home care, visits are often wholly focused on medical needs, not meal prep, therefore access to quick, nutritious easy to prepare food is vital to keep them well. This is again why it is essential that retailers serving remote rural communities are able to source essential basic groceries as well as fresh bread and fruit and veg.

Our members are looking to government, wholesalers and the wider groceries industry, to ensure the adequate flow of essential basics to rural retailers. In turn our members have the knowledge and volunteer networks established to prioritise and distribute appropriate food deliveries to those that need it the most. At the same time, they are performing a much needed task of also checking in on the wellbeing of vulnerable local residents during this crisis.

What further impacts could the current pandemic have on the food supply chain, or individual elements of it, in the short to medium-term and what steps do industry, consumers and the Government need to take to mitigate them?

Alongside our members, and also based on feedback from national wholesalers we fear that the supply chain will continue to disadvantage independent rural community shops. This cannot continue to be the case as lives will be put at risk and our members will be unable to continue to resource the additional pressure put on their time and capacity visiting cash and carry depots.

Government must work with suppliers and wholesalers and supermarkets to ensure fair supply distribution and allocation of essential goods that are in high demand and be prepared to take action where there is malpractice. We cannot afford to see larger supermarkets replenished ahead of small independents rural retailers, on whom so many vulnerable individuals rely.

It is fair to assume that online delivery will continue to be put under great strain and therefore the pressure and demand will continue on our rural community shop members. Government also needs to recognise that online deliveries are only part of the solution as many of our vulnerable and elderly rural residents are not able to access online services and do not have the family or friend support network to manage online ordering on their behalf – as and when slots are even available. And over-reliance on this as a solution will be wholly inadequate in terms of reaching the many rural residents not online or without the IT skills to complete such orders.

Reports from our members also suggest that non-retailers have established new cash and carry accounts to bulk buy for domestic needs that again disadvantage the retailers relying on wholesalers to supply their customers. These practices must be monitored and prevented by wholesalers.

What our rural community shop members need is:



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- Reduced minimum order quantities and frequent deliveries to help manage cash flow and storage capacity
- Priority ordering on some essential line of stock
- The reintroduction of click and collect services for rural community shops
- Support to the catering trade suppliers to adapt their delivery sizes and package sizes to support retailers
- Monitoring of pricing to ensure products costs do not increase as a result of demand exceeding supply. Some members are reporting wholesale prices exceeding the pack marked price of certain products

**How effectively has the Government worked with businesses and NGOs to share information on disruptions to the supply chain and other problems, and to develop and implement solutions?
How effectively have these actions been communicated to the public?**

Again, we are unaware of measures implemented that address the challenges that our members are facing every day since the start of the Covid-19 crisis. Plunkett has benefitted from the listening ear of central government, MPs, DEFRA, wholesalers and retailers but to date we have not been aware of a response to the issues raised.

Plunkett is committed to continuing to work alongside DEFRA and the groceries industry on behalf of our members until we see a fair supply and distribution to the rural community shop network across the UK working tirelessly to support those most in need at this time of crisis.