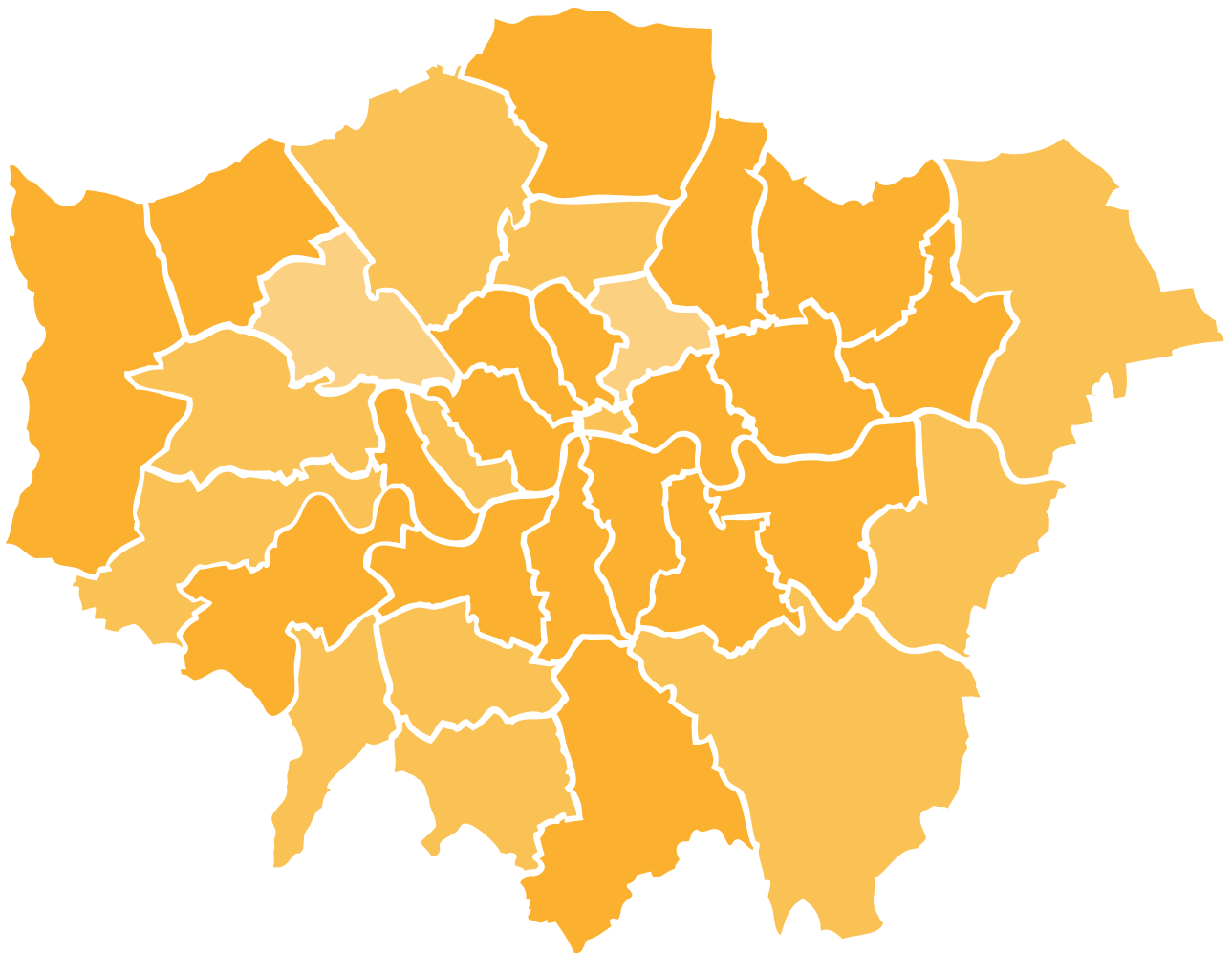


Response, Resilience and Recovery:

London's Food Response to Covid-19

November 2020



Foreword



Debbie Weekes-Bernard

Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement

Covid-19 has exposed pre-existing structural inequalities and a lack of resilience in London's food system. It has exacerbated challenges many Londoners face accessing healthy, sustainable, culturally appropriate diets; placed unsustainable demands on the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS); exposed over-reliance on complex, 'just-in-time' supply chains which may be further compromised by Brexit; and increased health inequalities. But we know these flaws existed long before the pandemic.

In 2019, the Mayor commissioned the UK's first regional measure of food insecurity, showing 1.5 million adults and 400,000 children in London regularly struggled to afford or access food.ⁱ The pandemic has pushed millions more Londoners into financial hardship and made life more precarious for those already struggling.

One million London households with children experienced food insecurity after one month of lockdown, and 100,000 children skipped meals because their family couldn't access sufficient food. Nationally, the Trussell Trust reported an 81% increase in people supported by emergency food parcels between April-June 2020 compared to the previous year,ⁱⁱ and the Independent Food Aid Network reported a 177% rise.ⁱⁱⁱ Although demand levelled out as the job retention scheme and other support became available, the pandemic's ongoing impact on income means the Trussell Trust forecasts 670,000 more people nationally will be classed as destitute by the end of 2020, meaning a 61% increase in need compared to last winter.^{iv}

The strong local government response was inspirational, protecting residents from financial hardship and food insecurity; delivered in partnership with the VCS. It needs to be adequately funded by the Government.

Since 2015, 'Beyond the Food Bank' has measured ways London boroughs have tackled food insecurity. It has explored ways councils can increase Healthy Start uptake, help children access food in term time and school holidays, improve good food access for older Londoners, ensure Londoners can access community food growing spaces and protect, promote and support breastfeeding.

This year's report shows how impressively London boroughs have responded to Covid-19's impact on our food system, especially given the financial pressures they face as a result of the pandemic's impact and the cumulative effect of cuts to core grants. I want to be absolutely clear that I acknowledge that boroughs are being forced to make unenviable choices about which vital services should be prioritised – and not all will be in a position to adopt the recommendations of this report. In setting out the differing approaches that boroughs have taken we hope to enable understanding and learning from the differing approaches taken to coordinating local emergency responses, and building greater food resilience for the future.

This report also demonstrates the importance of partnership working. Every local authority worked with the London Food Alliance, local VCS partners and the Mayor to establish Community Food Hubs to distribute food supplies. It also reveals how councils benefitted from having existing food and anti-poverty strategies, enabling them to respond rapidly to support residents, businesses and communities. Where councils had local food partnerships, food poverty alliances or strong links with the VCS, they coordinated extremely effective emergency responses. Where councils had 'cash-first' approaches to maximise household incomes alongside 'wraparound services' to address the causes of financial hardship, they amplified support to reach those most in need.

The pandemic has enabled many councils to increase their focus on food. New food partnerships and support for vulnerable residents shows the importance of a multidisciplinary, cross-cutting approach to food insecurity and resilience.

To support these partnerships, the extraordinary response of local authorities and VCS partners must be matched by commitment from the Government to restore funding for Local Welfare Assistance and continue funding the other support needed to tackle poverty as the driver of food insecurity.



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Executive summary

Sustain's food network in the capital, London Food Link, has published two annual reports since 2011 and 2015 measuring progress by London's local authorities on key areas of food and farming policy – [*Beyond the Food Bank*](#) and [*Good Food for London*](#). Past reports assessed specific action that councils can take to support children to access food during and outside of term time, older people to access food safely in their homes, and all Londoners to access affordable, sustainable and healthy produce locally, amongst other areas of work. Such actions help local authorities meet the objectives of the Mayor of London's Food Strategy.

This year the reports have been merged to examine London councils' food response to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Using data provided by councils, the *Response Resilience and Recovery* report assesses action taken by London's local authorities to address food poverty and enhance a good food environment and economy locally. The report looks holistically at the foundations that councils had in place before the pandemic, how councils built on these to coordinate the local emergency response, and whether councils are ensuring greater food resilience as part of their recovery plan. As well as specific findings contained within the body of the report, our analysis resulted in these overall findings:

Where councils had strong foundations prior to Covid-19, they were able to build on these to quickly develop sound emergency responses. In particular, where councils had any of the following in place, they were able to build on these quickly and 'slot in' new support:

- existing relationships with the local voluntary and community sector (VCS)
- food poverty action plans or other planning work relating to addressing long-term food poverty
- cash-first approaches that prioritised maximising household incomes amongst poorer residents.

Many councils forged new ways of working during Covid-19, and this is informing the recovery phase. As a result of the emergency situation, many councils started working intensively with the local VCS for the first time to deliver food and support, and some even started new forms of direct financial support to residents. In these cases, councils are building this new work into the recovery phase, for example by working collaboratively with partners to decide next steps, funding new partners, or in some cases establishing new alliances or partnerships as the framework for future local action on food.

Some councils are so stretched that they are having to rely too much on the voluntary and community sector, which is itself under severe strain. Local voluntary and community sector groups have done brilliant and essential work throughout this crisis. Whilst this is vital in an immediate sense, in some cases it enables local government to roll back direct provision where what is needed is publicly funded, consistent support. For example, several meals on wheels services have recently closed, in part because similar services are being run by voluntary groups at lower cost. This VCS provision is often difficult to sustain and sometimes lacks the capacity to meet the scale of need and may also struggle with vital risk management or quality control.

Councils have realised the importance of a diverse and resilient food supply. From local food growing, through to smaller shops, catering services, markets and other food enterprises, all have played their part in ensuring that food got to those in need. Many were already starting to recognise the role of neighbourhood shops and markets in providing access to healthy and affordable food, but during the crisis this has become more pertinent. Community food growing, while not always seen as a part of food production, has also shown its value in reaching those in need. More action is needed to ensure food is integrated in green recovery plans, which would also have co-benefits for climate and nature, which are vital considerations for all of us.

Survey and approach

The survey and approach was designed by the team at Sustain, based on our previous work and engagement with councils on food issues. Data and information for the report was collected through a survey to councils who self-reported on action taken and future plans. Questions were grouped into seven themes, each of which included sub-sections on a specific topic. For instance, in Children's Health, there are sub-sections on Healthy Start, free school meals, and holiday provision with food.

The maps in each section represent action taken by London councils across all of the areas of work that we asked questions about within that theme. 'Leadership', meaning concerted action on a number of points in each topic or theme, has been highlighted. We have endeavoured to be thorough, and to highlight good practice that demonstrates what is possible. However, we also recognise that Covid-19 has been a very challenging time, with many

people and organisations working at pace to respond to an alarming and large-scale food emergency. Any omissions are unintentional, and we will be happy to highlight additional good practice in future.

Within each of the sections in our survey we asked multiple choice questions on:

- What food-related support councils had in place before Covid-19
- What councils did on food in response to the Covid-19 pandemic
- What councils are doing on food to recover from Covid-19

We have grouped councils under 'leadership', 'good practice', or 'some action', depending on the level and range of actions taken. We recorded councils that did not report any action or did not respond to the survey as 'not reporting any action or data'.

Theme	Council activities or work
Partnerships and collaborative approaches to action on food	Having a food poverty action plan Having a food poverty alliance or sustainable food partnership locally Having strong working relationships with the local food voluntary and community sector, for example through commissioning
'Cash-first' approaches	Investing in local welfare assistance, Discretionary Housing Payment or equivalent local schemes Having a low minimum Council Tax payment Being an accredited London Living Wage employer
Food access	Investing in meals on wheels services and other food support for older adults and disabled people Ensuring all residents have physical access to good food
Children's access to food	Investing in the Healthy Start Voucher scheme Supporting access to free school meals Supporting holiday provision with food Promoting breastfeeding through the Unicef UK Baby Friendly scheme
Food growing and production	Supporting food growing, including allotments, community gardens, orchards and larger scale farming Increasing access to land Ensuring food growing is supported and protected in local plans Working in partnership with external organisations to initiate and support food growing
Good food economy	Supporting smaller food retailers, enterprises and markets to supply healthy and sustainable food Creating a Good Food Retail Plan across public health and economic development Helping reduce climate impact of small food businesses including markets
Climate and nature emergency	Including a focus on food in climate strategies or action plans or in any 'green recovery' work
Healthier Catering Commitment	Supporting the Healthier Catering Commitment or equivalent schemes

Recommendations for action

1

Support and invest in a **food poverty alliance or food partnership locally**, ensuring that local voluntary and community sector groups are included as equal partners, whilst the council invests staff time in coordination and oversight of the group. Ensure **new relationships formed during the crisis are continued** and strengthened.

2

Jointly write a **food poverty action plan** that focuses on building more resilient local food systems and emergency support in the aftermath of Covid-19, and ensure the plan's aims are carried out collaboratively with partners. Where a plan is in place, **collaboratively update this in light of Covid-19** and its aftermath.

3

Centre a '**cash-first**' **approach to tackling food poverty** by drawing on any mechanisms available to the local authority which maximise household incomes for poorer residents. This should include **welfare assistance funds, low Council Tax payments** and the integration of **wraparound services** with emergency financial and food support.

4

Map and invest in access to healthy food for residents, including encouraging existing or new retailers to sell fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate and local produce in areas that lack physical access to food.

5

Fund and support food services for older and disabled people, including **meals on wheels** services.

6

Promote the Healthy Start scheme, free school meals, breakfast clubs and holiday provision with food for all potentially eligible families. Allocate staff time and funding to the coordination and promotion of these.

7

Set targets to increase capacity of **local food production** and distribution and related skills, utilising community interest.

8

Target additional business and **economic support to smaller retailers and fresh-produce markets** and stalls to increase sales and access of healthy, sustainable food, helping to boost the local economy and improve health.

9

Include **action on food waste**, healthy and sustainable **food procurement** and **land use and planning** in **climate and nature action plans**. Engage citizens, businesses and council partners in these processes.

10

Join the **Healthier Catering Commitment scheme** or initiate independent efforts to encourage caterers and food businesses to make simple, healthy improvements to their food.

Council leadership in food across London

In previous years, the *Good Food for London* and *Beyond the Food Bank* reports provided league tables of the 33 London boroughs, comparing their performance against well-established criteria. This has proved a helpful way to encourage friendly competition and to recognise and stimulate progress over the time that these reports have been produced. This work has supported the step-by-step implementation of the Mayor of London's Healthy and Sustainable Food Strategy, with impressive results.

In this extraordinary year of 2020, we recognise that many councils are undertaking significant new work on food, and that councils and the organisations and communities they work with are under immense strain – they have been responding to the Covid-19 coronavirus and food emergencies with vigour but often limited resources. Consequently, we do not think it appropriate this year to produce a league table. However, we would like to highlight leadership and good practice, demonstrating what is possible, with the factors that contribute to this explored in more depth throughout the report. We hope this will serve as an inspiration and guide to catalyse a healthy, sustainable and resilient recovery for London's food system, and also in a way that will help us to tackle inequalities, climate change and the restoration of nature – for the benefit of everyone.

The following London councils have shown cross-cutting leadership across their action on food: Tower Hamlets, Islington, Southwark, Lambeth, Waltham Forest, Greenwich, Croydon, and Lewisham. There is much to learn from the joined-up approaches to food in these boroughs, where numerous and impressive initiatives have been supported.

All other councils have shown varying degrees of activity across their action on food. Some have shown good practice in particular areas, as shown by our maps throughout the report.



London's food in numbers

- **1.9 million Londoners** regularly struggled to afford or access food before the Covid-19 pandemic^v
- **210,006 emergency food parcels** were distributed by 115 Trussell Trust food bank centres across London between April and September 2020^{vi} while at least 148 London-based independent food banks, Salvation Army centres and schools distributed emergency food parcels on top of other types of food aid provision^{vii}
- **People identifying as Black or Black British were significantly overrepresented** in those that need to use Trussell Trust food banks (9% vs. 3% of the UK population)^{viii}
- In London, **32% of families are registered for Free School Meals**, which is higher than the UK average of 29%^{ix}
- Emissions associated with food account for an estimated **13% of total consumption-based emissions** in major world cities like London - food is therefore a bigger source of consumption-based emissions than transport, clothing and aviation^x
- **Half of families with the immigration status 'no recourse to public funds'** in the UK say they have had at least one day when their children went without a hot meal because they could not afford it^{xi}
- Roughly **one in ten** (8% of) **economically deprived areas** in England & Wales **are "food deserts"** – areas that lack access to affordable, healthy food retailers. And in London and the South of England essential food items are on average more expensive than other parts of the country^{xii}
- An estimated **200,000 older Londoners** are at risk of household food insecurity^{xiii}
- Roughly **30,000 people** are on a waiting list for an allotment in London^{xiv}

How are councils taking action?

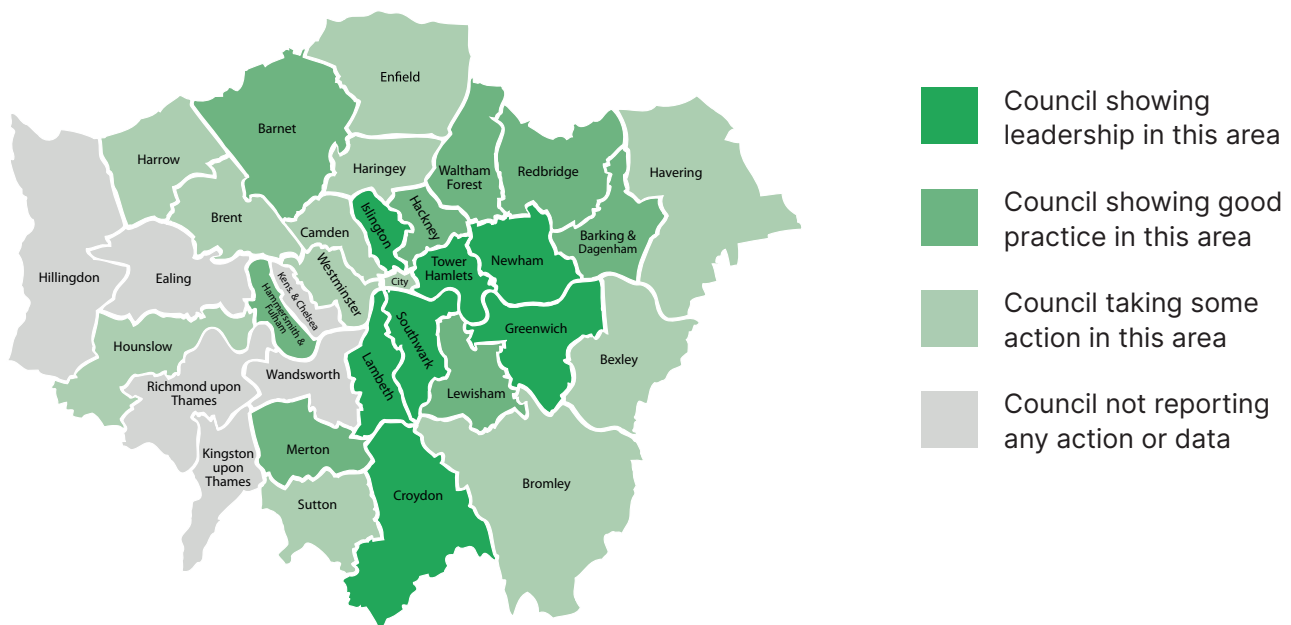
- 22 London councils had **Local Welfare Assistance Schemes** in place before Covid-19, with 18 of these increasing funding to these schemes in response to the pandemic
- Only 9 London councils now invest in a **meals on wheels service** for their borough
- 16 London councils had a **food poverty action plan** in place prior to the pandemic, with 13 of these having a multi-sector **group responsible for implementing the plan** and its recommendations
- All 33 London councils **worked collaboratively with the voluntary and community sector** to a significant degree in response to Covid-19 to distribute food aid and alleviate financial hardship
- 6 councils are now formalising relationships with the voluntary and community sector into **new food poverty alliances or food partnerships**. This is on top of the existing 15 partnerships and alliances in London
- 20 London councils have declared a **climate and nature emergency plan that includes** action on reducing the **environmental impact of food**
- 22 London councils have **policies that promote access to healthy food** retail or limit density of unhealthy food retailers, with 9 of these being a Good Food Retail Plan
- 18 London councils provided resources including small **grants for community growing projects** before the Covid-19 pandemic
- 15 councils actively **supported community gardens** in their borough **to stay open** during the pandemic

Partnerships and collaborative approaches to action on food

At the local level, action on food poverty, sustainability, or access to land for community or commercial food production can often be done in disparate, piecemeal ways. There can consequently be large gaps in terms of what is needed and missed opportunities to build resilience. When local actors share knowledge, experience and information and work together as part of a joint plan to address food or related issues, this builds a more resilient, diverse and sustainable place-based food system.

Addressing the lack of equity, sustainability, and health in our food system can be done at the local level through food partnerships, food poverty alliances, or less formalised joint work between the council, VCS, and business. To combat food poverty specifically, these groups can work together towards shared goals, formalised most effectively through a food poverty action plan. Councils can and should take coordination and leadership roles in this work, through convening meetings, sharing information, and coordinating - sometimes funding - concerted action.

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets council is a key member of the Tower Hamlets Food Partnership, a multi-sector partnership committed to improving the local food system and reducing food poverty. The partnership was established by the council and the *Women's Environmental Network (Wen)* and is now coordinated by Wen. Before the pandemic, the council collaborated with partners to develop a food poverty joint strategic needs assessment. In response to the pandemic, with support from partners and volunteers, the council set up the VCS Food Hub to support roughly 27 voluntary sector organisations providing food and cooked meals. These groups were well-placed to reach people likely to struggle to afford and access food during Covid-19, thanks to their existing links with seldom-reached families, older people, refugees and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Case study: Croydon Council

Croydon Council's Community Connect/Food Stop takes the council's Gateway approach out into the community. It is a partnership of over 50 voluntary, community, faith, public and private sector organisations working together to support residents. In response to Covid-19, Community Connect Local Collection Points were scaled up to enable more organisations to access FareShare food at no cost, and a Covid-19 Emergency Fund was created for groups to apply to.

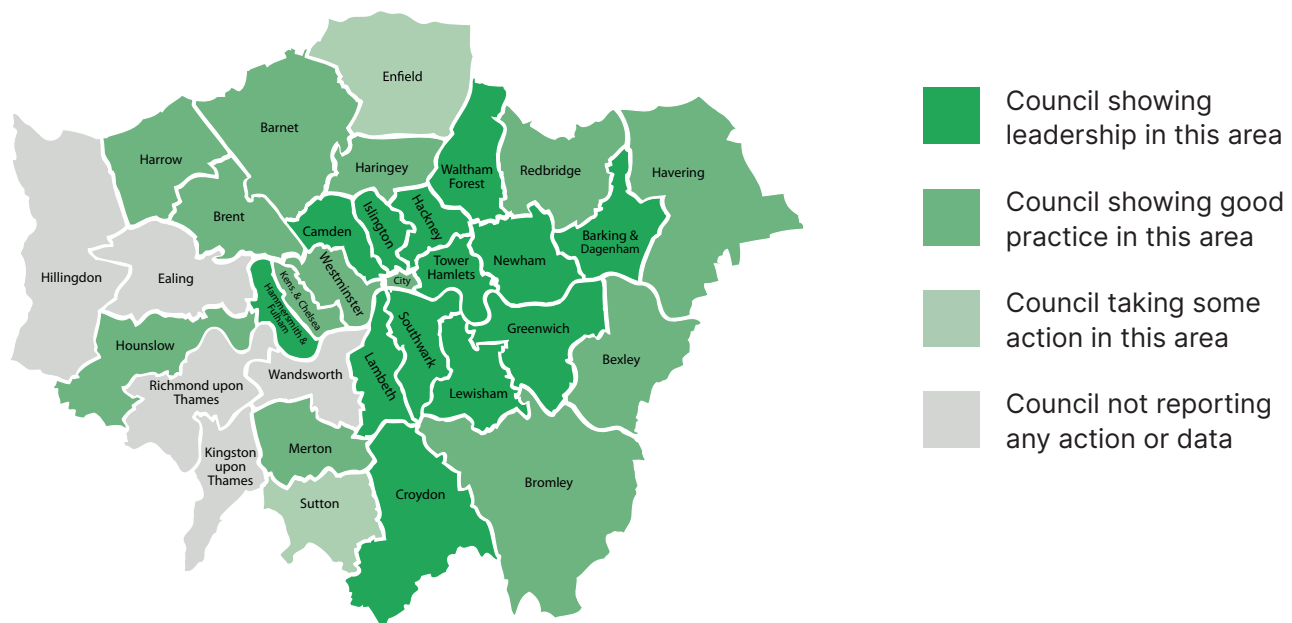
As part of the recovery phase, the council's Food Transition Plan summarises Croydon's arrangements for addressing food insecurity and demand for food aid. The Transition Plan outlines how underlying drivers of food insecurity will be addressed and what support is needed for residents affected by the social, health and economic impacts of Covid-19.

Council action on food partnerships and alliances

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, all London councils that responded to our survey worked with the local VCS in some way to coordinate food aid. Where joint work was already in place however, a collaborative approach that maximises local resources was easier to enact quickly. For example, of the 13 local authorities with a group responsible for implementation of their food poverty action plan, 10 drew on this group to plan the emergency response, with 10 also directly using the recommendations in their action plan to formulate their crisis response.

Where seeds of a partnership model existed prior to the crisis, these quickly blossomed into well-functioning partnerships or alliances during initial lockdown and for many councils this model is key to their recovery planning. For example, in Newham, a latent food poverty alliance pre-dated Covid-19. The necessity to work at pace and communicate regularly during lockdown accelerated the full formation of an alliance. Several councils including, Bexley and Hounslow, are building on systems set up during Covid-19 and formalising these into an alliance as part of their recovery work.

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis



What can councils do?

- Invest in the establishment of a food poverty alliance or food partnership.** The council should be a significant partner within the group, staff time should be allocated to it, and ideally funding provided to enable action. The alliance should work collaboratively with partners as equals. Where joint work has emerged organically as a result of activities undertaken during Covid-19, councils should help to formalise this into a more established alliance or partnership.
- Jointly write a food poverty action plan with local partners** who are invested in the plan and who work together to ensure that the ideas and actions within it are implemented. Fund staff time to coordinate this multi-sectoral action group. Councils with existing plans should update these to include a focus on food system resilience and recovery post Covid-19.

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The London Boroughs Food Group: joining up work on food during Covid-19

The London Boroughs Food Group is a well-established way for councils to share good practice and connect with VCS groups, expert practitioners, funders and food policy specialists. It is a sub-group of the Mayor's London Food Board, supported by the Greater London Authority (GLA) Food Team. The group has representatives from every London borough, ranging from public health and economic fairness teams to environmental health officers and infant feeding leads. Its membership also includes local food partnerships and community organisations, the Mayor's Fund for London, as well as national bodies such as Public Health England, and policy groups including Sustain and the Food Foundation.

Over 100 attendees regularly join the meetings, and an open-door approach means any interested party can join as an observer. The group has heard from VCS organisations at the forefront of the Covid-19 food response, providing data on food insecurity, emergency food aid, free school meal provision and actions related to food growing, markets and homelessness.

The value of partnership working has been reinforced throughout. Collaborative responses led by local authorities and VCS organisations, supported by the GLA, exemplified this in the early stages of lockdown, with the formation of 53 community food hubs across London for distributing emergency food supplies. Between 23 March and 31 August, the hubs enabled

the London Food Alliance and local VCS organisations to distribute 7,850 tonnes of food (equivalent to more than 18 million meals).

The GLA team supports this work with dissemination of helpful summaries of data, research and good practice on topics ranging from food insecurity data; food handling guidance; emergency infant feeding; and funding opportunities. The London Community Response Fund, for example, allocated over £5m to civil society organisations providing food and other essentials in its first two waves of funding between March and August, alongside funding for wraparound support advice services.

The London Boroughs Food Group has demonstrated the importance of a cross-cutting, sustainable approach to food policy, with professionals, experts and advocates as members, all committed to improving London's food system. This work has paved the way for transition and recovery plans that address some of the greatest challenges facing marginalised and excluded Londoners, including food insecurity and health inequalities.

If you or colleagues would like to join meetings or receive updates, resources and meeting summaries, please email the GLA food policy team's Liam Weeks to join the group's mailing list: liam.weeks@london.gov.uk.



Food to be redistributed by a social enterprise in Hammersmith and Fulham
Photo credit: Zoe Warde-Aldam

Case studies

Supporting women to become market traders in Tower Hamlets

In Tower Hamlets roughly 90% of market traders are men, and numbers of occupied market pitches have been declining in recent years. Recognising this, the council started a project to revitalise street markets and address this gender imbalance. This began with a leaflet campaign asking local residents, particularly women, if they wished to be traders. This had limited success, so, with the help of housing association outreach teams, the council hosted a meeting to scope support that women would want to consider trading. Word then spread, and the number of women interested grew to roughly 100, of which 30 committed to attending business advice training sessions. Most women expressing interest were from Black or Asian backgrounds. Many said they would not set up a market stall by themselves, but with support from other women they felt more confident. Participants undertook training, including on food hygiene, before starting trading on a stall on 'Lady Lane Market' on Wentworth Street from December 2019. Whilst most of the traders were not food traders, plans are in place for another cohort to begin food trading. In the lead up to this getting started, the group started the [Lady Lane Catering company](#) which catered for private events and children's holiday programmes before the initial lockdown.

The women reported that this overall experience was challenging and helped them to see themselves in a different light. During the initial lockdown, participants kept in touch and in October 2020 took part in a council run online business advice refresher session. They are planning some market trading days before Christmas.

Older people's food during Covid-19 in Hackney

Before Covid-19, Hackney Council commissioned Hackney CVS to coordinate a network of 14 lunch clubs across the borough. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that members were unable to attend lunch clubs, thus facing the loss of regular social contact and nutritious food. Following feedback from the network, the council agreed that in the short-term funding for lunch clubs could be used in more flexible ways. This included for meals and shopping to be delivered to members and to others within the community needing support. Hackney Adult Social Care were also able to offer hot meals at the

Tomlinson Centre for people who were in self-isolation following discharge from hospital, whilst Age East London provided shopping assistance to this group.

Joint work between Hammersmith & Fulham and Harrow Council to provide meals on wheels

Harrow Council runs an in-house meals on wheels service for residents of the borough, and Hammersmith & Fulham Council contract them to provide meals to their residents. This helps the two boroughs achieve an economy of scale and ensures that older residents across both boroughs can access the food that they need to stay safe and well in their own homes. In both boroughs, when Covid-19 lockdown began, demand for the service increased dramatically. The service was able to scale up provision with Hammersmith & Fulham reporting a one third increase in meals delivered. Increased demand has continued even as restrictions eased, and was caused not just by new referrals, but also existing customers requiring more meals weekly due for example to care arrangements not being able to operate as before.

“When the pandemic started, Hammersmith and Fulham had a funded meals on wheels service in place, that we could rely on and offer to more residents. I cannot stress how beneficial this was.”

Procurement Officer, Hammersmith and Fulham Council



A meal is delivered during lockdown.
Photo credit: Peter Cziborra / HILLS

‘Cash-first’ approaches to tackling food poverty

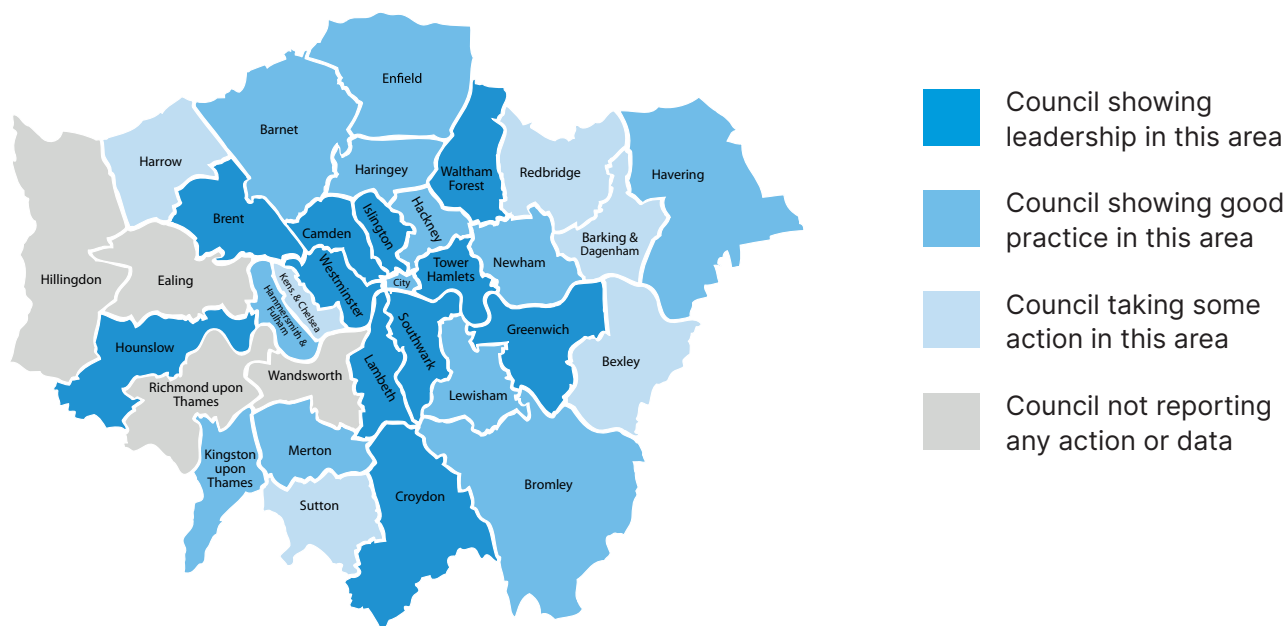
Food poverty affected almost two million people across London prior to the pandemic,^{xv} with numbers sharply increasing as a result of the pandemic.^{xvi} By and large, food poverty is an issue of income. Inadequate levels of welfare, low pay, insufficient or insecure hours together cause food poverty. People who struggle to pay rent and household bills use ‘coping mechanisms’ like cutting down on quality or amount of food bought.

A vital component of any local strategy that seeks to address food poverty therefore must involve a ‘cash-first’ approach. This approach entails a

focus on maximising household incomes, debt or financial hardship alleviation, and the integration of wraparound services that support people with issues such as welfare, employment, debt and mental health. Councils can play an important part in this, by prioritising the following areas of work:

- Being an accredited London Living Wage employer and funder
- Investing in local welfare assistance schemes
- Maximising Council Tax reduction
- Investing in wraparound services that help address root causes of poverty

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Croydon Council

Croydon Council’s Gateway Services brings together a raft of support under one banner so that it can be accessed via one single point of contact. Gateway Services combines preventative and holistic services with those that meet immediate crisis needs, for instance offering welfare advice and money and debt advice alongside Discretionary Housing Support, Council Tax Support, and food and utility vouchers.

In response to Covid-19, Croydon Council was able to slot new support into this way of working, meaning that those in need were able to access additional support sooner. Between late-March to September

2020, the council also: introduced new Council Tax Support for residents experiencing financial difficulty, which further reduced Council Tax payments by up to £150; expanded its welfare rights hotline from three half days to five full days per week; doubled its resource to meet the quadrupled demand for food vouchers and amenities (this included £47,392 in food vouchers, £16,135 in emergency funding and £180,316 to facilitate house moves), and; tripled resource to meet demand for free school meals (this included 13,709 assessments, compared to 4,046 in the same period last year).

Council action to centre 'cash-first' approaches

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of councils included some form of 'cash-first' approach within their anti-poverty work. For example, of 29 councils that responded to our survey, 22 had a local welfare assistance scheme and 12 had low minimum Council Tax payment for poorer residents of 8.5% or less. In response to the immediate Covid-19 crisis, these councils were then able to 'slot in' new funding, support or services quickly and efficiently. For example, Hackney Council increased its existing Council Tax Reduction scheme during Covid-19, with funds automatically going to poorer households.

As part of their recovery work, some councils plan to continue new support that they have put in place as part of their crisis response. For example, Barking

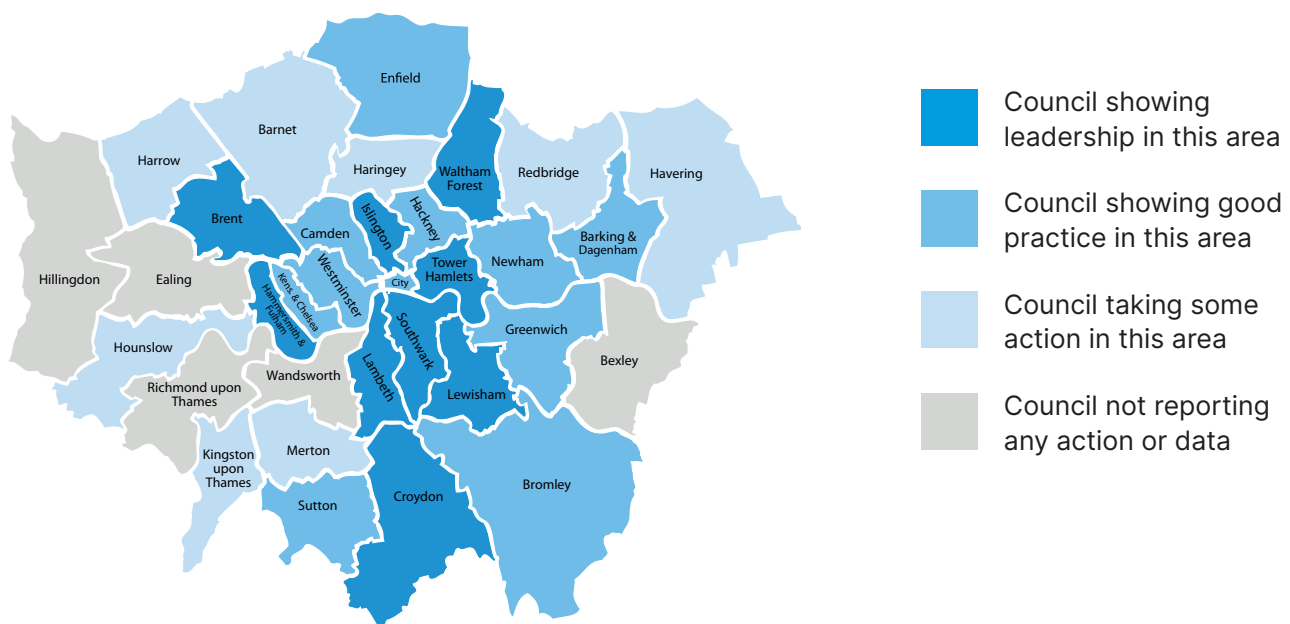
and Dagenham Council did not have a local welfare assistance scheme before Covid-19, so in response to the crisis they set one up. The council added this to sit alongside their Discretionary Housing Payment scheme and advice services. Staff who administer the scheme have noted the value of having a financial safety net for residents. Consequently, the council plans to expand and continue the scheme as part of their post-Covid recovery work.

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Responses to the Covid-19 crisis



What can councils do?

1. Establish and fully fund a **local welfare assistance scheme**.
2. Have a **low Council Tax minimum payment** of below 8.5%, preferably set at 0%, for low-income residents.
3. Have a direct referral route from the local welfare assistance scheme into **preventative or support services** such as debt or benefits advice, children's services, homelessness services, or employment support programmes. Also work with local food banks to integrate or make referrals to such wraparound services.
4. Have a **Discretionary Housing Payment scheme** in place for residents in economic hardship, and ensure this fund is fully spent by proactively promoting it.
5. Acquire **London Living Wage and Living Hours accreditation**, and ensure all commissioned and council-funded programmes are accredited Living Wage employers too.

Food access

Many areas within London lack access to affordable and healthy food, and economic deprivation often coincides with this. These 'food deserts' compound food insecurity caused by financial hardship,^{xvii} as those already struggling financially have to pay more for food, spend more on transport, or have to buy cheaper but less healthy food. Furthermore, these areas often have high densities of unhealthy food takeaways which also often cluster around schools.

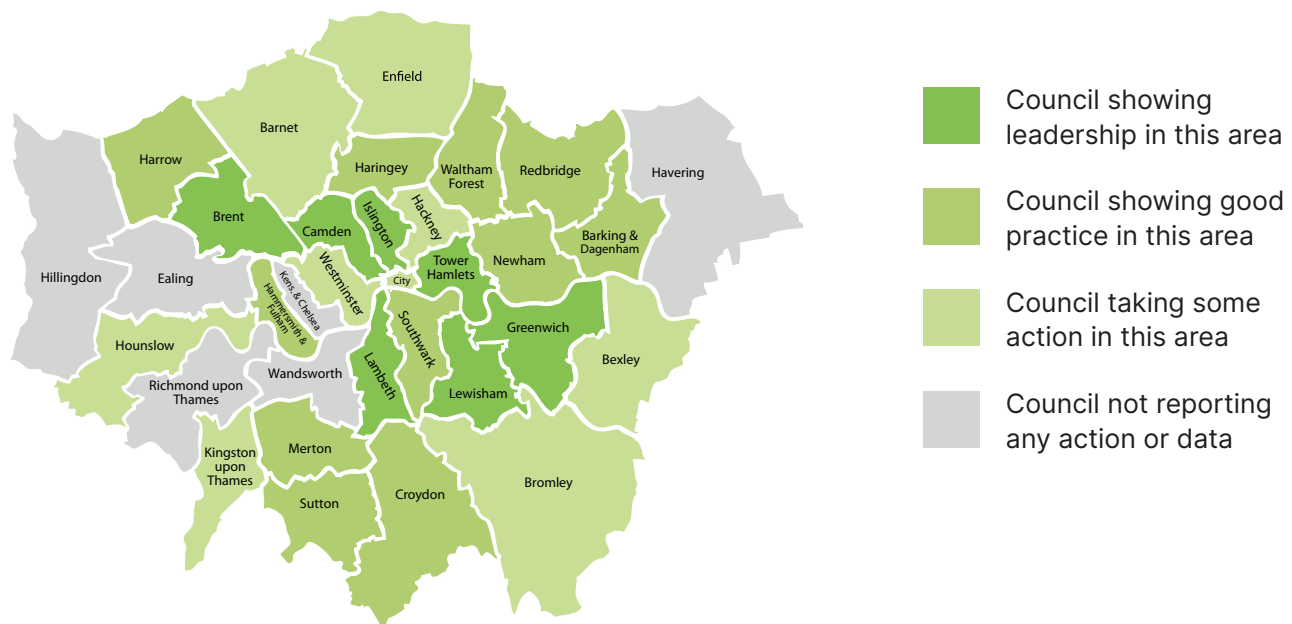
Older and disabled Londoners are at particularly high risk of malnutrition; this is caused by multiple factors including loss of mobility or dexterity, and decreased motivation to cook when living alone.

Where services are not available, many older adults resort to coping mechanisms like cutting out cooked meals. Preventative, holistic services such as meals on wheels significantly reduce these risks and bring a range of benefits including social contact and regular welfare checks.

Councils can play an important part in addressing these issues by doing the following:

- Fund meals on wheels and related food services for older adults and disabled people
- Map access to healthy, affordable food and incentivise good food retail in underserved wards

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Southwark Council

In 2019 Southwark Council mapped 'food deserts' in Southwark before undertaking a 'healthy basket' study in which residents chose food comprising a week's healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food shop for a family of four. Volunteers tried to buy the 'healthy basket' in food retailers close to Southwark's 'food deserts'. The research recommended that the council should take action to encourage healthy food retailers to trade in 'food deserts'. Southwark Council has also limited the proximity to schools of hot food takeaways and has a council-wide objective to improve foodscapes.

During lockdown, this ethos ensured Southwark Council maintained a focus on the availability of good, affordable food in poorer areas. The council worked with fresh food stalls to ensure they maintained support for families on low incomes through Alexander Rose vouchers, and ran training sessions for professionals on maximising uptake of Healthy Start vouchers. As part of their recovery work, Southwark Council is delivering their Good Food Retail Plan and has a dedicated Healthy Food and Business Officer to increase availability of fresh, affordable fruit and vegetables at convenience stores.

Council action on food access

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, several London councils were addressing the prevalence of 'food deserts'. Sixteen councils mapped the link between economic deprivation and access to good food, whilst 22 had plans to improve healthy food access. These foundations enabled councils to support resilient local food systems during lockdown: of the 12 councils that supported affordable fruit and vegetable retailers to stay open in 'food deserts', 10 had policies on healthy food access prior to the pandemic.

Before Covid-19, only eight councils had meals on wheels services, most of which expanded capacity to meet increased need during lockdown. Hammersmith and Fulham Council expanded their service by one third, whilst Croydon Council's expansion was integral

to their Covid-19 transmission prevention strategy – the council recognises that this service enabled older people to stay nourished in their homes.

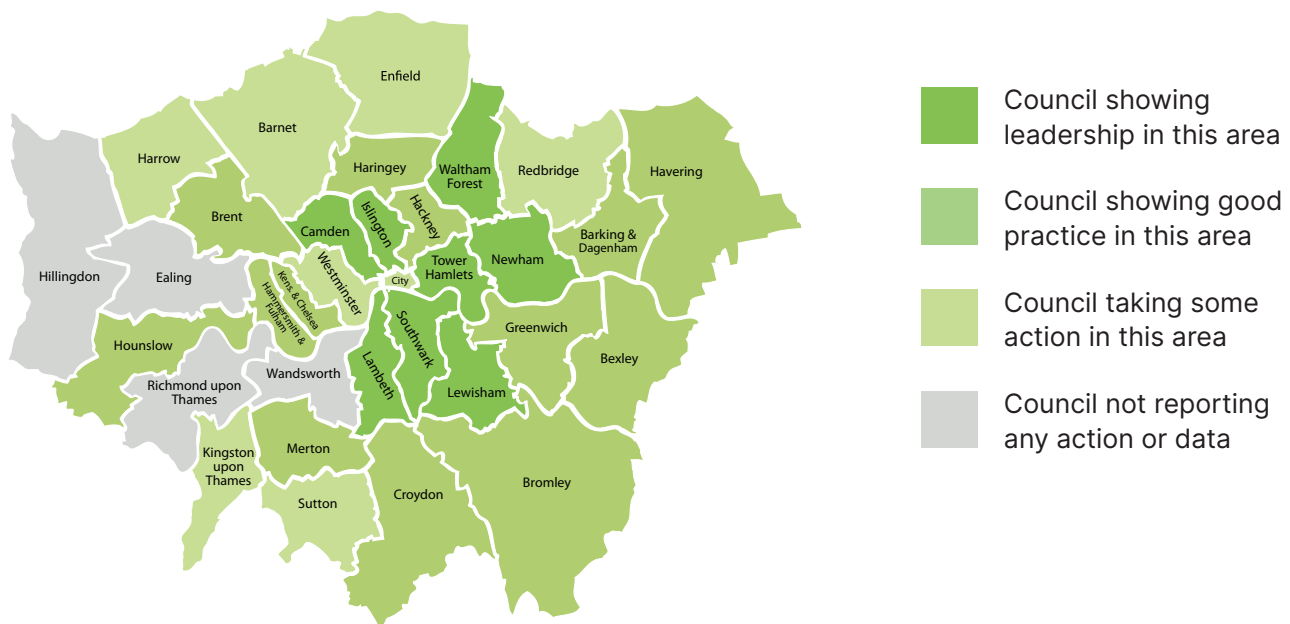
Councils are returning to existing plans to support access to fresh, affordable food as part of their recovery work, but are also investing in new schemes. All nine councils that are centering food access in their recovery work had comparable policies prior to the pandemic, whilst at least 22 councils are providing new funding or council premises for groups running community fridges or similar schemes.

London Food Link

londonfoodlink@sustainweb.org

www.londonfoodlink.org

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis



What can councils do?

- Map food retail, especially affordable fresh fruit and vegetables**, together with some of the following factors: transport routes; income levels; proximity to schools; and ethnicity data.
- Adopt policies to improve access to affordable healthy food and/or to limit unhealthy food retail**, such as Healthier Food Advertising Strategies or Good Food Retail Plans.
- Support food retailers offering fresh fruit and vegetables** including local shops, street markets, and box schemes to set up or continue operating in economically deprived areas.
- Fund meals on wheels services**. This funding should include costings for time spent on welfare checks, plating up meals, and other complementary services.
- Support meals on wheels services' referral pathways** through integrating them with adult social care and hospital discharge teams.
- Fund and support related food services for older adults including **lunch clubs, shopping services or nutrition services**.

The Covid-19 emergency food response across London

The Covid-19 pandemic and its associated economic fallout has compounded and deepened household food insecurity and hunger across the UK, including in London.^{xviii} London local authorities played a vital role in coordinating the emergency food response. Our survey shows high levels of engagement across the board, with all councils showing 'leadership' or 'good practice'. Our research also found some especially outstanding examples of local work from which we were able to identify key factors that enabled a good response,^{xix} as well as some concerning trends.

Core principles for a good emergency food response

1. **Dignity:** whilst 'emergency food aid' is necessary, it should be delivered in a way that recognises food as a right and upholds the dignity of everyone involved.
2. **Community wealth building:** any food related work should be done sustainably and ethically and should maximise gains for the local area. **Community wealth building** is about designing policies that keep money within a local area and provide good jobs for local people.
3. **Collaboration, coordination and leadership:** Councils should work collaboratively with the local VCS, faith-groups, business and others.

Practical elements of a good emergency food response

Broadly, local authorities whose emergency response was well-coordinated and effective:

- **Worked collaboratively, but with clarity around roles and responsibilities.** Councils that had food partnerships, alliances, or strong relationships with the local VCS were able to respond well and quickly. Lines of communication were open, with clear responsibility for areas of work
- **Applied flexibility around areas of responsibility.** Alongside clarity on who is responsible for an area of work, there was an openness to share ownership of work-streams
- **Took a longer-term, holistic view.** Supported local food markets, neighbourhood shops, catering and meals on wheels services and good food traders; funded and prioritised cash-first approaches
- **Had clear and effective external communications.** This included an accessible and well-promoted helpline, alongside clear instructions about available support and how to access it
- **Had an effective triage system.** This integrated both financial and food-based solutions and avoided directing more people to charitable food aid where this could be avoided^{xx}

Case study: Merton Council

In Merton, during the first few weeks of lockdown there was a significant response from the council and from voluntary sector and mutual aid groups in helping ensure emergency food was reaching those in need. The council set up a food hub to distribute surplus, and through this engaged with and supported local VCS groups to deliver food aid. As a result, Merton's food poverty alliance is more integrated into the local community and has more groups engaging as part of the alliance. This activity in response to lockdown has produced what is now Merton's 'Community Fridge Network'. The network is supported by the council and integrated into the food poverty alliance. It is a network of organisations delivering food aid that is dignified and community owned.

As part of its recovery work, the council is planning to:

- maintain the 'Community Fridge Network' over the longer term
- work with its communities that have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 including Black, Asian and minority ethnic residents, older people, young people, residents with a disability and carers
- review and update the council's food poverty action plan.

Issues with the emergency response

The Covid-19 lockdown triggered a dramatic increase in food insecurity, leading local authorities to collaborate with food aid providers to coordinate food distribution and support communities.

Unhealthy food donations flood local authorities' food aid

However, local authorities and public services across the UK have encountered donations of questionable nutritional quality. Many report being approached by big food and drink companies providing products high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS) such as chocolate and sugary drinks. In some cases, the volume of HFSS food donations has been high. One London local authority was offered 97,000 Easter eggs which they turned down to protect residents' health and to focus emergency efforts on more important fresh and nutritious foodstuffs. Taking into account the relationship between coronavirus and obesity, as well as the disproportionate prevalence of coronavirus in low-income communities, HFSS food donations should be minimised. In Greenwich, the council has collaborated with Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency (GCDA) to redirect unhealthy food. GCDA has been responsible for ensuring adherence to the good food standards and for avoiding partnerships that could be harmful to health. Similar measures could be taken by other local authorities.

Food access and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups

In London, income inequality and a lack of access to fresh affordable food are both disproportionately experienced by Black, Asian and minority ethnic Londoners. Alongside this, Black and Asian people are at particularly high risk from Covid-19, as well as from diet related illnesses including diabetes and obesity which further increases risk level from Covid-19. To overcome these structural barriers to health equality, much needs to be done, and councils can play a vital role in this.

Our survey found that a significant number of councils are taking some action in this regard, but that more could be done. Fifteen councils are taking action to ensure residents can access fresh, affordable food locally that is culturally appropriate, whilst nine councils are comprehensively mapping the availability of such food. During lockdown, Bromley Council

sourced specific cultural foods to add to the food parcels distributed by their food hubs to people who were shielding, whilst Hounslow Council worked closely with a range of hot food providers including faith groups that provided culturally appropriate food options for Hounslow's diverse communities.

Predating Covid-19, Lewisham Council had an action plan that focused on health inequalities amongst Black, Asian and minority ethnic residents. As part of the plan the council is commissioning community organisations to deliver insights work with Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, the results of which will feed into Lewisham's healthy weight services.

What can councils do:

1. Ensure that culturally appropriate foods are available in affordable local retailers and in any emergency food provision.
2. Implement planning policies and projects that enable Black, Asian and minority ethnic residents to access allotments, community gardens and green space.
3. Work with and support local Black-led VCS groups involved in community food provision.
4. Ensure as much financial and food support as possible does not exclude people who need it most, in particular those with the immigration condition 'no recourse to public funds'.



A young person boxes up surplus vegetables for Bubble and Squeak. Photo credit: Zoe Warde-Aldam

Cross-cutting case studies

Barking and Dagenham

In recent years Barking and Dagenham Council have given increasing resource and thought to action on food. In 2018, the council set up five Food Clubs, each of which are run jointly with a local VCS partner and which provide members access to healthy, affordable food alongside support services. Members pay a weekly fee of £3.50 and can access £20 worth of groceries. Membership is available to residents who are in financial difficulty or on a low income. In 2019 the council set up a complimentary programme called **Seed to Plate** which encourage members to grow, pick and cook nutritious meals through experiential learning.

In response to Covid-19, three of the five Food Clubs temporarily closed, but two were able to stay open and adapted to the new challenging circumstances by temporarily suspending the membership fee and loosening eligibility criteria.

“ Me and my children love the weekly cooking sessions with Natalie, we also come along to the gardening club, Seed to Plate, to pick fresh fruit and veg from the garden. My kids love it.

Mother of three and regular Seed to Plate attendee

Barking & Dagenham's Covid-19 response also included the formation of a community driven food poverty alliance called BDCAN. BDCAN began when key VCS groups came together with the council to plan the borough's emergency food response. Following this, the council allocated small funding pots to local VCS partners to deliver the work and nine locality hubs were set up. These hubs were run by community organisations that coordinated the support offer in their area by working with other local VCS groups. Requests for support came in via the council, who signposted people to appropriate hubs.

Barking & Dagenham's recovery planning builds on the systems and relationships established through the Covid-19 crisis response and has a strong focus on food. Working together as a system, the borough plans to:

- Streamline work across food banks by sharing guidance, operating procedures and learning.
- Improve the food bank pathway and ensure residents have access to wider support.
- Trial a number of behavioural science-led approaches to debt relief and debt collection. These focus on the overall experience being positive and supportive for each individual, and give alternatives when that person is unable to pay.
- Continue and extend their new 'cash-first' approach through ongoing funding for their new Local Welfare Assistance Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payment scheme.
- Grow credit union presence in the borough to provide residents with greater access to fair and affordable financial services.
- Reintroduce Seed to Plate, which was temporarily suspended during lockdown.
- Continue and formalise the new food poverty alliance as a structure to fit this work within.

Camden

The Camden Food Poverty Alliance, which is a collaboration between the council and local VCS groups, has a strong focus on the 'cash-first' principle. Within the group there is consensus that this principle should be central to anti-poverty work and action on food poverty, which in turn is influencing the development of the Alliance's Action Plan. The plan includes strategies that foreground this principle, for example through significant funding to voluntary and community sector groups that provide financial advice services, alongside in-house council run services of this kind. This example shows how cash-first approaches, partnership working, and food poverty action plans can come together to form a joined up and holistic approach to tackling food poverty.

Greenwich

Greenwich council has for several years taken significant action on food locally. This has ranged from their work supporting the local good food economy through Good Food Retail work, to strong action to ensure residents can access culturally appropriate foods by ensuring messaging about food, health and food growing is conveyed in ways that resonate with various communities. They have also worked to support allotments, orchards and infant nutrition.

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the council already had a strong commissioning relationship with Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency (GCDA), a local VCS organisation with significant reach, community trust and ties, and specialist understanding of localised food systems and food issues. Due to the existence of these strong foundations, in response to Covid-19 the council established a well-functioning triage and food support system to ensure all residents in need were able to access the particular support that they needed as quickly and seamlessly as possible. Greenwich's emergency food response system quickly became an inspiring case study for others.



Healthy food boxes for non-shielding residents in need in Greenwich during the first lockdown, prepared by GCDA. Photo credit: Claire Pritchard.

Food access for older, disabled and medically vulnerable people

When Covid-19 hit, it exacerbated the risk of hunger and malnutrition amongst older, disabled and medically vulnerable people, due to their risk from the virus and the need to self-isolate or shield. Alongside the government-run food box scheme for those shielding, and established meals on wheels services, numerous volunteer run community groups stepped up to meet this new need.^{xvi} Existing voluntary and community groups changed their activities, and new mutual aid groups worked hard to get meals to isolated residents. Whilst these volunteer run ad-hoc services played a vital role in ensuring older, disabled and medically vulnerable people could eat in the short term, many did not last long, or are now facing difficult decisions about how to continue. Reliance on volunteer labour and free or low-cost surplus food to provide this essential social service makes these models difficult to sustain when volunteer numbers reduce and free food supplies are not so readily available. These types of services can also find it challenging to offer choice and nutritional value for residents within their limited resources. This may leave increasing numbers of older or disabled residents at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition in the near future.

For example, three years ago the London Independent Living Service was established in Camden and Haringey. Dialogue between the two councils and Hertfordshire Independent Living Service (HILS), an established provider, led to the establishment of a similar service in London. Funding from HILS, Apetito and corporate funders, as well as support from One Housing Group to use their kitchen, helped to seed the service and Camden and Haringey Councils provided some development funding. However, the limitations of investment in the service and the lower than hoped for number of referrals meant that LILS did not reach the required economies of scale for long-term sustainability. It is feasible that with increased investment during this critical early stage and higher referral numbers the service might have reached a sustainable long-term footing.

The two councils are now focusing on supporting new, smaller, volunteer run services to grow their local neighbourhood offer, many of which engage with food surplus organisations, and utilise income from meals on wheels to supplement their support, in the hope that these services are both cost effective and sustainable. In light of the risks identified above, it is vital that in cases like this councils and their partners proactively ensure that these services are able to run a robust and well-integrated service to establish a sustainable long-term footing.

Children's food access

London has one of the highest levels of child poverty in the UK, with 37 per cent of London's children living in relative poverty after housing costs are taken into account.^{xxii} Ensuring that all children can access enough good food to grow and learn is vital to securing equal life chances for all of London's children.

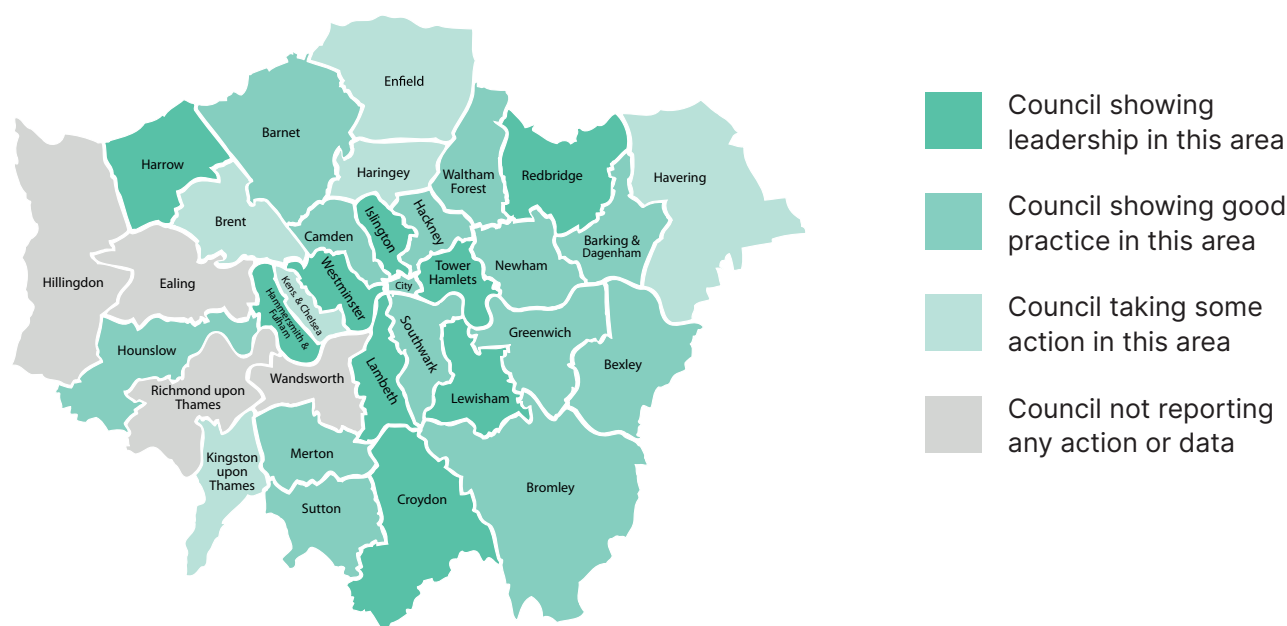
Local authorities can support children's access to good food through:

- Supporting the uptake of free school meals
- Supporting and promoting breakfast clubs
- Promoting the Healthy Start voucher scheme to retailers and parents

- Securing children's access to food during the school holidays
- Protecting and promoting breastfeeding.

Whilst these measures do not tackle the root causes of children's food poverty, they do provide a vital lifeline to struggling families and help ensure that children are not doubly disadvantaged by a lack of adequate nutrition. Furthermore, some of the above programmes can be integrated within a holistic approach; breakfast clubs and holiday clubs that serve food can include social, cultural and educational learning that puts food at the centre of children's health and wellbeing.

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Camden Council

Before Covid-19, Camden Council had a strategy for coordinating its Healthy Start voucher scheme. When lockdown happened, the council included Healthy Start registration forms in food parcels and at food banks and food hubs. Helpline call handlers were trained to identify and refer families eligible for the scheme, and a pathway was developed for Healthy Start that linked callers with health visitors and children's centres.

Relatedly, in the initial weeks of lockdown, Camden Council took action to maintain free school meals. Hampers containing ten days' food were provided fortnightly to schools and over 12,000 hampers were

provided to families between March and July 2020. The council sent free school meal (FSM) registration information to schools via the headteachers' network and social media along with information on ensuring families with 'no recourse to public funds' were aware of their FSM eligibility.

This work will be continued into the recovery planning stage via Camden Council's pathway for families in hardship: families are offered an assessment via the duty health visitor and referred to appropriate support including free school meals registration and the Healthy Start scheme.

Council action on children's food

In response to the immediate Covid-19 crisis, most London councils supported free school meals (FSM) eligible families, either by working with schools to provide meal packs or by providing payments. Thirteen boroughs worked to improve the national voucher system, for example by ensuring retailers accepted the vouchers. Many councils also took steps to support infant feeding. These responses were made easier where strong foundations were in place.

For example, Islington Council had teams dedicated to holiday provision with food and FSM. These teams worked closely with their respective partners as soon as Covid-19 hit. The FSM team supported schools to initially offer lunch packs and later fortnightly food parcels where families preferred these to vouchers.

The holiday provision team liaised with [Magic Breakfast](#) who also offered home delivery food packs.

Councils that took positive action on FSM before Covid-19 are more likely to include a focus on this in the recovery phase. Of the 16 councils that are planning to proactively maximise the uptake of free school meals, all but one was mapping this uptake prior to the pandemic.

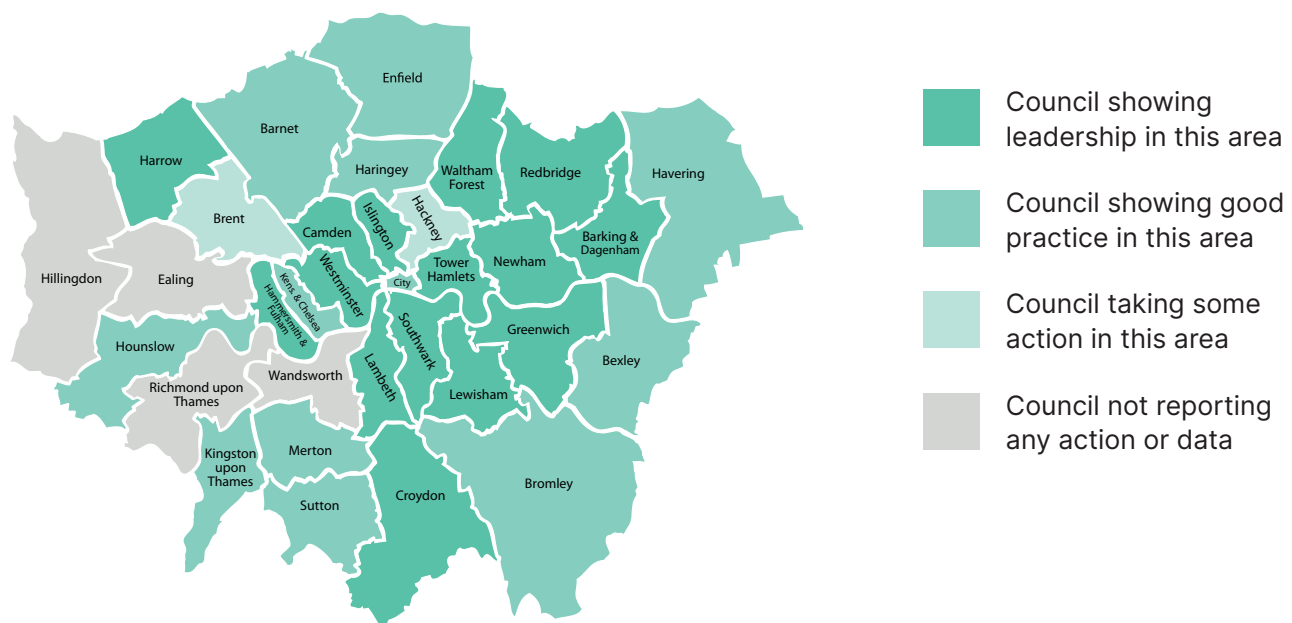
Unicef Baby Friendly

Smita Hanciles, National Infant Feeding Network Lead

smita.hanciles@nhs.net

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/>

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis



What can councils do?

- Healthy Start:** Have a designated officer working on Healthy Start and a strategy for coordinating and promoting the Healthy Start scheme locally.
- Food in schools:** Have a mechanism in place to measure FSM uptake and promote FSM.
- Food in schools:** Fund universal free school meals for primary school children, including children with the immigration condition 'no recourse to public funds'.
- Food in schools:** Fund the fruit and veg in schools scheme beyond government-funded levels.
- Fund **breakfast clubs** and/or engage partners to provide support for breakfast clubs.
- Have a designated person who acts as the central point of contact for information and questions about **holiday provision including food**.
- Fund **holiday provision with food** and/or engage businesses and other community partners to support holiday provision with food.
- Holiday provision with food:** Track the location and number of holiday activity schemes that include food provision.
- Breastfeeding:** Work towards full Unicef UK Baby Friendly accreditation in all eligible services, including ensuring access to the required training.

Food growing and production

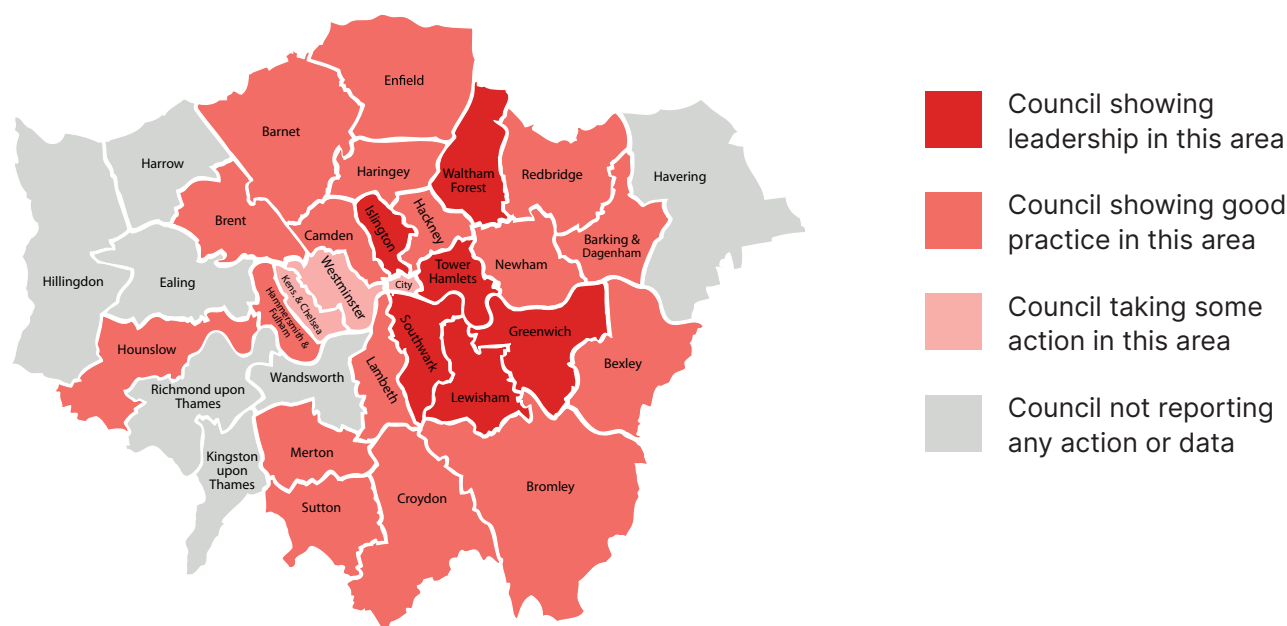
Increasing opportunities to grow food, as well as the amount of land used for food production, has several recognised benefits, all of which are important outcomes for councils. These include improving health, access to nature and fresh food, creating skills and jobs and the potential to reduce the carbon footprint of food.

In London, 59% of the green belt is agricultural land, which amounts to 20,756 hectares with potential to be farmed for local markets and communities, but most is not used for this purpose.^{xxiii} Outer London boroughs have the potential to grow much more food for local supply chains at a community and productive scale, cultivating local jobs and food resilience.

During 2020, demand for spaces to grow food surged,^{xxiv} as people looked for opportunities to access fresh healthy food for themselves and others, as well as to improve their wellbeing. To help meet the immediate and longer term need, councils can support food growing across three main areas:

- capacity building and practical support for food growing
- access to land and land use including supportive local planning policies
- partnerships and support for growing within other council plans and strategies.

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Waltham Forest Council

Waltham Forest Council included food growing in their approach to improving public health through their Health and Wellbeing strategy and a new Food Growing Strategy. As part of this they are mapping land and assets across the borough to increase local food production and at the time of writing this report the Council had identified 29 potential new growing sites in schools, housing, streets parks and allotments. The council actively encourage and enable the use of publicly owned land for community food growing and have 72 existing community food growing sites across the borough.

Waltham Forest Council had strong partnerships with external organisations to support food growing projects, who they worked with during the pandemic. A key partnership is with **Organiclea**, who leases the old council plant nursery to grow organic food at scale. During the pandemic Organiclea ran online courses funded by the council for community food growing sites. Through the council's partnership with Groundwork London, who coordinated the volunteer response and supported communities in need during lockdown, the council was able to encourage community food growers to join the volunteer scheme to participate in a range of roles from food packing to food distribution.

Council actions on food growing

The majority of councils supported initiatives including orchards, community gardens or school gardens. Of the 26 councils responding to the questions on this area, 16 encouraged and enabled use of publicly owned land, including park land and housing estates for community food growing, and nine councils proactively increased the amount of land for food growing in the last year.

Councils who showed leadership before lockdown were also able to take positive steps and show further leadership during their emergency response, particularly those working with external partner organisations. For example, Islington commissioned a community partner ([Octopus Community network](#))

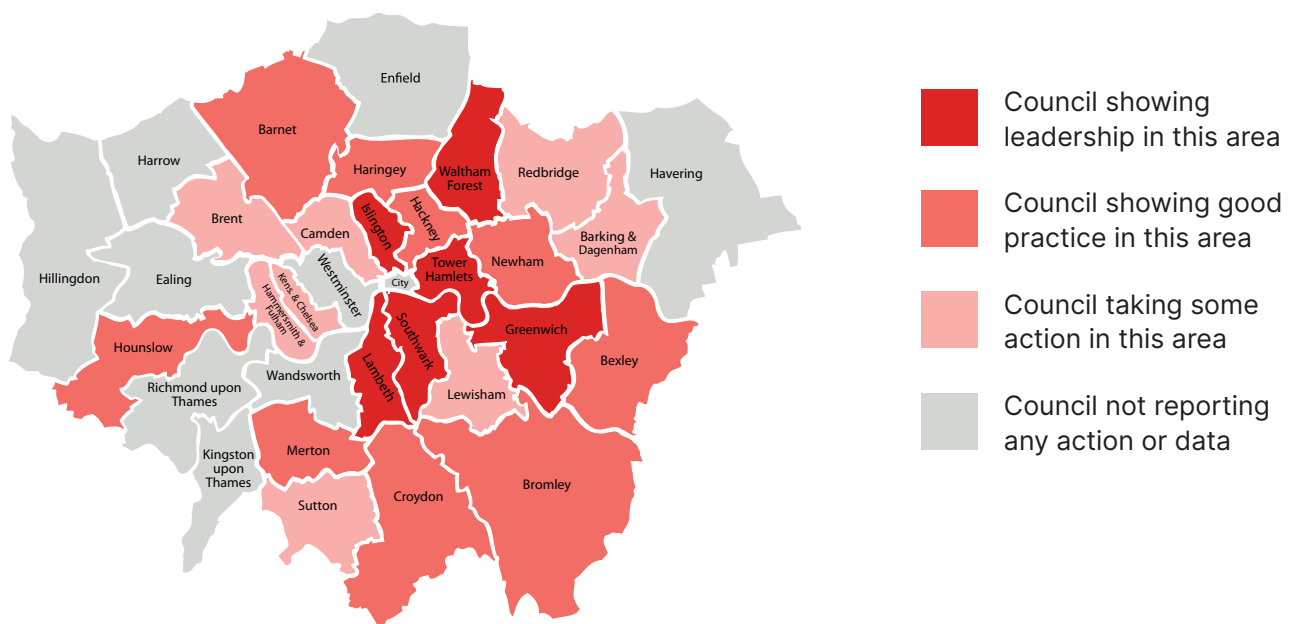
to help develop a Community Food Growing Strategy which will map all existing food growing opportunities in the borough and look at opportunities for developing new ones across the public realm.

Although many food growing spaces were forced to close or adapt during the pandemic, 15 councils supported community gardens to continue to grow food and 11 went further to connect growers with local food providers including foodbanks. For example, Bexley Council connected local allotment holders to their community fridge network.

Capital Growth, Sustain

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Responses to the Covid-19 crisis



What can councils do?

1. **Include food growing in public health strategies, food strategies, local plans, and climate and nature strategies.** This is especially important for councils as community food growing meets many council objectives and crosses the work of many departments.
2. **Appoint a designated officer to champion food growing** and create clearer pathways for accessing land, as well as links with local networks or key VCS organisations.
3. **Proactively identify land for food growing**, make access to land easier including mapping land and assets to increase local food production.
4. **Support for community food growing should be including in local planning policies** and frameworks, to ensure that existing land for growing food is protected and new land is secured, including in new developments.
5. **Connect with Sustain's Capital Growth team** who can help councils to encourage and support food growing.

Supporting a good food economy

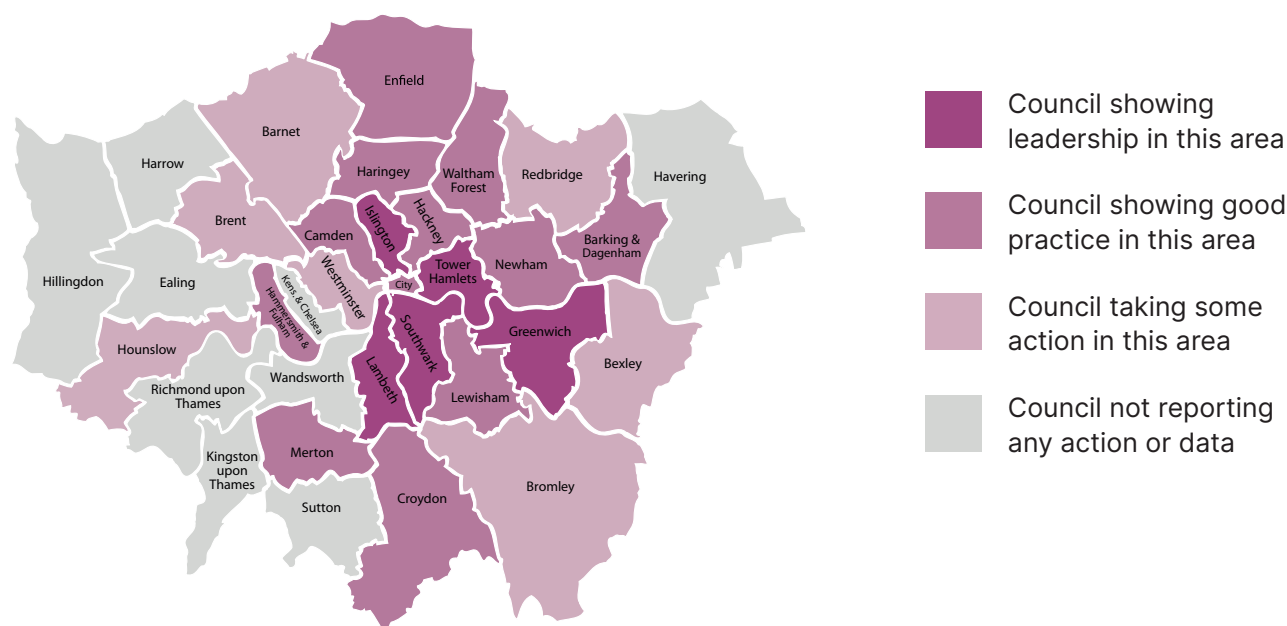
Locally the food economy consists of a mixture of food businesses and enterprises, including many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) such as convenience stores, markets, caterers and foodservice outlets, box schemes and community shops, all of which are vital to a resilient and sustainable food supply. A good food economy is diverse, provides access to healthy and sustainable food, represents local and cultural food choices and can adapt to change.

Putting good food entrepreneurs and enterprises at the heart of local development and promoting them to consumers also creates jobs, local prosperity and can create vibrant, healthy high streets, all vital to creating good food neighbourhoods.

Councils can play an important role in helping the good food economy, including retail, via the work of teams across Public Health and Economic Development. Councils were assessed by their actions across three areas:

- Plans and strategies to support local food enterprises, including Good Food Retail plans and consideration to food businesses in climate change action plans
- Practical resources and support to food SMEs and food markets, especially to increase sales of healthy and sustainable food
- A focus on developing a good food economy as part of recovery planning.

Foundational work before Covid-19



Case study: Soutwark's support for food SMEs

One of the ambitions of Soutwark Council's Economic Wellbeing Strategy is for every Soutwark resident to have access to quality, affordable and healthy food and produce from their local high street or market. The council employs a full-time Healthy Food and Business Officer to support food SMEs from a business perspective, while also engaging them to sell healthier food. This has included working with markets to increase the use of Alexander Rose fruit and veg vouchers, which increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers for those on a low income.

Soutwark were also, with support from Guy's and St Thomas' Charity, part of the Good Food Retail initiative looking at how to improve access to healthy, affordable food in convenience stores. The learning from the pilot has been applied to support businesses to adapt their model so that they could continue to operate during lockdown. Food businesses suffering as a result of Covid-19 have also been supported through a free consultation with the Healthy Food and Business Officer. During the pandemic, the council worked to match food enterprises who had offered empty kitchens or cooked meals to local hubs.

Council action on supporting good food economies

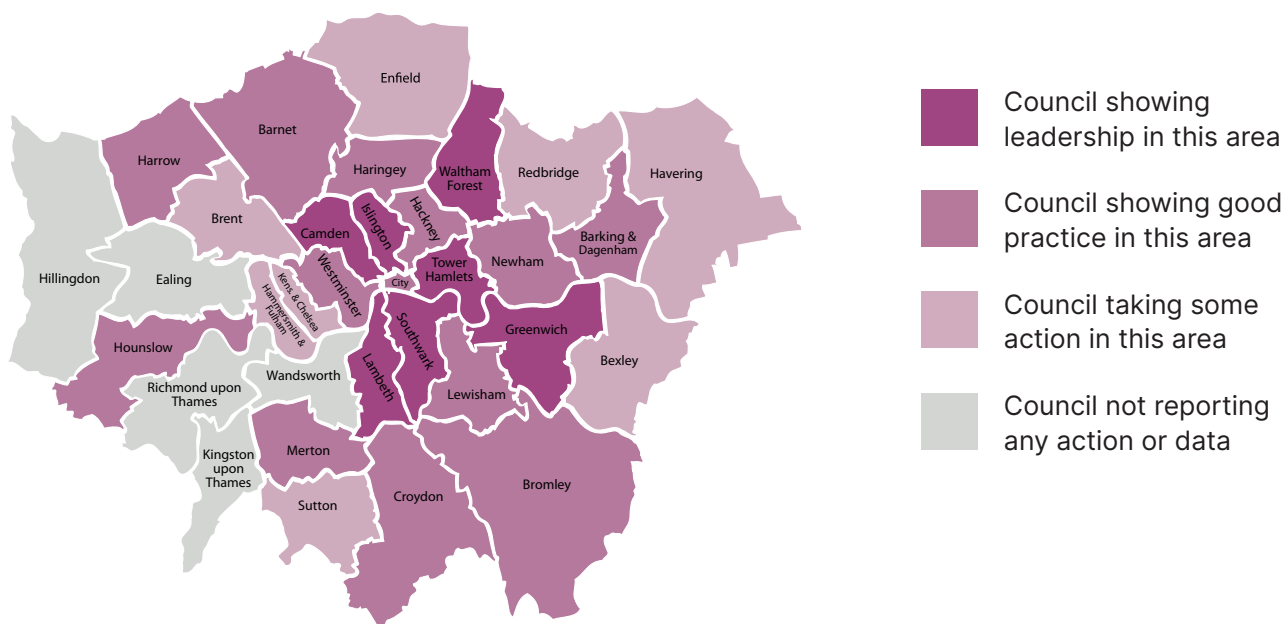
Whilst most councils supported local food businesses prior to the pandemic, only some had a targeted approach to increasing the health or sustainability of their local food economy. For example, Greenwich's Good Food Retail plan focuses on supporting local convenience stores to develop a healthy shopping basket at a competitive price to the local supermarket.

Most councils responded to support local food retail during the crisis, recognising the vital role of diverse food supply during this time. Fifteen councils engaged local SMEs in emergency food provision for people in need and almost all councils worked to support food enterprises and markets to stay open or re-open.

Several councils, including Islington and Tower Hamlets, created an online directory of traders selling essential food, to maintain the supply chain from SMEs to customers during lockdown.

Whilst many councils made impressive responses involving their local food economy during the pandemic, a subset of councils are building a recovery plan with extra support for enterprises and markets providing healthy and sustainable food moving forward. Notably, many of these councils were already taking progressive actions towards building a long-term approach to a good food economy, therefore supporting healthier and more resilient communities.

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis and recovery plans



What can councils do?

- Develop Good Food Retail Plans** and projects that aim to increase access to healthy and sustainable food.
- Produce a food strategy that includes the local food economy and food retail**, with an action plan to help smaller local shops, markets and enterprises create better access to healthy and sustainable food and be sustainable as businesses in the long-term.
- Ensure that the economic development team are engaged in business and strategic opportunities related to healthy and sustainable food** and join up opportunities with public health.
- Target financial and business support to food enterprises and retailers, especially those that already sell fresh, healthy food** with reduced climate and nature impact or to move towards increasing sales of this food and identify ways to procure food through local businesses.
- Support food enterprises, food markets, kitchens, chefs and cooks to participate in healthy, fresh, emergency food provision for people in need.**

The climate and nature emergency and food

In the UK, 30% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the food system and a shocking third of the food we produce goes to waste.^{xxv} Intensive farming and fishing practices are the main drivers of devastating biodiversity loss.^{xxvi} Fixing the food, farming and fishing system is therefore one of the most important large-scale ways to help avert climate change and restore nature, which should now be urgent priorities for everyone.

An impressive 22 London councils have declared a climate and nature emergency, many with bold targets to become carbon neutral (for example 2030 for both Croydon and Lambeth). Twenty councils have released an action plan for putting their declaration into practice that includes food.

What are London councils doing on food and climate change?

Food waste

Council actions can keep a colossal amount of food out of landfill. Following the principles of the Food Waste Hierarchy,^{xxvii} reducing the amount of food wasted should be the top priority both in the supply chain and by businesses and households, whilst ensuring that as much of the edible food produced gets eaten rather than being thrown away. Facilitating separation of food waste and other recyclable materials is important. Community composting or municipal composting are among the better solutions for unavoidable food waste.

Food waste was the area in which most London councils are taking action. Of the 27 councils responding to our climate and nature questions, 21 councils offer a food waste collection service to households, 14 to schools, and 8 to food businesses.

Procurement and citizen diets

Fifteen councils are taking steps to serve more environmentally-friendly food in council catering. The biggest climate and nature benefits come from serving less but better meat,^{xxviii} and Camden and Havering are leading the way by reducing meat in schools. Enfield are the first local authority to commit to only vegetarian and vegan food at onsite Council events.

Land use and planning

Two thirds of London councils have tree-planting plans but only about half of these 22 councils currently intend to include fruit and/or nut trees. Enfield are looking at larger scale growing projects, joining boroughs such as Waltham Forest, Barking and Dagenham and Haringey who have already made significant areas of land available for growing at scale.

Climate change and Covid-19 responses

Many councils considered the climate in their emergency food response, including Newham who offered vegetarian food parcels and prioritised seasonal European and British vegetables. As part of a Green Recovery, Southwark Council is planning to support a resilient local food system by investing in food markets and considering a Green Levy for businesses that are disproportionately polluting.

Recommendations: 'Quick Wins' for councils, climate and food

- **Procurement:** Council catering could easily serve vegetarian food as default for council meetings and events, and serve less but better meat across all settings.
- **Tree planting:** Funding is available to help the UK meet ambitious tree-planting targets. Fruit and nut trees deliver a raft of benefits for people and nature, and mini-orchards can be achieved in a surprisingly small amount of space.
- **Council powers as a licence granter:** Only a few councils are currently using licensing and business rates to influence business behaviour, even simple event licence conditions like banning single-use plastic at festivals could have a huge benefit.
- **Engage citizens:** raise awareness of sustainable diets and engage citizens in other measures that the council takes to tackle the climate and nature emergency.

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Healthier Catering Commitment

London has more than 8,000 fast food takeaways, which often serve less healthy food.^{xxix} Furthermore, areas with high densities of hot food takeaways often coincide with areas of economic deprivation and with areas with little or no access to affordable fresh food,^{xxx} thus meaning local people have very limited healthy food options. One quarter of takeaways in the UK are located within a 5-minute walk of a school and 20% of adults and children eat takeaway meals at home once a week. In London, 38% of children are overweight or obese, which is the highest proportion in England.^{xxxi}

What is the Healthier Catering Commitment?

The London Healthier Catering Commitment is a voluntary scheme promoted by local authorities to help caterers and food businesses make simple, healthy improvements to their food. When a food business signs up to the scheme, it commits to improving the food it provides and sells by making small, affordable changes such as:

- Making smaller portions available on request
- Offering some healthy options, for example, lower sugar drinks and snacks, serving salad and fruit and offering water, reduced sugar drinks and fruit juice in the place of fizzy drinks
- Heating oil to correct temperature and regularly replacing used cooking oil with fresh cooking oil. This can help chips, and other fried foods soak up less fat during the cooking process
- Using unsaturated fats and changing the cooking oil to healthier alternatives.

Support for the Healthier Catering Commitment in London

Twenty-four London boroughs have already adopted a Healthier Catering Commitment (HCC) and are working to improve nutritional value of food for their residents.^{xxxii} Of the 24 boroughs that responded to the relevant questions in our survey, 19 councils were participating in the HCC or had developed their own scheme for businesses. The remaining five boroughs were not participating in the scheme, listing lack of resources as the reason. For example, both Havering and Barking and Dagenham hope to relaunch HCC with new staff members.

Redbridge council focuses on ensuring that all local food businesses within 500 metres of school zones provide and serve food that is lower in fat, sugar or salt and that they change their cooking oil to a healthier option.

Enfield has been running the HCC for four years and currently has 80 businesses signed up. They aim to increase the number of businesses signed up in areas of deprivation, where the council has previously struggled to involve businesses.

The HCC scheme not only improves health outcomes for residents but can also save businesses time and money. In Lewisham, 52 food businesses have achieved the HCC award. Many of the businesses are also Sugar Smart and have reported that their business has managed to save money by taking part in the initiatives as businesses are not using as much sugar.

Healthier Catering Commitment in London

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Photo credit: Zoe Warde-Aldam

Food related recovery planning

In response to the immediate Covid-19 crisis, London councils utilised existing ties with the local voluntary and community sector, made new partnerships, and worked collaboratively often quite intensely and out of necessity. This new joined up way of working is in many cases now being formalised into new alliances or partnerships. Support to VCS groups is in many areas being continued, or new community or locality hubs are being transformed into more permanent community spaces that both provide food aid, but are also a positive community space with library facilities, meeting spaces, and a diversity of other resources. Councils are also looking more widely at local assets that can support resilience, such as community food growing spaces that are good for wellbeing and access to fresh food, or the local shops that provide vital neighbourhood food supplies within easy walking distance.

All councils developed Food Transition Plans to set out ongoing arrangements for food support during the transition from lockdown to recovery. Lewisham, Croydon and Camden were amongst those to address how to ensure food aid organisations have what

they need to support low-income residents, whilst also working towards a situation where food aid is needed less, through the integration of wraparound support in community hubs or food banks. Alongside this many councils are embedding sustainability principles into their food aid work whilst others have a strong focus on food within their climate plans or green recovery plans.

Despite these positive steps across London, much still needs to be done. Across the UK, unemployment has risen since the crisis^{xxxiii} and predictions indicate that London households will continue to lose income throughout 2021.^{xxxiv} Consequently, thousands of London residents are experiencing financial crisis or may fall into crisis soon. Some councils have reported that case workers are now regularly advising clients not to spend their limited money on food, but instead go to foodbanks, so that they will prioritise paying rent and not face homelessness. However, charitable food banks were established to help people out of one-off emergency financial or crisis situations and should not be institutionalised as a long-term solution to food poverty.

Case study: Hounslow

As part of its recovery, Hounslow Council is placing a significant emphasis on supporting and working with the local VCS, especially groups delivering emergency food aid. The council is consulting partners who it worked with in response to the crisis, to scope interest in and feasibility of a food alliance and is working proactively with the borough's foodbanks through regular weekly calls with each foodbank. Together, the council and foodbanks are developing plans to integrate wraparound services into foodbank sites, to support clients with issues such as mental health, social isolation and debt.

As a cornerstone to this new collaborative way of working, the community hub that was set up as part of their crisis response is being transformed into a long-term community solutions model that will work with the VCS and provide holistic, wraparound support to people in financial difficulty or crisis. Space in existing libraries and other Council venues will be used for community activities, and the aim is to foster community focused initiatives which also help address underlying issues causing food poverty.

The council is also embedding health and sustainability into its emergency food response for example through an agreement with Hounslow Community Foodbox in which fresh fruit and vegetable boxes will be delivered to residents in food insecurity. Hounslow Council have set up a Green Recovery Task Force that has officers from across council departments and which is scoping numerous potential flagship projects including the expansion of 15-minute neighbourhoods in Hounslow or a green skills academy. The council is planting orchards and is working with a fruit tree specialist to graft further fruit trees ready for planting in 2021. In response to Covid-19, Hounslow Council has launched a community allotment project called 'Hounslow Micro Gardens'. Two large allotment plots have been divided into smaller 3 by 4-metre introductory plots and allocated to residents without a private garden on a first-come, first-served basis. Additional locations for tree planting and other growing initiatives will be identified as part of the Green Recovery Plan.

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About London Food Link

Part of the food and farming charity Sustain, London Food Link is the voice of good food in London. Our network is made up of individuals, enterprises and organisations who are working for better food in the capital and represented on the London Food Board.

We lead and partner on policy initiatives, campaigns and practical projects to improve the food system. These include the Good Food for London and Beyond the Food Bank reports, the London Food Poverty Campaign, Capital Growth, Urban Food Fortnight and The Jellied Eel magazine.

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