

# Riding the waves.

The long perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic from UK's local food system actors in 2020-21.



**Anna Krzywoszynska**

**Stephen Jones**

**Damian Maye**

# About this report

This report is an output from 'The local as a site of food security resilience in the times of pandemic: opportunities, challenges and ways forward' project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/V004107/1) under the UK Research and Innovation Open Call on COVID-19.

The study was led by Dr Anna Krzywoszynska from the University of Sheffield (now University of Twente), and Prof Damian Maye from Countryside and Community Research Institute at the University of Gloucestershire.

Please reference this report as follows: Krzywoszynska, A., Jones, S., Maye, D. (2022) Riding the waves. The long perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic from UK's local food system actors in 2020-21.. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6380040



The University  
Of Sheffield.  
Institute for  
Sustainable Food.



CCRI

COUNTRYSIDE  
AND COMMUNITY  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# Table of Contents

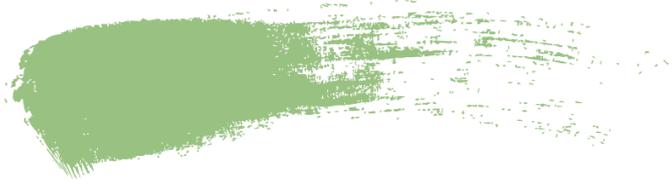


<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. METHODOLOGY. ....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3.1 Online longitudinal research: reflection on methods.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. FINDINGS. RIDING THE WAVES OF THE PANDEMIC. ....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.1 The first wave .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.1.1 A ‘blind panic’ .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4.1.2 Pulling together .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4.2 The ‘new normal’.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4.2.1 Growing pains .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4.2.2 Uncertainties around demand.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.2.3 Bombshell Christmas.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.2.4 Bad weather .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.2.5 Food poverty: barriers to getting involved.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.3 Living with Covid .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4.3.1 Fearing the disease.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4.3.2 Keeping on top of guidance and legislation.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.3.3 Tensions around safety measures .....</b>	<b>27</b>

**4.4 Straining point, breaking point.....29**  
    **4.4.1 Supply chains straining .....30**  
    **4.2.2 A shrinking sector.....31**  
    **4.4.3 Relentless uncertainty.....31**  
    **4.4.4 Burnout .....32**  
    **4.4.5 'Thanks, but no thanks': A lack of recognition.....32**

**5. UNCERTAIN LOCAL FOOD FUTURES. ....35**

# 1. Executive summary



This report explores the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic as an ongoing event from the perspective of local food businesses and organisations in the UK. It builds a rich narrative using qualitative data collected from 12 case studies over a period of ten months (November 2020 – July 2021) as part of the project “COVID-19: the local as a site of food security resilience in the times of pandemic”. The report explores how local food system actors dealt with the pandemic period, contributing to the UK’s food security at a time when many people faced challenges of food access. However, as the case studies demonstrate, this was achieved at a cost of self-exploitation, weakened mental health, and, for some, burnout.

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated national lockdown in early 2020 was a turbulent moment for our participants. The stress of facing the prospect of losing livelihoods quickly gave place to another kind of stress – of meeting an explosion in demand as customers, disappointed by the gaps in provision by supermarkets, turned to local food businesses. Local organisations working on food poverty similarly described a sudden rise in demand for their services, both from the public and from governance actors. This motivated some of our participants to expand their operations, taking on new staff and enlarging their premises. This intense period was also a time of the joy which came from working together under adverse

circumstances, and saw the building of closer bonds both within and between businesses and organisations. This was all, however, underlain by worries about the disease itself, and about how it may affect our participants, their families, and communities.

By mid-2020, a certain sense of a 'new normal' was emerging; the shape of this new 'normality' was one of deep uncertainty. The severity of lockdown regulations kept changing dynamically throughout 2020, causing large fluctuations in demand and making it hard for LFAs to make long-term plans or establish new routines. Our participants described the challenges related to sudden expansion of their organisations, including problems with acquiring new premises, integrating new staff into the organisational culture and procedures, and reconfiguring administration of the business during a stressful and unusual period. This period also saw a continued effort from LFAs on the food poverty front; however, local food businesses faced a number of obstacles in contributing to this effort, including the closed nature of existing groups and networks. The national lockdown and limitations on family festivities, announced just before Christmas 2020, had a large impact on the morale of LFA staff, who had been working intensely both on the supply chain and emergency food provision fronts. Difficult weather in the late winter-early spring of 2021 also impacted local food production and caused supply chain disruptions for LFAs.

Throughout the research period, our participants were concerned both about the effects of the illness itself, and about the effects of the illness and of pandemic control measures, such as self-isolation, on their operations. They reported receiving no or very little guidance on pandemic safety. The inconsistent and fragmented nature of the advice led the LFAs to develop their own safety protocols. The lack of coherent messaging from the government meant that what constituted an appropriate and inappropriate level of risk was ultimately left to interpretation. As a result, the leaders within these businesses and organisations had to walk a fine line between ensuring safety and security and not being seen to interfere in people's personal choices.

Towards the end of the reporting period, in mid-2021, the LFAs in both food business and in the third sector noted that they were starting to be affected by supply chain issues, potentially underpinned by the combined effects of Brexit and of the pandemic

on the availability of labour and the flow of goods. They also noted that a number of local food system businesses were closing down, and that people working in third sector organisations were resigning.

In our last conversations, our participants were expressing a disappointment and frustration that the achievements of the local food sector had not been acknowledged. During the pandemic, the local food sector had 'plugged the gaps' in the mainstream food supply, and had 'stepped up' to deliver agile and targeted emergency food provision where government-led efforts were faltering. Neither of those efforts, they felt, was being sufficiently recognised by policymakers. As a result, our participants felt that, in spite of their hard work, as a sector they were back to square one, of working in an 'alternative' niche at the margins of the dominant food system.



## 2. Introduction.

# The pandemic as an ongoing event.

The COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared by the World Health Organisation in March 2020. The UK government imposed its first national lockdown shortly after. The impact of the pandemic and of the associated policy responses were strongly felt in all areas of social life, including in the local food sector<sup>1</sup>. As infection numbers rose into the second and third ‘waves’, and as new variants emerged, it became clear that thinking about the pandemic as a singular event was no longer appropriate. Rather, the conversations shifted towards ‘a new normal’: a new social reality where the COVID-19 virus is a constant presence requiring ongoing change and adaptation.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the early impacts of the pandemic on the local food sector, and of the sector’s resilience to these, please see Jones, S., Krzywoszynska, A. & Maye, D. (2022) Resilience and transformation: Lessons from the UK local food sector in the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Geographical Journal*, 00, 1-14.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12428>

This report presents a unique window onto the emergence of this ‘new normal’. It discusses the experience of the pandemic as an ongoing situation, rather than as a one-off emergency, amongst 12 local food system businesses and organisations. It draws on qualitative data which was collected regularly from these participants over a period of ten months (October 2020 – July 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic was seen as a potentially transformational moment for the UK food system. The large number of reports published by the local food sector in this period captured this feeling of optimism and empowerment, and of a hope that the local food sector can be a significant part of the UK’s food landscape going forward<sup>2</sup>. Powerful institutional actors, such as the UK government, see the local food sector as an important support to the main, supermarket-dominated food system, and count on it being available in the future to plug the gaps or provide additional services at times of need. Local food system organisations themselves argue that current local food system activities should be amplified so as to transform the UK’s food system<sup>3</sup>. For both these groups, the local food sector is an important part of the UK’s food future, albeit in different ways.

We argue that to continue being a source of resilience, the local food sector needs to be better supported. The local food sector is only as resilient as the individual people, businesses, and organisations within it. In the following pages, as we experience the unfolding pandemic with our participants, we document the mounting sense of fatigue, and hear our participants speak about the possibility of complete physical and mental burnout. Such experiences call into question the continued ability of LFAs to provide food system resilience in the future without support from central institutions.

---

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. The Soil Association’s *Grow Back Better* (2020) <https://www.soilassociation.org/who-we-are/our-strategy/grow-back-better-manifesto/>, The Landworkers’ Alliance *Vocal for Local* (2021) <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/vocal-for-local/>, and Sustain and RSPB’s *The case for local food* (2021) <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/the-case-for-local-food/>. For more details on how local food system organisations framed the future of the local food sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Black, J. E., Maye, D., Krzywoszynska, A., Jones, S., (2022) How is ‘the local’ framed in UK system food debates? A review of mainstream and local food sector reports during the Covid-19 pandemic. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6378946

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of these framings, see Black, J. E., Maye, D., Krzywoszynska, A., Jones, S., (2022) How is ‘the local’ framed in UK system food debates? A review of mainstream and local food sector reports during the Covid-19 pandemic. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6378946

# 3. Methodology.

## New methods for longitudinal online research.

This report draws on case study data collected as part of the project “COVID-19: the local as a site of food security resilience in the times of pandemic”.

In order to collect longitudinal data during the pandemic, a novel and tailored mix of qualitative research methods were developed. This longitudinal approach was important as it reflected the developing nature of the pandemic, rather than seeing it as a single one-off event. We recruited 12 case study participants through snowballing from contacts provided by our Advisory Board, which was composed of representatives of the local food sector.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The projects expert advisory board was made up of representatives from the following organisations involved in the local food sector: The Open Food Network, The Soil Association, Sustain, Better Food Traders, Pasture-fed Livestock Association, Sustainable Food Places, The Land Workers Alliance, Farm Retail Association, The Royal Agricultural University, and Social Farms & Gardens Wales.

The first stage of the methodology was to conduct an initial survey and online interview with the participants. The survey provided some important primary background information on each case study organisation, whilst the interviews (conducted in October and November 2020, semi-structured, and around 1h in duration) provided a greater depth of detail on the participant and their organisation, the impacts of the pandemic so far, how the organisation had responded / adapted, what needs or 'gaps' they filled, and future prospects.

The initial interviews and surveys were also used to create a second survey, tailored to each case study participant. This survey was completed by the case study participants a monthly basis for the following 10 months (November 2020 – July 2021). The survey was available online. It tracked the impacts of the pandemic on different aspects of the business or organisation, including: the level of demand they were experiencing, staff, their supply chain, collaborations with others, the social distancing measures they were implementing, food poverty work, funding applications and future plans, including expansion if applicable (see Appendix for examples).

In addition to this, participants were asked to upload a monthly diary entry about the running of their organisations and how the pandemic had impacted them that month. They were asked to record their reflections in whatever way was easiest for them and they felt most comfortable doing. The formats included audio recordings, videos, written diaries, and photos with a short description.

The final phase of the methodology involved return interviews, which took place in August and September 2021. In these, the participants were encouraged to further reflect on their experiences of the pandemic, and to speak at length about the aspects of the pandemic which had been particularly important to them over the time of the research. The interviews included general questions about the impacts of the pandemic, as well as specific questions that the researchers had drawn from analysing their monthly reporting diary entries, as well as the initial interviews.

The qualitative data generated from these case studies was thematically coded in NVivo. The emerging themes form the basis for the structure of this report.

The table on p. 7 shows the participants involved in the case study phase of this research project and their level of involvement in the different stages of it. There were initially 14 participants who took part in the first interview phase of the work. However, one participant dropped out after this initial stage and took no further part. Two other participants struggled to find time for the monthly reporting phase of the project and so had minimal engagement with this phase of data collection. A total of 12 participants took part in the return interview. 13 of the participants were based in England, with 5 participants in the South West of England, 4 in the South East of England, one in the Midlands, and 3 in the North of England. 1 participant was based in Scotland.

### **3.1 Online longitudinal research: reflection on methods.**

As the richness of the themes summarised in this report indicates, our longitudinal qualitative methodology allowed us to capture a wide range of impacts and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our case study participants. The mixed format of the monthly reporting allowed, on the one hand, a persisting focus on specific themes (through the survey) and, on the other hand, gave the participants ample room for unstructured reflection (through the diaries). As a result, the methodology produced a rich dataset both regarding the changes in the case study businesses and organisations, and regarding the personal experiences, emotions, and reflections of the individual participants.

In setting up this methodology, we were mindful that we would be asking for a fairly large time commitment from people who were already experiencing stress and who were potentially struggling. To reflect the value of the time volunteered by the participants, each case study was allocated a £250 thank-you payment (regardless of whether they completed the full research engagement). In addition, we made sure the participants knew they could withdraw from the project at any time. All the same, there were moments during the data collection when we were worried about our research participants. We then reached out to them directly to offer mental health support.

<b>ORGANISATION TYPE</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>1<sup>ST</sup> INTERVIEW</b>	<b>MONTHLY REPORTING</b>	<b>RETURN INTERVIEW</b>
<b>Community Supported Agriculture</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Farm shop</b>	<b>South East</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Farm shop</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Food hub</b>	<b>Midlands</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Direct sales (incl. bakery)</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Food hub</b>	<b>South East</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Box scheme</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Direct sales (meat)</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Food partnership</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Farmers' market</b>	<b>South East</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Food partnership</b>	<b>South East</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes (1 month delay)</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Butcher</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>2 surveys. No diaries</b>	<b>yes</b>
<b>Food hub</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>5 surveys. No diaries.</b>	<b>no</b>
<b>Direct sales (fish)</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>No - stopped responding</b>	<b>No - stopped responding</b>

**Table 1:** List of participating case studies and levels of interaction.

We were pleased to receive positive feedback on the methodology from our participants during the 2nd round of interviews. We were told that the monthly diary entries, surveys, and interview reflections were a positive experience. They allowed time for reflection and 'taking stock' which was personally and organisationally valuable.

*"Yeah I mean I've thoroughly enjoyed it I have to say because it's made me think about things every month, and that's probably why I agreed to take part in that it would give me a reason to do that, you know to reflect on what the hell is going on and how we were affected or not affected by it. So I'm really grateful of the opportunity to have taken part. (...) and I think it's been useful for the management team for me to provide that, I possibly wouldn't have had the motivation or thought to say how I capture the figures, you know the different numbers for example, and so it's helped me influence management decisions. So that's been helpful, very helpful on a week to week basis." (Direct sales, Scotland)*

*"On a personal level, as a small business owner, I think had I not had those diaries and that feedback from yourselves to say 'do you need some help', I think I would have been in a very different place now. (...) I was so full of anxiety about this that I wasn't checking in on myself. (...) I mean the only reason you knew about it was because I was doing the diaries, and I was thinking I was just doing 'oh this is what's happened this week', I had no idea until I read them about the anxiety that was in there." (Farm shop, North)*

# 4. Findings.

## Riding the waves of the pandemic.

### 4.1 The first wave

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated national lockdown was a turbulent moment for our participants. The stress of facing the prospect of losing livelihoods quickly gave place to another kind of stress – of meeting an explosion in demand as customers, disappointed by the gaps in provision by supermarkets, turned to local food businesses. Local organisations working on food poverty similarly described a sudden rise in demand for their services, both from the public and from governance actors. This explosive demand motivated some of our participants to expand their operations, taking on new staff and enlarging their premises. This intense period was also a time of the joy which came from working together under adverse circumstances, and a building of closer bonds both within and between businesses and organisations. This was all, however, underlain by worries about the disease itself, and how it may affect our participants, their families, and communities.

### 4.1.1 A 'blind panic'

Although the data collection started in November 2020, this is obviously not where the story of COVID-19 began for our case study participants. The first interviews, conducted in interviews gave an opportunity to reflect back on the first wave and the emotions associated with that.

Thinking back to March 2020, the participants described feelings of “blind panic” and sleepless nights at the initial announcement of lockdown when they were uncertain about what exactly this would mean for them.

*“Like I said it was the blind panic to start off with, but suddenly you’ve got a business and everything’s going to be turned off and everyone’s going to be shut up at home and nobody can come out to shop, and that’s how I read it. **As I’m lying there at 3 o’clock in the morning and thinking ‘how on earth do you keep a business going now?’**” (Butcher, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

*“That night (23rd march 2020) I couldn’t sleep because, you know we lost not just the café and the little shop that we had but all our orders that went out to restaurants and cafes, all cancelled overnight. So overnight all our business – and we anticipated all the festivals and the farmers’ markets would close as well. And we realised we had a lot of cheese we had just made for this festival, which is our biggest trading day of the year, we had all that cheese in the cold room and we knew that within 4 or 5 weeks that was going to be mature with nowhere to go (...) So that night I really struggled to sleep, and so rather than disturb my husband I went downstairs with a pen and paper and started sort of mind mapping of what could we do. **And my husband came down and said ‘come to bed’, and I said ‘oh I’ll only keep you awake’, and he said ‘no, let’s do this together because I’m up there doing the same thing’... And I said ‘look, our business is done, we’re going to have to live on savings’**” (Farm shop, North, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

The public reacted to the lockdown announcement by stocking up on essential supplies, leading to shortages of many products and the widely reported ‘empty shelves’ at many stores as the just-in-time food supply failed to respond quickly enough to the rise in demand (see Fig. 1). As a result, people turned to alternative provisioning streams, such as the local food sector, which saw a sudden increase in demand.

*“It was **like being dropped into a double Christmas** with no planning and no time to think” (Butcher, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

*“So meanwhile back in [location] there were four of us, and two of the four said that they felt they should self-isolate for various reasons. So it was basically left to me and one other guy to be packing fish (...) with half the people. **The phone didn’t stop ringing** and you picked up the phone and there was often very lovely old vulnerable people just so happy and grateful to be*

speaking to a person, and they wanted to engage you in a long conversation ‘oh how would you recommend cooking that, love’ and all this kind of thing. And it was just like if I don’t put the phone down on you now I haven’t got the time to physically put the fish in a box that is going to a customer who has already paid for this order and is waiting for it hopefully to arrive the next day kind of thing. So it was this whole thing about **you never had enough time in the day to do what you needed to do.**” (Direct sales, fish, 1st interview)

“And I should have realised I guess that being a food shop and people were panicking that it would end up on our doorstep – but I didn’t. **And when it happened it happened overnight and it was frightening, really frightening.** At the front we have vegetable racks because you want to make the shop look attractive and to invite people in; **we had cars pulling up just taking stuff off the front and driving off again;** we had theft in the shop. Supermarkets had run out of pasta so we had thefts of that. We had to bring everything indoors, we couldn’t have anything outside at all. So this was in about 3 days leading up to the lockdown. **So I had to get bouncers, literally bouncers on the door.** I had two blokes outside the front of the shop all the time for the entire time we were open. I stayed on the shop floor just to make sure that the girls were OK. And it was just a crazy time. And people were so horrible to one another as well, even local people our regulars who then sort of...you know how do I say to somebody at the door ‘well you can’t come in, we’ve never seen you before’ and the regulars were expecting us to do that, they were saying ‘well surely, we’ve supported you all this time’. And I said **‘but I just can’t do that, how can I say you can or you can’t come in?’** (...) So yeah I did find it threatening.” (Farm shop, South East, 1st interview)

The food supply break down also affected the organisations such as food partnerships who use surplus food to help those who are experiencing food poverty. These organisations also saw a sudden rise in demand, both in terms of individuals approaching them for help, and in terms of the new demands placed on them by other institutions.

“Well I mean just an incredible increase in the amount of people that are in food poverty, and I think it’s sort of been fluctuating throughout the year. **We had an incredibly steep increase at the very, very beginning of the pandemic** and it’s sort of gone down from that point.” (Food partnership, South West, 2nd interview)

“So overnight they were contacted by the City Council and said ‘we need to develop a volunteer response mechanism for the city’, and overnight they basically set up across the city, working in different wards, they set up these community care hubs. So within a third sector organisation in each of the wards (...). And in that was that the council set up this emergency food response, and that was facilitated through these hubs.” (Food partnership, North, 1st interview)

The severity of COVID-19 was also, at that time, a big unknown. Our participants reflected on the sense of fear of the disease itself, and on their concerns about the impact this would have on themselves, their family, friends, and the wider society.

*Interviewer: If you could go back in time and talk to yourself in March 2020, what would you tell yourself? What do you wish that you had known at the start of the pandemic that you know now?*

Interviewee: Well on a personal level I'd be like **'don't worry because you and your family aren't going to die'** (...) And you're not going to starve, and you will still be able to function as a household and as a family in the main in a way that's totally fine. (Box scheme, 2nd interview)

"...how serious would it become, like the 28 Days Later [Zombie Film] you know. Obviously you did think that, you know that food and other things would become scarce. So I mean the co-owner, she did bulk buy a lot of essential things, like pasta, **I mean we had like a war cupboard with lentils and pasta and rice in them you know, we did think like....I mean we joked about it, you know we joked about it that if the worst came to the worst we could all just move into the town and live off the land you know.** But then we thought well maybe we'd need to build a barricade because other people would have nothing and they would want to come! As I say we joked about it – but it wasn't a joke because you really didn't know how serious this would become in terms of resources. And I mean it clearly isn't a joke because we don't know how supply chains and resources are going to be from now on, you know there might be a long term impact to this. But as I say half of it was a joke, but it was in seriousness too as like what is the worst case scenario for this situation you know when resources become so scarce that will people turn on each other, that type of thing you know. So as I say it was a joke but some serious side." (Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)

"Oh God I almost don't want to go back to it, **it was just such a nightmare. It was horrible.** So I remember leaving the restaurant here in the city, in the financial district, being told by the government that we had to close. And Radio 4 going off air for a short while, and my dad always told me that that meant the nuclear submarines were about to be gone, that used to be the code for it... And there was rumours around the station (...) that the military were coming in to monitor people's movements and all that kind of thing. And you know now I know that was probably scaremongering or conspiracy theories and all the rest of it but nonetheless it did feel really severe and really sad actually." (Direct Sales, fish, 1st interview)

#### 4.1.2 Pulling together

The 'crisis mode' into which our participants' businesses and organisations were thrown as a result of the first wave also created positive experiences. Some of this was associated with an increased sense of bonding within teams, as well as new cooperation between organisations.

"But at the time **you were very scared for your colleagues you know.** Obviously we couldn't work from home, we had to go to work and I suppose not have the face to face interaction with customers obviously in the early days, but we had to be very careful with each other. And you were scared, I was scared you know. So yes you had that fear, but then obviously that did help to build our group dynamic. We were a strong group before, **we're like a family basically, so we've kind of grown in that sense** in terms of looking out for each other..." (Direct sales, Scotland, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

"But there was a lot of talk between the box schemes about a lot of sharing of resources, a lot of sharing of ideas, a lot of dialogue between them about what they do differently now, how they can do things differently. And each box scheme, because they're completely separate organisations often in completely different parts of the city with a different make-up of volunteers and workforce etc and cultures and all that sort of stuff, they all did things differently. But **there was a lot of communication** between them about that." (Food Hub, South East, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

The emergency food provision was an important element of the early days of the pandemic. While food poverty has been a long-standing problem in the UK, our interviewees commented that the pandemic created a new urgency to address it amongst the powerful institutional actors, such as city councils. As a result, these more powerful actors became open to and indeed active in building cooperation where it did not exist before.

*“Historically it’s been difficult to “break into” the food bank network in this city - as a supplier - because they have well established supply networks and there are elements of politics between the different food banks in the city. But COVID seems to have changed that and **coordination grew** out of the community and networks/ links between the food banks became more effective. (Box scheme, 1st interview)*

*“And we chaired a weekly meeting of the different council services with relation to food provision. So that includes people from all across the council, so somebody from Environmental Health, there’s Public Health, Housing, Children’s Centres, the Comms side (...) it was such a key issue for everyone wasn’t it? You know all those council departments all meet weekly and we would have about 40 people at some of those early meetings. It was a massive issue for so many council services and they absolutely turned to us to help them sort that response out. So again that’s a place where the **conversations were able to happen.**” (Food partnership, South West)*

At the same time, many of our case study participants reported taking initiative in ensuring food access in their communities. This was often described as filling the “gap” that was left by the mainstream food sector.

*“And there were a lot of issues with mainstream provision (...) there’s a narrative now isn’t it that supermarkets stepped up, but that’s not how I saw it. I saw it as revealing the gaps actually. (...) So **they did get there in the end but there was definitely a gap** while they shifted their models.” (Food partnership, South East, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

*“That’s how we did it, just kind of like **reaching into the communities** and having this like very simple form that people filled in about their experience of food insecurity at that moment.” (Food hub, South East, 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Many have commented that the early period of the pandemic was characterised by ‘the Blitz spirit’, a feeling of solidarity amongst different local food organisations and businesses in the face of adversity. Our participants reported that the scale of the COVID-19 emergency in the food sector more broadly, and in their communities specifically was initially energising in this way.

*“in a strange way things were a bit of a novelty in the first wave as well you know... don’t want to use kind of war language... but it was that kind of make do and mend connotations in the*

*beginning, and we were all doing something for this, **we were all sacrificing something.***”  
(Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)

*“something that **I personally felt quite inspired by was the community aspect**, so like how do we support our community. Because in Cambridge and also elsewhere we did see businesses that that became....you know it was a focus of what they do, like how do we make sure we’ve reached vulnerable people, and how do we make sure that our food is accessible, and things like that. (...) It’s not that it wasn’t something that was important to us anyway but (...) it was sort of like ‘yeah get your act together and actually do this now’. So that I think was quite inspiring.”*  
(Food hub, South West, 1st interview)

### 4.1.3 Growing together

For those local food businesses who were seeing an increase in demand, there was a sense that years of effort were finally paying off and being rewarded.

*“The flip side of course, and I’m going to be really, really honest about this. Is that **it started to make money, a lot**, not just in turnover but the profit margins. (...) Because, **thanks very much, I’ve put in 10 years of hard graft, I put all of my savings into starting the farm shop from scratch, it took a long time to get that money back.** Because we were reactive to what people wanted [locally], lovely to provide that service but maybe those things that they wanted actually didn’t have a particularly high profit margin”* (Farm shop, South East, 1st interview)

*“**Now thanks to COVID and people’s changing consumption habits** we just seem to be – touch wood – on an even keel now. So I’ve got a lot to thank COVID for.”* (Direct sales, fish, 1st interview)

*“But it’s very positive in a way you know. When we’ve spent so long building the business up and when the biggest pressure you’ve got is a long queue of people wanting to buy your product it’s less likely to keep you awake at night!”* Direct Sales, meat, 1st interview)

As the first wave progressed, the positive stories about the efforts that local food actors had made were shared in the media. The summer 2020 also saw the publishing of a number of reports in praise of local food, including Soil Association’s Grow Back Better, and the Covid-19 UK Veg Box Scheme Report by The Food Foundation.<sup>5</sup> Our participants told us this feeling of recognition fed a sense that the case for local food had been well and truly proven. There was a sense of positivity and hope about its future because of this.

*“**I think local food has been appreciated**, I think people realise that the local food chain was the most important food chain and we had to keep it going. I don’t know if people will remember that though, I think human beings forget quite quickly. I don’t know that the local food chain will be appreciated long term like it should be.”* (Farmers’ market, 2nd interview)

*“It’s not all negative, because one of the things is, **it’s really catapulted us into the centre of the community.** So people who were coming to the café pre first lockdown between the two*

---

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.soilassociation.org/who-we-are/our-strategy/grow-back-better-manifesto/> and <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/covid-19-uk-veg-box-scheme-report>.

*lockdowns started to come because they felt like they knew the place, they knew us. And so it hasn't all been negative.” (Farm shop, North, 1st interview)*

*“I think seeing the resilience and the adaptability of independent business and small business, and kind of sustainable business whatever, I think was quite good, **it shows the strength that we have in comparison to the supermarkets sometimes.**” (Food hub, South West, 1st interview)*

As a result, a number of LFAs we interviewed made plans to expand and grow. This included investing into online presence as well as expanding the physical space used (e.g. enlarging premises). However, as the following sections will show, as the pandemic continued this positivity largely faded away, and the LFAs had no opportunity to rest and recover after that first wave. Instead, the pressure upon them continued to accumulate.

## 4.2 The 'new normal'

The expansion in response to the new levels of demand was a challenging process for LFAs. Our participants described the struggles around acquiring new premises, integrating new staff into the organisational culture and procedures, and reconfiguring administration of the business during a stressful and unusual period. The severity of lockdown regulations kept changing dynamically throughout 2020, causing large fluctuations in demand and making it hard for LFAs to make long-term plans or establish new routines. This period also saw a continued effort from LFAs on the food poverty front; however, local food businesses faced a number of obstacles in contributing to this effort, including the closed nature of existing groups and networks. The national lockdown and limitations on family festivities, announced just before Christmas 2020, had a large impact on the morale of LFA staff, who had been working intensely both on the supply chain and emergency food provision fronts. Difficult weather in the late winter-early spring of 2021 impacted local food production and caused supply chain disruptions for LFAs.

### 4.2.1 Growing pains

A number of the local food businesses that benefitted from the increased demand during the first wave looked to expand their business. However, many were not been prepared for this level of growth at such short notice. As a result, they struggled with several issues.

In the dairies, a number of participants discussed struggling with a lack of space and facilities as a result of processing a larger than usual number of orders. However finding and purchasing or renting new premises is not an easy process for LFAs, as this example from a food hub illustrates:

*"We put in an application for a site (...) Overall it was a very good deal, (...) but we thought that it was likely that it was going to be taken by a developer. But we pulled all the stops out and put our best offer in that we could (...) And actually as of today we found out that that was unsuccessful, we don't know who they did go with but we guess that it might have been a developer because of the clause in the sale which stated that any profits that were made on any development that was done on the site, half of those profits would go to the owners. Whereas that's not something we could promise because we weren't planning on developing lots of houses." (Food hub, South West, November 2020 diary)*

With the growth of these businesses also came issues of internal politics and changes to the culture of the organisation. As we noted previously, one of the strengths of the LFAs is the strong bonding within the teams. With an expanding workforce, issues arose for our participants around ensuring continuity of the organisational culture. In addition, some LFAs commented they struggled to find new staff members, or to recruit sufficiently skilled staff.

*“So our organisation is growing, more people are doing a wider range of roles and that’s kind of....I suppose that’s sort of tested our ability to manage people effectively. And as a cooperative you know we have particular kind of aims as to how we engage with our co-workers and how we are aspiring towards democratically governing the organisation and involving those co-workers. So yeah, maybe in a conventional hierarchically sort of managed business the processes would be maybe more familiar to people, possibly more efficient in certain respects, but also you know wouldn’t offer the ability to engage individuals and seek consensus and look to kind of demonstrate the co-operative values that underpin what we do.” (Box scheme, January 2021 diary)*

*“One example of this is some debates we’ve had recently with regards to the governance of the business and the structure. So there’s some tension about whether the business should remain as a kind of company limited by shares, or to become a community interest corporation(...) So that’s been a bit of a contentious point recently over the past few weeks (...) There’s a lot of changes that we want to make and a lot of it is about relationships between people and people needing to feel like they’re.....staff members needing to feel like they are trusted and valued but also recognising that we need to bring new people on to the team.” (Food hub, South East, November 2020 and April 2021 diary)*

*“for whatever reason at the moment we are trying to hire to strengthen what is a good marketing team but we definitely want to add more excellence into it, and it’s proving very, very difficult to find people of the right calibre.” (Diet sales, South West, April 2021 diary)*

*“And staff, you know we’ve got a young team that we’re building and that’s tricky because there’s some dynamics there that need to be managed. (...) I’m thinking there is going to be some chickens kind of all like pecking, you know a new pecking order, a shuffling, a storming (...) So there’s some managing of team to do over the next few weeks.” (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

This growth has also meant new policy and admin challenges for our participants. Increasing staff numbers, complexity of operations, and turn over required revisiting issues such as insurance, taxation, as well as internal management procedures.

*“We’ve put in a lot of processes and policies in place to kind of try and just operate in a more professional way I guess when you move from being a properly small business to being one that is actually starting to grow into, well not a big business but maybe a kind of middle sized business.” (Food Hub, South East, 2nd interview)*

*“So we’ve had to completely obviously reformulate not just the business operations over the past 12 months but as a result we’ve had to completely reformulate our business insurance cover, and that has actually been a major task, very time consuming, very dull and involves*

*establishing key facts about the business for the underwriters to assess us.” (Box Scheme, March 2021 diary)*

*“We have turned over £90,000+ and this means breaking the VAT threshold. So, much of our time has been spent in registering ourselves for VAT, adjusting prices, working out which products attract VAT and which don’t... (...) It is far from straightforward and has been a minor nightmare to carry out within the timeframe that HMRC allows.” (Food hub, Midlands, April 2021 diary)*

#### **4.2.2 Uncertainties around demand**

The longitudinal methodology used in this study allowed us to track the fluctuating demand LFAs experienced as a result on ongoing changes to pandemic-related regulations. We were also able to note the emotional reactions to these fluctuations amongst our participants.

As described above (and elsewhere) a number of local food businesses saw a big increase in demand during the first lockdown, with some describing the intensity of demand ‘like a double Christmas’. As restrictions eased over the summer of 2020, our participants saw a tailing off in the level of demand. Some participants felt frustrated with customers for returning to more mainstream shopping habits. Others were more accepting that the “gaps” related to food availability that they had filled during the first wave of the pandemic were always going to close when supermarkets recovered from the initial shock, and people became less fearful about going into supermarkets. These different reactions suggest different perceptions of the role that LFAs are playing the food system: a (hopefully) growing alternative, or just an addition to the dominant supply chain.

*“So the sales went up by about four and a half times compared to the same period last year, they’re now down to about two and a half times compared to last year. So it’s a lot higher than it was last year but it’s still way down off COVID peaks. And **some of me just feels a bit disgruntled with some of the customers that put so much pressure on these small businesses to perform for them and then as soon as they are able to go back to Tesco’s off they go back to Tesco’s.** And I kind of want to meet those people personally and say ‘guys, do you know what you are doing to the planet by your actions there, it’s not fair, everybody is in this’.” (Direct sales, South East, 1st interview)*

*“I think the fruit and veg, it wasn’t that they said they wanted it and then they didn’t, it’s more a case of they did what we anticipated. **Everyone said ‘oh we’ll continue supporting you, we’ll continue shopping here’ and we knew they wouldn’t because why would you pay twice as much for bananas when you can get them from the supermarket - a banana is a banana after all.** And it was our job to find what was the thing they couldn’t get in the supermarket – local*

*artisan produce and treats and local chocolates – people are prepared to spend a bit more on those things. So that’s....yeah.” (Farm shop, North, 1st interview)*

When cases started to rise again and restrictions were re-introduced at the end of 2020/ start of 2021, demand once again picked up but not to the same extent that it had done in the first wave.

*“Interestingly that first week, which might have been about a month ago now in Scotland, where there was a 30% increase in our online sales that weekend. As you say, that kind of more restrictions, you know not a whole scale lockdown, but even just maybe the conversation around it from politicians you know was being heightened again.” (Direct sales, Scotland, 1st interview)*

Then once again, as restrictions were eased in summer 2021 the levels of demand tailed off again.

*“It looks (and feels) very different this month. The order numbers have dropped significantly – with no likely repeat of last summer, when Covid was firmly in place and people were much more likely to be stuck indoors and doing their shopping from home.” (Food hub, Midlands, June 2021 diary)*

It is important to note that such fluctuations in demand were not unusual for our participants. Regardless of COVID-19, LFAs observed a similar pattern in demand over the course of the year, with levels of demand reducing in the summer as people went on holiday/ had their own home grown produce. However, the pandemic-related changes made these fluctuations much more pronounced. In addition, some LFAs who adapted to the news consumption habits which emerged as a result of lockdowns and restrictions (such as people working from home more) struggled when customers became again more ‘mobile’.

*“We have started to see a bit of a drop (...) I mean **we always do see a sort of, you know you have your highs in January and then it goes down to low points in August and then it tends to go up again in September as people come back from holidays** (...) This drop is a bit sooner than we would expect, we don’t know whether there’s some things....well I think there’s a big influence of coronavirus rules being relaxed, people going back to offices, people going back to restaurants and things like that and wanting the box less and it fitting less well with their lives. (Food hub, South West, June 2021 diary)*

*“So the actual home deliveries have started to slip off a little bit now and that’s....although we are still doing some it’s been that sort of thing that people have found it inconvenient to be in at a time when we deliver. (...) People are saying that ‘but actually I’m starting to go back to the gym now’ or ‘I’m going off to meet a friend for a coffee’ and these sorts of things. But they don’t want it, especially through the warm time, they don’t want their delivery left on their doorstep when they’re not going to be there. **So the logistics of it are actually a lot more difficult now***

*we're out of lockdown because then obviously it was so easy because everybody had to stay at home anyway." (Butcher, 2nd interview)*

As we mentioned earlier, many of the LFAs we researched responded to the increased demand by growing the size of their operations. This decision was, however, also a constant and reoccurring source of worry as the LFAs observed the fluctuations in demand and changed behaviour amongst their customers. For some, the higher levels of demand seemed unstable and potentially unlikely to continue beyond the end of government restrictions.

*So yeah you know we do have resources now that we have gained over the past year and that we kind of want to invest in our future whatever that may be, is it part of a new site, is it new members of staff, is it better marketing, is it like all these various things it could be. But yeah we have to kind of just not rely on things that may change in the future." (Food hub, South West, 2nd interview)*

### **4.2.3 Bombshell Christmas**

Christmas 2020 stands out as a significant time for the LFAs we researched in a number of ways. Firstly, it was a time of particularly high demand for businesses and food organisations alike. Our participants reported that customers were spending more money, and that employers used LFAs as a source of Christmas treats (e.g. local food hampers) for employees who would normally be invited to Christmas dinners. At the same time, Christmas 2020 also stood out in terms of the effort to address growing food poverty. As a result, those involved in the emergency food response were also busier than usual over the Christmas period.

*"I felt confident that the city was doing an excellent job with food provision (...) **Everybody was working flat out to get as many parcels out and that anybody that needed food was able to access it**, which was really great to see, it's really fantastic." (Food partnership, North, December 2020 diary)*

Consequently, all our participants reported working long hours to meet the demand. Importantly, this period of intense work was combined with rising cases of COVID-19, which led to a last-moment announcement of restricted movement on 19th December. The restrictions effectively prevented mixing and visiting family and friends over Christmas. A number of participants reflected that this period of time seems like a significant contributing factor to the exhaustion and burnout described in later months.

*“So people were obviously fed up by then, I think the timing obviously with what happened at Christmas time, **that really affected morale.** (...) by that stage people didn’t want to sacrifice any more, you know.” (Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)*

*“I think the impact on our team, on the morale, was greater. I think that was something we definitely noticed. You know **people were worn down by that stage, and so then another lockdown.** And you know we were giving these vegetable boxes to all the team (...) and it felt like a really good idea but you almost felt like you wanted to send them home with somehow feel-good movies as well. You know you needed to really help support their morale in every way possible because it felt very draining.” (Direct sales, South West, 2nd interview)*

#### **4.2.4 Bad weather**

Although not related to COVID-19, the unusually harsh weather experienced in winter 2020/21 was another added source of pressure for the LFAs. The winter storms, late frosts in spring, and inconsistent summer weather caused issues for those who relied on locally grown produce, as illustrated by these detailed diary entries from our community supported agriculture participant:

*“**Severe winter weather conditions continue to throw up challenges** and slow our start to the growing season as polytunnel temperatures plummeted to -5C overnight. The unusually low temperatures delayed harvesting for the veg boxes as the brassicas didn't thaw out till midday and the leeks froze into the ground (again). Torrential rain caused a quagmire round the new packing shed and we had to invest in some recycled plastic ground reinforcement panels to maintain safety standards.” (Community Supported Agriculture, South West, January 2021 diary)*

*“The whole of July has continued to be dominated by the extreme weather conditions that have affected growers like us all over the UK this growing season. Farmers and horticulturalists are renowned for their pessimism but it has been without exception **the most challenging we’ve ever experienced in 13 years at this CSA.** The growing team sizzled in sweltering temperatures one week, then just seven days later battled Storm Evert to harvest veg in 50mph winds and driving rain. During the heatwave our growers were arriving at the site at the crack of dawn to labour in the polytunnels and get all the watering done more efficiently before it got too hot.” (Community Supported Agriculture, South West, January 2021 diary)*

#### **4.2.5 Food poverty: barriers to getting involved**

Food poverty has been a significant issue in the UK for a number of years, and became even more pronounced during the pandemic. As we discussed above, some LFAs commented that the pandemic increased cooperation on this issue and enabled them to become involved in new ways. However, it proved more difficult to incorporate contributions to the food poverty effort on an ongoing basis into their expanding and changing businesses and organisations.

Our participants shared reflections on multiple barriers which were preventing them from becoming involved. They faced problems in cooperating with food charities due to mismatches in operating times (e.g. food charities not being open on the weekend, when LFAs had surplus available), or due to the charities' requirements about the food (e.g. preferring long-lasting tinned food over fresh food, or the charities not being able to accept small quantities, or to deal with multiple small suppliers, or not being able to pay the full cost of locally produced food).

As we mentioned earlier, the local food sector overall shifted towards the online sphere; however, these platforms did not necessarily have the functionality needed to accept food vouchers, limiting the LFAs contribution to the food poverty action.

*“The Healthy Start vouchers and aspects of the common government regulatory practices and local council issued things, **it’s incredibly difficult to make that work in an online scenario** because they require a physical piece of paper. So they’re always touted as being a solution but in fact it’s not really a solution.” (Food hub, Midlands, June 2021 diary)*

Overall, our participants communicated a sense of frustration in being locked out of the food poverty response due to the lack of the ‘right’ connections, be that with pre-established groups, with particular political institutions, or with faith organisations who are active on this front. Our participants complained about the closed nature of the groups within the sector. They argued that more should be done by these organisations to ensure that they capture all possible contributions.

*“Well within food banks there’s also..... these like umbrella bodies who affiliate with certain food banks (...) So you are able to access certain regional or national supply chains of surplus and redistributed food if you are part of the Trussell Trust (...). And **there’s some politics there as well, you know there’s connections with churches, there’s the role of local politics** you know because of the demographics of particular areas.” (Box Scheme, North, 1st interview)*

*“I keep pushing this in meetings, I keep saying ‘I feel that we need a constitution and that we need to make it open and transparent’ and I get nowhere. Because **certain people have been invited and certain people haven’t**, put it that way.” (CSA, 2nd interview)*

*“I mean it’s harvest season right, there’s a lot of surplus, **but the mechanisms aren’t there for feeding surplus to get it to the people that need it**. You know food banks don’t want to touch it, you know [these organisations] they’ve already got their supply chain and their systems. And it’s like how can you??” (Food partnership, North, 1st interview)*

## 4.3 Living with Covid

Throughout the reporting period, our participants were concerned both about the effects of the illness itself, and about the effects of the illness and of pandemic control measures, such as self-isolation, on their operations. Our participants reported receiving no or very little guidance on pandemic safety. The inconsistent and fragmented nature of the advice led the LFAs to develop their own safety protocols. The lack of coherent messaging from the government meant that what constituted an appropriate and inappropriate level of risk was ultimately left to interpretation. As a result, the leaders within these businesses and organisations had to walk a fine line between ensuring safety, and not being seen to interfere in people's personal choices.

### 4.3.1 Fearing the disease

The fear of the virus and its effects was a significant element of the pandemic experience for our participants. In the period of this study (2020-21), the severity of the health impacts of COVID-19 (in its then-circulating variants) were only just starting to be understood.

*“And I have and still am a little bit fearful because of the effects of... **there's an underlying fear of contracting COVID or giving it to someone and them having something terrible happen to them.** So that fear for yourself and for others. (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

The main source of concern around COVID-19 for our participants, however, was the way that the illness and the need to self-isolate would affect the LFAs operations. Throughout the reporting period, we heard how our case studies monitored the number of cases in their communities closely, and worried about whether they would be able to keep their businesses open or their supply chains going when increasing numbers of people were going off sick or isolating (for example when new, more infectious variants emerged, or during the so-called 'ping-demic' during early summer 2021 when large numbers of people were being told to self-isolate using the NHS COVID-19 app).

*“The only thing that was **worrying us all the time physically was myself and the staff catching it and then having to close down because of it.** That was the only real worry” (Butcher, 2nd interview)*

*“We had, one of our casual staff, her husband caught COVID (...) we hadn't actually thought about the pandemic, the disease itself, [that's] the only time I did, I was like **'my God, are we***

*going to have to close', just overnight, just have to close because it's possible that she's got it."* (Farm shop, South East, 2nd interview)

*"And we were fearful at any point, in fact it didn't really happen, but we were fearful that we would lose one or more of our main volunteers or our manager for a couple of weeks or more if we weren't watching out (...) So **all of that had to be handled over and above the actual business of getting food** (...) and all the same sort of pressures that there are normally. (Food hub, Midlands, 2nd interview)*

*"It's true to say that there was quite a lot of fear in the air I think, in fact that was worse in January, I wasn't the only one off with COVID. **COVID affected so many in our area and the health service, it was very scary for a bit.** And quite a lot of volunteers and some of our front line organisations and food banks, food distribution areas also got COVID in a way that didn't happen previously and that's mainly because of the new variant affecting Sussex at speed."* (Food partnership, South East, January 2021 diary)

*"We unfortunately got our first person who tested positive for coronavirus, so.... stress. So we decided that we were going to do tests of all members of staff using the lateral flow tests just so we could kind of have a baseline of where we say 'OK we've tested everyone and everyone's come back negative' which luckily they did. But from finding out that news on Monday there was **stress in terms of are we going to be able to get the tests in time before people come into work on Tuesday.** (...) But luckily everyone did come back negative and I think overall, yeah it was OK."* (Food hub, South East, January 2021 diary)

*"Certainly in terms of staff management June was significantly more challenging because of the **considerable number of days lost through enforced isolation from the COVID ping process.**"* (Direct sales, South West, June 2021 diary)

### 4.3.2 Keeping on top of guidance and legislation

Protecting workers and the wider public from the effects of the COVID-19 illness was the foundation of government guidance and legislation, both with regards to controlling the movement of individuals, and in terms of ensuring the safety of work places and public spaces. Keeping on top of the changing regulations was a source of stress and pressure throughout the reporting period for the LFAs.

This was a particular issue at the start of the pandemic, when any form of advice was minimal. As a result, LFAs had to follow their own best judgement in their attempts to ensure the safety of their staff and customers

*"We had very strict kind of COVID protocols, we were very quick (...) The only snag was we had to cobble together advice from the Scottish government, the Irish government and I think the US government because **there was nothing in England to do, there was no advice at all from the British government. And we cobbled together a protocol** which actually other CSAs used a bit to start with because they were also caught on the hop."* (Community Supported Agriculture, 2nd interview)

*“Yeah I mean we had to fight our way through it really. You’d have phone calls from the council from time to time saying ‘are you doing this, are you doing that’. We had the police visit and asked to look at our one-way system and how we were managing it (...) **We found it a bit heavy duty to have the police come in I must say**” (Butcher, 2nd interview)*

The participants then continually had to invest time and effort in understanding new guidance and legislation as restrictions were raised or lowered.

*“We had information coming through from our local Environmental Health officers but it was always kind of a little bit behind because we already knew that from the .gov websites because we were making sure that we were up to date. And then our Environmental Health officers would send something and you’d think (...) **we could have done with that information 2 weeks ago.**” (Farm shop, South East, 2nd interview)*

*“So I suppose the sort of theme really has been an uncertainty and having to adapt and not maybe necessarily having very clear communication from government as to what those changes are and what that impact is going to be on us. **So we kind of had to almost pre-empt it and make sure that the rules are there but not necessarily knowing what those rules should be because we haven’t had very clear communication on that**” (Farmers’ market, 2nd interview)*

It also became an issue for participants when staff members tested positive and they weren’t sure what to do. As one participant explains in the quote below, it was for example very hard to understand how the self-isolation of one staff member affected the rest of the company. As a result, the LFAs had to go through the stressful process of interpreting regulations according to what ‘felt right’, and hoping they were not breaking any rules or risking fines.

*“**There was a lot of conflicting advice on the internet, the government websites, the local authority, ACAS you know, so I just went with the one I liked!** I went ‘I like that answer, we’ll do that’. And to be honest we have all been double jabbed, we all wear masks, we are careful (...) everyone was taking Lateral Flow Tests twice a week (...) so it felt like the risk was minimal really.” (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

### **4.3.3 Tensions around safety measures**

The lack of clarity around pandemic safety guidance created a space where multiple interpretations of what constituted appropriate, safe, or desirable behaviour were possible. This created many difficulties for the LFAs. Our participant from Scotland noted, for example, how separate messaging around different safety measures in Scotland and England led to tensions:

*“obviously in Scotland we had two sets of news (...) and so people were responding, you know aspects of peoples’ behaviour or their mood or their expectations was in relation to when Boris Johnson made an announcement. But this was for England and Wales only for example and obviously we were out of sync in Scotland (...) **so that was annoying when people sometimes***

*expected you to be doing something and you'd say 'well actually we can't do that at the minute because that's just England, not happening in Scotland' (...) face masks are still mandatory in Scotland so we maintain that. But again some people don't wear them and I think that's kind of the mixed messaging that's coming from the different governments." (Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)*

Overall, the LFAs we interviewed were committed to creating a safe space for their staff and their customers. In line with their local and community-embedded ethos, they were very aware of and careful about the potential impacts they may have in terms of exacerbating the pandemic. The lack of coherent messaging from the government meant, however, that what constituted an appropriate and inappropriate level of risk was ultimately left to interpretation. As a result, the leaders within these businesses and organisations had to walk a fine line between ensuring safety and security and not being seen to interfere in people's personal choices.

*"We are asked 'do I have to wear a mask in the shop' and we say 'you don't have to, we prefer it', and most of our customers will put their mask on in the shop. (...) nearly all the staff now are double jabbed (...) so in the next 2 to 3 weeks we probably will drop our masks (...) I'm still slightly uncomfortable because we have an older population who come here because they feel safe and it's at a time when we are moving indoors as the weather changes, so it's....I think it's just we need to do it in consultation with our staff and talk to our customers as well." (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

*We are aware of members of staff who are not getting the vaccine for various reasons (...) We don't have any kind of policy that says 'you must be vaccinated' because we think it is your own choice. Obviously it's choice that affects other people, but yeah. So we haven't said anything like that. I guess if it kind of came up as a conversation then, well I know that I personally would sort of try and at least like try and understand people's fears or concerns. But yeah it's a hard one." (Cambridge food hub, 2nd interview)*

## 4.4 Straining point, breaking point: the pandemic and the future of the local food sector.

Towards the end of the reporting period, our participants noted that they were starting to be affected by supply chain issues, potentially underpinned by the combined effects of Brexit and of the pandemic on the availability of labour and the flow of goods. They also noted that by mid-2021 a number of local food system businesses were closing down, and that people were also leaving the third sector. In our last conversations, our participants were expressing a disappointment and frustration that the achievements of the local food sector had not been acknowledged. The local food sector had 'plugging the gaps' in the mainstream food supply, and had 'stepped up' to deliver agile and targeted emergency food provision when the government-led efforts were faltering. Neither of those, they felt, was being recognised by policymakers. As a result, our participants felt that in spite of their hard work, as a sector they were back to square one, of working in an 'alternative' niche at the margins of the dominant food system.

### 4.4.1 Supply chains straining

The 'gaps' in the dominant food supply chain was a significant element of the LFAs experience during the first wave of the pandemic, as we explored above. Our participants did not, however, report having problems with their own supply chains. This was in spite of worries around the impact of Brexit at the start of 2021, when new exporting rules came into play. Towards the end of the reporting period, however, our participants began to notice supply chain troubles.

*"I mean **the situation has become worse**. Last week when Jock went to the fruit and vegetable market it was the worst ever and all the wholesale guys there were saying this, **this was like the worst week they had ever experienced in like 50 years** of working there some of them, in terms of supply and quality. I mean I'm talking like rotting fruit, which is normally OK you get dodgy stuff but generally the level is very, very good. Also he has been seeing less things from Europe, so more like sweet potatoes and so on from the Americas for example, so there has been a change in the location of supply I would say. (...) the other thing that has happened is this last week is that we can't get French flour [for our baguettes], so that's a first for the whole time."  
(Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)*

*"it was the final conference for [a project] ....And the thing that really jumped out at me is that, I think it was just in a break-out group (...) and everyone in the room....he had somebody from Scotland, somebody from London, myself from Brighton and Hove, basically a complete spread*

*[and] we were all really struggling around food surplus supply” (Food partnership, South West, May 2021 diary)*

Our participants hypothesised that they were experiencing these supply issues due to the combined impact of the pandemic and of Brexit. They thought that the supply chains were able to maintain normal operations for a while by eating into surplus, which was now running out. In addition, they commented that they were feeling the effects of Brexit on staff shortages as well as their customer base. These challenges were starting to put additional pressure on the LFAs by mid-2021.

*“You know I think it’s highlighted the other staff shortages due to COVID. (...) you hear a lot about it in construction at the minute but obviously **it’s massively affecting food as well, the way that people are struggling to get workers** and that kind of thing has affected our food supply. Hauliers as well, massive issue in food distribution isn’t it nationally at the minute. (...) I just think there was a lot of stockpiling by businesses in the beginning, you didn’t get this impact early on. And now we’re getting the impact of it” (Food partnership, South West, May 2021 diary)*

*“We’ve lost a lot of our Eastern European customers (...). I think partly it was the processes that people would have had to go through to stay here or to work here, and then also some of them would always probably go home for some of the year and then come back, so do work here and then also do work at home as well. So what we’re hearing is that people just didn’t come back here because of COVID in case there was a lockdown and then they couldn’t travel. So they’ve just stayed at their original home in Europe and haven’t come back. So that might be some impact with the workers as well. (...) But that was something we kind of thought we would have experienced at the beginning or after Brexit happened sort of thing. So **it’s like there’s been a surplus built up and now we’ve used all the surplus and now we are starting to experience the lack of some items for real.**” (Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)*

#### **4.2.2 A shrinking sector**

None of the LFAs in our project went out of business or closed down during the reported period. However, in the last months of the project in mid-2021 our participants started to report that suppliers, customers or other local businesses they worked with and were friends had stopped trading. Similarly, LFAs in the third sector told us that their colleagues were leaving their jobs.

*“I remember **one of the standard questions on your questionnaire was ‘have you lost any suppliers’** and for the (...) first 6 or 7 months or whatever it was not even vaguely a concern of ours, it was all add, add, add. **Then I began to think ‘what is this question’, which cynic is asking this question? And then we lost the first one**, and that sort of set off a period of 3 or 4 months when at least one, and I think 2 or possibly 3 on one occasion fell off the chain. And some of them stopped doing business completely, whether it was an economic reason or a personal reason I can’t actually really tell you but anyway they weren’t there.” (Food hub, Midlands, 2nd interview)*

*“In the third sector as a whole there’s a lot of people leaving their jobs (...) I think people are coming through this going ‘what am I doing – I don’t want to work like that anymore’. And I think...you know there’s been.....has anybody had a pay rise, has anybody been compensated for what they’ve gone through?” (Food partnership, North, 2nd interview)*

Not only did losing business partners and colleagues affect our participants’ supply chains and cooperation networks, it also took an emotional toll to see people they knew well going through these difficulties.

*“All of that energy. And it’s like I knew it was hard but I didn’t know it was that hard. (...) But it’s just sort of like you keep hearing this, you know somewhere else has shut down, something else has happened. It’s just like ‘poof’.” (Food partnership, North, 2nd interview)*

#### **4.4.3 Relentless uncertainty**

In the previous sections of the report we explored the various ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic created uncertainty for LFAs. In the final interviews, we asked our participants to specifically reflect on the causes and impacts of this uncertainty. Whilst a minority of the participants said they accepted and were to a large extent used to living with uncertainty from before the pandemic (“it is a feature of managing a business at any time”, Box scheme), the majority of participants reflected that the level of uncertainty was higher than usual during the pandemic, and that this was a continued source of stress to them. As one of our participants commented, the uncertainty was all-pervasive, affecting every element of their business.

*“It was like doing the Covid Hokey Cokey. I don’t think many people realise but as a business the rules were changing sometimes every two weeks and there was reams of legislation coming out at a time when you were trying to survive. So you didn’t want to do anything wrong because you didn’t want to get a fine, you didn’t want to put anyone at risk, you know you didn’t want to be responsible for someone dying (...) not being able to business plan, not knowing if next month should we start recruiting staff, should we not start recruiting staff. And that meant that you had a really heavy workload so when we were open it was really hard work, and when we were closed it was hard work in a different way, you know it was just trying to think of different ways to bring in some money and support the community (...) **constant change, inability to plan finances, resources, or even our own time off.**” (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

The pandemic introduced uncertainty on an unprecedented scale and of unprecedented intensity for LFAs and other societal actors. Making ‘normal’ business and operational decisions became difficult and stressful. It was not only hard to predict the future need for goods or services offered by the LFAs, but even hard to predict how deeply the pandemic may affect the basic social fabric.

*“Is it wise to start spending loads of money on new vans and new cold stores and bigger premises and more staff if we’re just about to jump into a mad massive recession where loads and loads of people are unemployed?” (Food hub, South East, 1st interview)*

*“We knew that things were going to....well poverty specifically was going to be really enormous (...) And then I guess the uncertainty was kind of how much and for how long. And obviously also there is still this kind of question about like what can open now, what can’t, **is it all just going to be plain sailing from now on (...) back to normal?**” (Food partnership, South East, 2nd interview)*

#### **4.4.4 Burnout**

The previous sections of this report tell the story of the multiple pressures and accumulating stress that local food actors have endured over the course of the pandemic in 2020–21. These sources of stress have all been significant in themselves, but when combined within the space of less than a two year period they have brought several of our participants to the point of complete physical and mental burnout.

*“**It was the relentlessness of it, it just didn’t stop.** You know if you have a job you go home at the end of the day and you have weekends where hopefully you can switch off a little bit, but that was just.... **We thought we were going to lose everything** and it was...**you just were like fighting to survive** and I don’t think you appreciated just the toll it took.” (Farm shop, North, 2nd interview)*

In the interviews the participants reflected on what the cost of this might be in the years to come, particularly in non-for-profit organisations who felt an obligation to work relentless hours.

*“**The burn out has been a real thing across all the organisations we support** because depending on different peoples’ situations, because sometimes it has felt, I think to a lot of the volunteers out there, like if they didn’t do it no-one was going to do it, and that they had all this stuff on their shoulders and if they didn’t do this thing then people would literally be going hungry.” (Food partnership, South East, 2nd Interview)*

One such participant was considering leaving their role as a direct consequence of the stress they had experienced during the pandemic. While this participant was very proud of the work they had done, they felt the pressure had become unsustainable.

*“Personally, I might look for something else (...) I feel a bit coalface at the moment without the support, you know” (Food partnership, North, 2nd interview)*

#### **4.4.5 ‘Thanks, but no thanks’: A lack of recognition.**

We noted that in the early period of the pandemic our participants felt a surge of optimism and good-will around the local food sector and localised food services. By

mid-2021, however, our participants were expressing a disappointment and frustration that the achievements of the local food sector had not been acknowledged. Policy actors were noted for not recognising the contribution of the local food sector to 'plugging the gaps' in the supply system, and in 'stepping up' to deliver agile and targeted emergency food provision when the government-led efforts were faltering. For example, one of our participants was working with a local council to supply food for children as part of the free school meals provision during the pandemic. Instead of this leading to this LFA becoming more firmly embedded in the council's food procurement strategy, however, their services were suddenly discontinued.

*"I felt quite disappointed at the time because we put a lot into that. It was a huge amount of effort, a lot of man hours. The delivery slot, it was an incredible amount of deliveries to try and cram in in one day, you know quite exhausting work and what have you, and we kept them going all that time. **And then yeah, we just got a 'thanks but no thanks'.** (Butcher, 2nd interview)*

Similarly, our farmers' market participant commented that while it is clear that local food markets offer a safer way for people to shop during the pandemic, this has not led to any policy which would support local food markets from policymakers.

*"Every time they think we're doing well all they want to do is take more rent. (...) Farmers' market – out rents have gone up through COVID, they haven't gone down. I think that **during this whole crisis people became really scared of supermarkets** and going inside to shop and they realised that being outside was safer, **but will they remember that in February 2022** when it's freezing cold and it's pouring with rain and it's quite frankly warm in Sainsbury's and you can park outside and it's easy? **They won't remember that. And I think there should be loads more government campaigns supporting local food and local markets** and there should be loads more support on the ground from local councils to make sure that we're supported. But there won't be, there never has been, there won't be" (Farmers' market, 2nd interview)*

While the pandemic and its effects were continuing, this was not being recognised by governance actors. This was also visible in the food poverty-related landscape, where funding streams created during the early days of the pandemic were disappearing.

*"There has been a lot of funding available for the crisis **and a lot of that funding is kind of closing now, or kind of drying up now.** And as an organisation it's better for us to get kind of long term, maybe like 3 year funding, than it is to get something that is for a year. However there aren't that many organisations out there that are....kind of any trusts out there that can give you the kind of long term funding" (Food partnership, South East, 2nd interview)*

Overall, our participants told us they felt that the opportunity for genuine positive change for the UK food system which the pandemic opened up was slipping away. For

local food actors, a 'back to normal' meant being back at the margins of an inhospitable and difficult sector.

***“We were like ‘OK there is some optimism here that this might be finally addressed’, seriously addressed you know. We did think that. But now we don’t think that. We’re just back to thinking cynically as we did before that here is another opportunity – you know it’s like all the issues with the economy, it’s another opportunity to say ‘OK we need to change how we live’ and this virus should have been one such event. And it appears that it’s not being, you know (...) So it’s still very hard what we do and it’s very disappointing that kind of you feel you are swimming against the tide.”*** (Direct sales, Scotland, 2nd interview)

# 5. Uncertain local food futures.



As we write this report in February 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic has become ‘domesticated’ – from an emergency event, it has passed onto day-to-day life and become normalised in a range of (contested) practices of ‘closing’ and ‘opening’ spaces, practices, and lives. There are many calls for ‘going back to normal’; however, as our report illustrates, deciding which elements of this pre-pandemic ‘normal’ should be retained is far from obvious. For the local food sector, ‘normal’ (pre-2020) was a difficult even if rewarding space, one where concerns with food provenance were still seen as a marginal issue, and where local food action struggled to be recognised by governance actors. The change in food demand and food need during the lock-downs in 2020 created for many of our participants an opportunity to experience a different kind of ‘normal’, in which their contribution to local communities was more recognised, and in which their businesses grew dramatically. In some ways, however, even in that time of dire need ‘normal’ food system patterns were already asserting themselves, as indicated by the overlooking of local food markets as key social infrastructure, or by the challenges local food businesses faced in accessing financial support. The much desired return to ‘normal’, therefore, is a bitter-sweet experience for the local food sector, and a sense that a different – alternative! – future has been foreclosed is palpable.

Our longitudinal methodology allowed us to 'stay with' our participants throughout the turbulent months of 2020–21, and to experience with them the 'human cost' of living through the pandemic, in its multiple dimensions, from fears around personal safety, to the challenges of keeping a business or organisation going and responding to the spike in demand. Uncertainty, some of our participants told us, is always part of the game; however, the pandemic has clearly intensified this uncertainty, shifting established patterns of demand, changing supply chain compositions, and creating a hard to keep up with landscape of new regulations. The feelings of burn out, which were widely reported by our participants, indicate the toll of dealing with this new uncertain terrain. While the local food sector has proven its resilience, it has done so at a cost which is not widely recognised. Without this recognition, future resilience may be hard to achieve.