



## ActEarly Report

### **The impact of the COVID-19 emergency food hub programme on food insecurity in Tower Hamlets**

**Date:**

June 2021

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"This work was supported by the UK Prevention Research Partnership, an initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation Councils, the Department of Health and Social Care (England) and the UK devolved administrations, and leading health research charities."

Weblink: <https://mrc.ukri.org/research/initiatives/prevention-research/ukprp/>



## Executive Summary

This report examines the impact of an emergency food hub programme put in place during the early stages of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in Tower Hamlets. The evaluation was carried out at the request of the Tackling Poverty programme at Tower Hamlets Council in order to help them examine the effects of their work on the service providers and residents from across the borough who were supported the programme. Due to the low participation rate, the current report describes the impact of the emergency food programme as experienced by the community-based organisations and does not reflect the perspectives of volunteers, food recipients, and the council's officers involved in the programme. The evaluation was conducted by the ActEarly Healthy Livelihoods thematic area in cooperation with borough officers. ActEarly is a five-year programme of studies in Bradford and Tower Hamlets that focuses on early life changes to improve health and opportunities for children through attention to their material life circumstances, their learning and play opportunities, and the environments in which they live. Further information about ActEarly is available here: <https://actearly.org.uk/>

### Background

- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is a multi-racial, multi-faith, and multi-cultural Borough in East London with high rates of poverty and food insecurity.
- In March 2020, the emergency food hub programme in Tower Hamlets was established by the council as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- More than 20 local organisations including community-centres, food banks, schools, and faith-based organisations received financial and/or food resources from the council at different capacities to provide food support to residents experiencing poverty and food insecurity as a consequence of the pandemic.
- This report summarizes the results of in-person qualitative interviews and self-administered surveys of key members from 10 organisations involved in this programme on the overall performance of the council and the effectiveness of the programme in addressing the sudden rise in poverty and food insecurity in the borough.

### Findings

- Eight organisations existed prior to the beginning of the pandemic while 2 were established as a response to the pandemic.
- Compared to the pre-pandemic time, an increase in food demand was observed at all participating organisations where an average of 40 to 450 families per week accessed organisations to receive food since March 2020.
- The overall demographic characteristics of the population accessing food related services did not change drastically as a result of the pandemic, however there was an increase in the household size, in the number of single mothers, and those who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.
- To accommodate the increase in demands, organisations made adjustments to their operational processes such as redeploying staff to new positions, recruiting more volunteers, redistributing financial resources to address the COVID-19 safety regulations, and forming new partnerships with other community organisations and the Tower Hamlets council to receive financial and food services assistance.
- Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, many organisations were forced to terminate their onsite activities and modify methods of food service delivery.
- The overall performance of the council in establishing the emergency food hub programme was deemed satisfactory by the organisations.

- Despite the overall satisfaction, organisations had concerns about the weekly variation in the volume and the freshness of the food, and lack of healthy food options provided through the programme.
- As many people continue to be at risk of food insecurity and poverty, the organisations plan to continue their services beyond the immediate phase of the pandemic but the capacity at which these services can persist into the future depends on the level of financial support and access to food and social resources provided by the TH council.

## **Conclusion**

- The establishment of emergency food hub programme by the Tower Hamlets council in March 2020, has been successful in providing financial support and food resources to the local community-based organisations delivering food and other non-food services to residents financially affected by the pandemic.
- From the perspective of community-based organisations, challenges related to food services including amount, content, storage, and delivery as well as consistency in financial support still remain which require improvement in the communication between the council and the local organisations.
- In the light of continued increase in financial adversity and food insecurity due to the pandemic, the council's support of the community-based organisations beyond the pandemic is necessary in order to address the need.
- Further research is needed to better understand how the establishment of this emergency programme changed the overall functioning of the council and whether and to what capacity the programme can be continued into the future.
- Further research is also needed to examine the effect of the emergency food hub programme on addressing food insecurity and mental wellbeing among food recipients and volunteers.

## Introduction

The current report is a collaborative project between Tower Hamlets Council and the Healthy Livelihoods theme of ActEarly – a City Collaboratory approach to early promotion of health and wellbeing through partnerships of universities of York, Leeds, and University College London, and the Bradford Institute for Health Research, with the goal of identifying and improving the environmental factors that influence child health in the city of Bradford and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, the Tower Hamlets'(TH) council launched the emergency food hub programme on behalf of a group of food banks, community-based organisations, schools, and food providers within the borough. The aim of this programme was to provide financial support, redirect resources to coordinate food donations, and for voluntary sector organisations in the borough to collect and deliver food to the residents in Tower Hamlets impacted by the pandemic ([https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News\\_events/2020/December\\_20/Council-launches-emergency-food-appeal-on-behalf-of-local-food-banks.aspx](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2020/December_20/Council-launches-emergency-food-appeal-on-behalf-of-local-food-banks.aspx)).

The objective of this evaluation is to investigate how the emergency response has impacted the operational processes of organisations involved and their interaction with the TH council. The findings of this evaluation will inform the council's food distribution systems and planning for future projects.

## Methods

### Design

This report provides a descriptive evaluation of the emergency food hub programme with a pre-post design. There are no comparison groups within the borough as the model of response was adapted to the area and appears to be unique in that it did not take place in other areas of the country. Therefore, this report will establish a baseline for subsequent studies on community food assets in the borough. The research tools used in the current evaluation have been adapted from a similar research conducted in the city of Bradford which has mapped local community food assets to enable production of a parallel map in Tower Hamlets (<https://actearly.org.uk/food-and-healthy-weight/>).

### Data collection

Initially four different semi-structured qualitative interviews were developed with the aim of targeting different stakeholder groups: 1) *council officers* involved in running the emergency food hub programme, 2) *key members* of community organisations distributing food in the programme, 3) *volunteers* at each organisation, and 4) *food recipients/residents*. The council officers' interview focused on changes in the operational processes and expenditure within the council in response to the pandemic. The key members interview focused on the changes in the operational processes and expenditure within each organisation and the organisation's partnership with the council in response to the pandemic. The volunteer and food recipient interviews focused on the individuals' physical and mental health and wellbeing in relation to volunteering with or receiving food from the organisations as well as the overall satisfaction with the emergency food hub programme.

After ethics approval was secured from the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee, 26 community organisations and three council officers were contacted via email and followed up by

email, phone or both between December 2020 and March 2021. The initial data collection plan was to conduct in-person interviews with the council officers and the key members of participating organisations via Zoom. Due to low response rates and time constraints, however, we transformed the interviews to online self-administered surveys with close and open-ended questions using the University of York Qualtrics survey tool and distributed the link amongst the organisations. Of the 26 organisations initially contacted, 10 key members completed in-person interviews via Zoom (2 key members) or the self-administered survey on Qualtrics (8 key members). After completing the interviews/surveys, the key members were asked to invite their organisations' volunteers and food recipients for participation in the study and in-person interviews. The link to the online survey for volunteers and food recipients as well as the word document versions of each survey were also shared with the 10 key members who participated in the study for distribution among their volunteer groups and food recipients. Despite the efforts and changes in the protocol, we were unable to collect any responses from the council officers, volunteers, or food recipients so this report consists of data from key members only. After the recruitment/interview period ended, the answers to all questions provided by the 10 key members were summarized and are presented below.

## Results

Table 1 presents the general details on the 10 community organisations participating in the TH emergency food hub programme. The majority of these organisations existed prior to the start of the pandemic in 2020 and provided different types of services (e.g. housing and accommodation, financial advice, education, and social engagement) to the community. Two organisations were newly established as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Characteristics of 10 organisations participating in the evaluation study

Type of Organisation	Existed Prior to 03/2020	Provided Food Prior to 03/2020
Food bank	Yes	Yes
Primary school	Yes	Yes, in a different scheme
Community organisation	Yes	Yes, in a different scheme
Charity	Yes	Yes, in a different scheme
Food bank (church)	No	No
Community centre	Yes	Yes, in a different scheme
Social housing	Yes	No
Food bank	No	No
Community centre (charity)	Yes	No
Primary school	Yes	Yes, in a different scheme

### General aims of organisations

All organisations were established with the aim of addressing different needs within their communities including poverty and deprivation, food insecurity, unemployment, poor educational attainment, housing and accommodation, crime, and other community-based issues.

### Motivation for providing services to the community

Amongst organisations, the main motivation for providing different services to the community prior to the start of the pandemic in 2020 included relief of food poverty, community engagement, tackling isolation, and education and training.

### Characteristics of the target population

The organisations serve a diverse population from different racial/ethnic groups, nationalities, ages, religions and social groups with the majority of individuals and families being from South Asian, Muslim, and low-income backgrounds. Two organisations specified that they serve special populations; one serves refugees registered with the organisation and one serves Somali women 65 years of age or older.

Services offered by most of these organisations cover a wide region of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets including E1, E2, E3, E4, and E14 postcodes while others extend services to clients from the greater London and the E18 region. Key members reported that whilst people can access the services at different organisations from outside their catchment regions the majority of food recipients are from different areas within the borough of Tower Hamlets.

### Food types and delivery modes available before the pandemic

Amongst the organisations reporting food service provision prior to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, a variety of food options were available including: hot meals served on site in the form of lunch or breakfast clubs (for school children), fresh fruits and vegetables, non-perishable foods and groceries for collection or delivery, and market style food collection where food recipients could choose up to 10 different food items as needed.

### Food services acceptability

With respect to the acceptability of foods received by the organisations as part of the emergency food hub programme, overall, key members reported that in their view, the food recipients they knew about were mostly satisfied with the content of the foods they received and stated that most products met the basic needs of families. However, one respondent reported that food was rarely in line with the culture of the organisation's target population emphasizing *"donated food, whilst welcomed, is often without the food culture of our predominately Bengali beneficiaries"*. Another reported food recipients' preference for fresh fruits and vegetables which were not supplied in great quantities in the programme. One key member also mentioned that although there was satisfaction with the staple food delivered, sometimes food was rejected by the food recipient due to other issues: *"Sometimes we receive food that is out of date or mouldy and that is rejected by the users"*. Similarly, multiple organisations expressed concern about the variation in the food content from one week to another. One key member explained:

*"The content of food delivered to our centre varies greatly from week to week. Some weeks we receive bread, pasta, milk and fresh fruit and vegetables. Other weeks we receive all canned and packed goods"*.

Another key member described the weekly changes in food variety as *"Some weeks we receive a good variety of items. This is very beneficial to the recipients as they save money on their weekly shop for essentials. Other weeks we supply and odd bag of snacks and canned fruit etc"*.

## Frequency and venue of food services provision

Prior to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the frequency of food services provision ranged from once a week at some sites to 4 times a week at others. Food services were set onsite and the majority of organisations provided their services free of charge or at very low cost (only in case of organisations that provided hot meals on site).

## Changes in food services after the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic impacted the provision of food services at all organisations. There has been an overall increase in the volume of food and spending related to the amount of food purchase and delivery. Due to the COVID-19 social distancing policies, organisations that provided market style foods distribution where people could choose up to 10 food items as desired free of charge, and luncheon style meals at site were forced to change their structures into food packages containing ingredients or pre-cooked meals. Some organisations started food delivery services especially for elderly recipients and those with disabilities. There has also been changes in the frequency of food service provisions. For instance, one organisation changed their food provision from once a week to once a month as the result of the pandemic.

The two participating primary schools have also extended their food provision programme to cover the families of the children. A key member described:

*“we changed from delivering breakfast clubs to children in the holidays to delivering food parcels to 450 + families per week, twice a week [at 2 different schools]. This [h]as only been possible because we work with our local partnerships and national funders to focus our delivery.... and the content of food is equal to about a week of food for a family of 4 including pre-cooked meals, fresh vegetables, dairy, and canned food”.*

The primary schools have also created more flexibility in food delivery where food pickup is available twice a week and delivery services are available for parents who are self-isolating or struggling due to other reasons.

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and increased need within the community, organisations made a variety of changes to their internal processes. Many organisations reported redeploying staff to new positions to support the pandemic specific response such as fundraising, case worker, food coordination and distribution. There was also redeployment of resources at some organisations. For instance, one key member mentioned *“Spending and budgeting changed, resources used to make hot food was used for parcels”.*

There has also been an increase in the number of volunteers recruited at the organisations involved in food packaging and delivery. Organisations had to adopt COVID-19 guidelines and new policies related to safety, social distancing, mask wearing and cleaning as well as policies related to working with local communities, new services beyond food and policies surrounding work with the council's emergency food response. A number of the key members reported that their organisations have established new working relationships with other charities and community-based organisations to address the needs more efficiently.

### Change in the characteristics of the population being served since the start of the pandemic

The reported average number of individuals accessing services at the participating organisations varied greatly from about 40 families to 1800 individuals (approximately 450 families) per week since the start of the pandemic. According to key members, there have not been significant changes in the demographic characteristics of the food recipients since the start of the pandemic; rather there was an increase in the number of food recipients in need including: larger families, single mothers, and those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. One key member described these changes:

*“Lots of families have lost jobs and these are now at risk of food poverty without the support - families where they have had breakdowns in relationships – domestic violence reports and police called - fathers have left and families have been left without finances as everything is in the fathers name”.*

### Provision of non-food items during the pandemic

Of the ten participating organisations, only one did not provide any non-food related services. The others reported provision of a range of non-food services to food recipients including: distribution of toiletries, providing services such as virtual social support groups, legal and financial advice, phone top-ups, and making referrals to professional counselling and other social services. One key member described the extent of services related to mental health and wellbeing as following:

*“We have been in contact with all our vulnerable clients including; elderly (senior citizens), single parents with under 5's, people on very low income, lost jobs and people in isolation via telephone to check on their health and wellbeing, doing shopping and also picking up medications as and when needed.”*

Provision of mental health services was also reported by the two participating primary schools through *“social workers in school”* and *“school liaison officer”*.

Despite the provision of aforementioned services, some organisations had to terminate their onsite, in-person activities such as social engagements/hospitality or advising services due to COVID-19 restrictions and instead make referrals to other community-based organisations.

### Continuation of services at current capacity beyond the pandemic

There was an overall consensus amongst all participating organisations that their food services to the community should be continued beyond the pandemic. However, the capacity at which these services will continue is dependent on different factors such as the availability of funding and the extent of food supplies provided through the food hub programme. One key member described the need for the continuation of services as:

*“Families need the help - they have opened up about their lack of food and how difficult things are - especially those not on benefits but just scraping enough together with working - also families who break up and those coming to us from the refuge”.*

Another key member stated their reasons for wanting to continue the services:



*“From the beginning of lockdown we provide [a] food delivery every Thursday and Friday at least 45 -50 families in our ward. Due to the lockdown again and again, there are huge food demands for vulnerable people in our area. Following COVID19, there are lots of people [who] become unemployed, families with children affected due to the lock down and above all older people have develop some mental health illness due to the impact of pandemic. Following the demand, we want to maximise our service and we want to carry on these services to vulnerable families in our area.”*

### Current major needs of communities

The major needs of the communities as described by the key members were job opportunities, higher income, increased food donations and funding from Tower Hamlets council to help families, more mental health support and social contact, as well as more educational support. One key member described their community’s needs as *“Need of social contact and interaction, mental support and sometimes advice. Providing essential and basic food items to people, who are waiting for universal credit and other benefits.”*

### Additional costs incurred as a result of participating in the emergency food hub programme

Of the ten participating organisations in the survey, eight reported no or minor incurred costs associated with their participation in the Tower Hamlets’ emergency food hub programme. One of the organisations reported major costs attributed to the costs of cleaning, purchasing personal protective equipment and COVID-19 training sessions held for staff and volunteers. A second organisation reported £5000+ of major costs with no further details on their spending. One of the participating schools’ key members explained why there had not been an increase in financial costs: *“the full cost of the delivery is hidden, because we are using school staff, premises and resources to deliver the food hubs”*.

### Satisfaction with the council’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Tower Hamlets council’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic was ranked as satisfactory or very satisfactory by seven of the ten participating organisations. In particular, organisations expressed satisfaction with the council’s communications and the food services provided to the organisations. Two organisations felt neutral about the council’s response but did acknowledge the council’s responsiveness to their requests, particularly from the poverty team. One organisation expressed dissatisfaction with the council’s response to the pandemic because the financial aid and the volume of food provided by the council were not deemed sufficient:

*“Since the beginning of the Food HUB (May 2020), We have been requesting for minimum essentials for example; bread and dairy products including dried food (rice, lentils, oil etc) which was delivered to [us] by TH food HUB. We only received the products for 4-6 weeks due to Tower Hamlet Council allocated some funding which was roughly of £40,000 for all the Food HUBs.”*

Similarly, although participating organisations were neutral about the volume of food provided to them by the council, many reported concerns with inconsistency in the content and the volume of food received which varied from week to week and decreased over time. There were also problems with storage. One key member said *“Towards the beginning of the pandemic we received larger deliveries, this decreased as the pandemic continued. Also, a more consistent amount of food would be easier to plan for.”*

## Benefits of participating in the emergency food hub programme

Overall, key members reported participating in the food hub programme as beneficial in addressing the needs of their communities in the light of the increased need and food insecurity due to the pandemic. One organisation's key member explained the impact as *"Benefits: 1. Saving family living cost 2. without going to supermarket, they stay isolated and reduce spreading COVID19. 3. not falling in poverty. 4. As we are providing healthy food, they are become familiar with healthy eating lifestyle. 5. Preventing starvation"*.

### **Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated the existing problems of many families in need, it also placed new subsets of population at risk for poverty and food insecurity. As reported by multiple organisations, the number of single mothers, unemployed/furloughed individuals, and larger families accessing services increased after the start of the pandemic. This increase in demand forced many organisations to make changes to their operational processes and develop new relationships with Tower Hamlets council and other organisations in order to accommodate the demand. Some organisations added food services to their regular services while others with existing food services modified their service schemes to cover more individuals and families. Although organisations expressed an overall satisfaction with the emergency food hub programme, they reported challenges.

### Challenges

Multiple organisations reported challenges with food service delivery provision by the TH council. Variations in the weekly volume and content of the food may have limited the capacity of organisations in meeting the needs of their target populations. In some sites the delivered foods were passed expiry date or did not include many healthy options and therefore were rejected by the recipients. Furthermore, even though the provided foods met the basic needs of the recipients, it was reported that they were not always aligned with the cultural practices of the target population. Furthermore, organisations that provided onsite services (i.e. lunches, hospitality, non-food social services, and advising services) to residents prior to the pandemic were forced to terminate these services limiting community members' access to such services. While some organisations did not report extra costs as a result of participating in the food hub programme, a few organisations reported major costs related to staffing, and COVID-19 related safety and cleaning training and restrictions. Although the participating primary schools reported minimal incurred financial costs, they attributed this minimal cost to the school staff and teachers having to acquire new positions associated with food packaging, delivery and other related services to accommodate the increased food demand among their students and their families. Furthermore, as levels of poverty and food insecurity in Tower Hamlets continue to grow as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all organisations expressed the desire to continue their food services to the community, citing that financial and food support from the council would be necessary for achieving this goal.

### Limitations

The goal of this evaluation was to examine the food hub programme's effectiveness in addressing the increase in food insecurity and poverty in the Tower Hamlets. Unfortunately, due to lack of participation from all key stakeholder groups in the food hub programme we were unable to collect data on the perspectives of council members involved, nor were we able to include the perspectives of volunteers or food recipients. This limitation may affect the extent to which we can

draw conclusions on whether the food hub programme has been successful in addressing the sudden increase in food insecurity within the community. Furthermore, we cannot assess whether participation in this programme has led to alleviation of stress and improvement of mental and physical health in the community members.

### Conclusion

This report summarizes the benefits and challenges associated with participation in the emergency food hub programme which was established in March 2020 in Tower Hamlets by the council from the perspective of ten community-based organisations. Overall, the programme was successful in providing financial support and food resources to a variety of organisation in Tower Hamlets including schools, food banks, community centres, and faith-based organisations to respond to the increased demand in food among community members particularly families, single mothers and those who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. These organisations want the programme to continue. However, there were some shortcomings such as variation in distribution of financial resources as well as variation in the weekly volume and content of foods delivered to each organisation that still need to be addressed in order to improve the effectiveness of the programme in the future. As there are still many people at risk of food insecurity and poverty, the organisations plan to continue their services beyond the pandemic but their capacity to do so depends on council support. More research, perhaps adopting an embedded community research approach, is necessary to examine the capacity of the food hub programme and its effectiveness in addressing food insecurity in Tower Hamlets from the perspective of the council officers as well as the effectiveness of the programme in addressing food insecurity and mental wellbeing from the perspective of volunteers and food recipients.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank all research participants and colleagues at the Tower Hamlets council who have supported the production of this report.