

CAN YOU DELIVER?

FOOD SLOTS DURING LOCKDOWN

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In this briefing, Paul Pearson shares early findings from interviews with participants living with disabilities and long-term health conditions in Scotland, exploring their experiences of accessing food during and after lockdown. He finds that access to supermarket delivery slots has been particularly challenging. Many people, for a range of reasons, fall between the cracks, either unable to access priority delivery slots or even when they can, facing barriers. This has impacts not only on people's basic survival, but also on their dignity and autonomy. This is the first of several planned findings briefings on food issues for marginalised groups during the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland.

I have been working as a researcher on the '[Scotland in Lockdown](#)' project over the past five months, a study that is aiming to understand and share the experiences of people from [four different 'at-risk' groups](#) in our society during the pandemic. My own research, as part of a wider team, has focused on the experiences of disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions. The issue of food insecurity has been highlighted consistently throughout the pandemic, not least through the work of [Marcus Rashford on free school meals in England](#). Food insecurity has also emerged as a key issue in our study across all four areas, and this piece is part of a series on food access and security.

This contribution draws on the nineteen interviews I have carried out, and the following quotes are from several of the people who took part in the study. The issue of accessing supermarket delivery slots has proven to be a complex and barrier-filled environment that many of the people I spoke with have struggled to navigate. This issue has affected people of all ages, from all areas of the country, and from all walks of life.

Forgotten shielders: not on the 'list' but shielding still

In the early stages of lockdown, the Scottish Government (along with others in the UK) agreed a range of measures designed to support those asked to shield. These measures included access to priority online supermarket delivery slots; however, navigating this system proved very difficult for many of the people I interviewed. This experience was summed up by one participant who lives with MS and faced barriers when accessing a major supermarkets online delivery system:

"the whole... system for the deliveries was just a nightmare."

This was the case not just for those officially shielding, but also those who themselves took the decision to shield due to being at additional risk because of pre-existing conditions. This was the case for the following participant whose long-term condition has resulted in them being virtually housebound:

"I think what would have been really useful is some of the support that the shielders got. So, the biggest issue first was we rely on Tesco grocery deliveries, and suddenly that got impossible to get."

As I spoke to more people, a significant category of individuals emerged - those who took the decision to shield but did not receive an official 'shielding letter' advising them to do so. This group did not have guaranteed access to the same concessions as shielders, such as priority access to online delivery slots. This frustration was voiced by the same participant, who found their access to food services severely limited:

"we fall between the cracks, really, because we're housebound but not on the shielding list."

This participant identifies a key problem that recurred throughout interviews. That is that lockdown for this group meant that some found themselves without the level of access to essentials that they had prior to the pandemic. This had the effect of thrusting people into an often-new system of food access that seemed, at times, to buckle. Furthermore, this system appeared to have little or no consideration built-in for the additional barriers that this group faced. Both, those shielding without a formal letter and those housebound, represent a collective group of what I would term 'forgotten shielders'- a group whose needs appear to not have been met during lockdown.

Delivery issues don't stop at the door

Once the supermarket food delivery systems were accessed, participants reported a mixed experience. Some found it worked for them, whilst others encountered a variety of problems. The inability of a major supermarket to provide a specific, and, in the case of the following participant, accessible time slot, was further raised as being a major issue:

"it'll be like an all day, eight 'til four, or eight 'til six slot, and that's not great for me, because I tend to conk out unconscious, and the thing with these deliveries, they say, there has to be an adult to receive it."

One of the people I spoke to, who lives with a chronic debilitating illness, described a recent food delivery, highlighting how a 'one size fits all' delivery scheduling system can be inaccessible, dangerous, and the cause of extreme distress:

"the other week I ordered shopping to be delivered, and obviously because I live up one flight of stairs, but the stairs are internal, so just like come in the front door and then it's like a flight of stairs up to the rest of the house, and my health was so bad, like so bad, I could hardly get down the stairs. So, I said to the guy, I was like, could you like carry the stuff up the stairs? I can stand in another room or whatever, like... but like I'm disabled, I really can't manage to carry the stuff up the stairs... I ended up like crawling up the stairs with the stuff that was supposed to be...that needed to go in the fridge, like the meat and stuff, and then I just sat on the floor in my kitchen and cried for half an hour, before I had the energy to put anything away. And like two days later, there's still stuff like strewn all up the stairs and a friend came to visit, and he put a load of stuff away for me."

Hearing from disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions has powerfully detailed how food delivery systems need to consider individual circumstances and needs. Current policies appear to neglect the individual needs of the person and assume that everyone is able to carry their shopping bags up the stairs, regardless of any impairment or health condition they may have. These issues suggest that the shielding provisions need to consider practical elements of people's living conditions such as their type of housing. This offers an illustration of a form of discrimination called 'ableism'. Situations such as those described above, illustrate how policies put in place to address food access can themselves create barriers to getting food. It should be noted that such examples are not failings of the individual delivery workers, themselves

performing a job that may have placed them at additional risk throughout the pandemic, but of the system as a whole.

Getting food, but not what you need

The issue of having access to food, but not the food that you need, was also raised. For one participant living with Crohn's disease, whose condition is triggered by eating gluten, a lack of gluten-free products meant they would sometimes go to bed hungry:

"A lot of the gluten free food was understocked, and, you know, that was probably the worst part of it I'd say, that was the most stressful part... the consequences for taking [...] gluten far outweighed being a little bit hungry till morning."

When delivery systems couldn't be accessed, some people were forced to rely on support from informal sources. A person who took part in the study, who is registered blind, spoke of the loss of their additional support (home-helps), and described in detail their struggles to secure food. They highlighted a period when they were reliant on the generosity of a local bar and its workers:

"the local bar sent me food, so that tided me over, and then somebody else in the pub took it on herself to a couple of weeks later, and she bought me food out of her own pocket, you know, so if it wasn't for the support and the generosity, you know, people in the community, I would have been royally fucked, to be honest."

Accessing and using online food delivery services both during and post-lockdown has been extremely challenging for many of the official and 'forgotten' shielders. The issues and barriers described by these people can be tackled, and it is encouraging to see [the Scottish Government's updated guidance, which states that the Government is exploring how to expand access to online delivery slots.](#) However, to address the issues discussed in this piece, it would appear that a collaborative approach, which looks specifically at how to meet the needs of individuals, both official and 'forgotten shielders' alike, is needed. This should involve all stakeholders, including the major supermarkets, Government and, crucially, the people affected by this issue. This is particularly urgent given the resurgence of COVID-19 and the possibility of Scotland facing further public health restrictions as we approach winter.

SCOTLAND IN LOCKDOWN

"Health and social impacts of Covid-19 Suppression on vulnerable groups in Scotland" explores the impact of Covid-19 lockdown in four areas: people living with disability or long-term health condition, refugees and asylum-seekers facing destitution, people affected by criminal justice and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. The research is being conducted by researchers in Sociology at the University of Glasgow, and it is supported by numerous partner organisations.



CONTACT INFO