School caterers put their meals on wheels

A guide for local authorities and school caterers on delivering meals to older adults during Covid-19
Authors

This report was written by Morven Oliver-Larkin who coordinates Sustain’s London Food Poverty Campaign and Fran Bernhardt who coordinates Sustain’s Children’s Food Campaign with assistance from Sustain’s Simon Shaw, Ben Reynolds and Kath Dalmeny.

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Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA), Eggcup, Enfield council’s school catering team, Food2You shopping service at Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, Lancaster Council, Lancaster & Morecambe College, Greenwich Council and Washingborough Academy.

Front cover photo by: Peter Cziborra

Note:

This report was compiled in response to a fast-evolving situation and it does not include all examples of this type of work. We are disseminating this information quickly, so that it can be helpful for caterers and local authorities. We have not included all examples or details. Please get in touch if you have further examples to share.
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Kitchens, restaurants and caterers across the country have had to close during the Covid-19 crisis. This has had a range of impacts, including uncertainty around supply lines, security of employment, skills retention and even the ability to reopen at all post-lockdown. Sustain is particularly concerned that the expertise and supply networks of school kitchens and caterers are not being adequately put to use during this crisis, and that it will affect the long-term viability for schools to provide children with access to healthy and sustainable food.

Alongside this, thousands of older and clinically vulnerable adults are either self-isolating in their homes or struggling to access food. Many cannot cook at home and have limited access to meals or sufficient nutritious food. Government food parcels consisting of tinned and processed foods do not suit everyone’s nutritional needs or preferences. Meanwhile, meals on wheels services have been severely cut back in recent years. This has meant that in many areas there was no established meals on wheels provision to step in to provide nutritious meals for older and housebound people during the outbreak.

Conversely, in response to Covid-19, some areas have rapidly created or scaled up meal delivery services. These have been able to make use of existing catering staff, skills, kitchens and food service supply lines to be able to supply older and housebound people with nutritious food and vital points of contact to help overcome isolation. They offer inspiration, as well as many lessons to be learned about how catering services can help to respond to crisis, now and in the future.
Why using school catering to provide meals is beneficial

1. **Increases access to nutritious meals:**
   Older and clinically vulnerable adults are at high risk from coronavirus, so nutrition and health is particularly important at this time. Additionally, many older adults were isolated and unable to access regular meals before the Covid-19 outbreak; this number has grown since lockdown measures were put in place.

2. **Improves sustainability of school caterers:**
   Many school caterers have lost their core market and have had to close down or shrink their operations. Diversifying their market helps these businesses survive the Covid-19 crisis. This is particularly key so that expertise in relation to catering for school children is not lost.

3. **Optimises underused logistical capacity:**
   School caterers have connections to suppliers, and have access to kitchens, staff and equipment that are ready to do this work immediately. They also have the necessary expertise, skills, contacts, supply chain expertise and food safety training to respond at scale.

4. **Increases viability for meals on wheels services:**
   Meals on wheels services often require economies of scale to operate successfully. Diversifying the operations of one caterer can therefore build these economies of scale and build resilience into that business model as and when shocks occur.
A meals on wheels service is more than a hot food delivery service. At its best, it is an integral part of adult social care, is linked with social services, and provides welfare checks to meal recipients. For some of the most vulnerable individuals and families, this contact and nutritional support can help them to live independently, or support them on release from hospital. It is a way of ‘checking in’ on people and acting as a link between people living in isolation and the wider community. Whilst community meals in group settings have been, and maybe one day will again be a good option for those who could leave their home, this option was never accessible to those who could not leave their house, the number of which has increased hugely in the current crisis.

Sustain is publishing preliminary guidance on what constitutes a good meals on wheels service, including that:

- The meal is nutritionally and culturally appropriate and aligns with the Eatwell plate.

- The meal delivery service has client need profiles that are communicated to delivery staff. This includes information about their mental or physical health, such as dementia or mobility issues, and about how staff should therefore act, such as whether they should plate up the food and encourage someone to eat, dietary requirements and tastes, etc.

- Delivery staff keep brief notes on how a client is doing and report any signs of risk.

- Delivery staff have information about how to enter the house, including safe-key codes where needed, meaning clients do not have to get up to let them in to the house (where appropriate and based on mobility constraints).

- Delivery staff check the entire premises if a client is not at home. If a client is found fallen, they call emergency services and wait for the ambulance to arrive. If the client cannot be found, this is reported to a family member or to services if needed.

Swiftly organised, community or small business led meal services that have sprung up in response to Covid-19 may be harder pressed to run a fully integrated meals on wheels service that is linked to social services and which includes welfare checks. We believe however that they can and should integrate aspects of these criteria, and where possible be moving towards the incorporation of as many as possible. In some cases, where new delivery is driven by local schools or voluntary organisations, knowledge of and links with clients may even be easier: at Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA), for example (one of the case studies in this report), vulnerable families are already known to the school, and these receive their regular weekly meals as an integral part of maintaining links with and checking on these families.
We have identified four models through which this is possible and currently happening. Each model is led by or centred around one key organisation: a school caterer; a voluntary or community organisation; a school; or a local authority (see table below). In most cases whoever leads this work requires external support. Each model typically involves a combination of these organisations – which organisation leads or is driving the majority of the work determines which model is being used.

There are four main aspects to this operation that may be conducted by separate teams or organisations working together, or by one team dividing the areas between them. These are:

- Cooking
- Handling orders
- Deliveries
- Oversight of logistics

The best division of labour and model of operation will depend upon local resource and contexts.

If you are a school, caterer, local authority or community group currently considering a move towards provision of meals for older, isolated or disabled adults in the community, we advise that you first think about the resources available to you and pursue one of the four models shown in our table below. Please see ‘next steps’ below for further details on how you could start this work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cooking</th>
<th>Handling orders</th>
<th>Deliveries</th>
<th>Oversight of logistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilities and staff expertise provided by the school catering team</td>
<td>Taking and recording often sensitive records and ensuring they are up to date</td>
<td>Moving the food from kitchen to resident on time, adhering to health and safety and vulnerable person guidelines</td>
<td>Ensuring all aspects of system are coordinated and running smoothly</td>
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1. **Council centred approach**

   *Example:* Enfield Council

   - School caterer cooks meals
   - Enfield Age UK group handles orders
   - Enfield Stands Together (Enfield council volunteers) deliver the food

   **Enfield Council**

2. **School caterer centred approach**

   *Example:* Greenwich school caterer*

   - School caterer cooks meals
   - Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency (GCDA) handles orders through Greenwich council Covid food response pathway
   - Delivery arm of the school caterer's operations carries out deliveries

   **GCDA**

3. **Voluntary organisation centred approach**

   *Example:* The Bevy and Brighton Aldridge Community Academy (BACA)

   - School caterer cooks meals and pub both cook meals, separately
   - Each organization handles their own orders; each operate on different days of the week, thus complimenting one another
   - Volunteers deliver meals

   **The Bevy Pub has oversight of their orders; school has oversight of their part. The two organisations refer people to the other operation depending on need, but operate autonomously**

4. **School centred approach**

   *Example:* Washingborough Academy

   - School caterer cooks meals
   - School office takes orders directly from older people or family
   - School staff or volunteer parents drive meals to residents

   **School headteacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggested resources to fulfil these roles</th>
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| Ask local schools about their catering operations | • Local school offices  
• Local authority  
• Age UK  
• Local charities  
• School caterers may have a deliveries arm  
• Volunteers  
• Volunteer parents at the school  
• School staff  
• Council staff  
• Covid mutual aid groups  
• Food poverty alliances  
• Food partnerships  
• Local council's public health team |

*This model is no longer in operation in Greenwich because meals are now being prepared by other services in the local area.*
Addressing the vulnerabilities of service-users

Any operation of this kind will need to consider the particular circumstances faced by recipients of the service and ensure risks are mitigated. This is certainly possible, even if much of the work is carried out by volunteers as many organisations do this regularly. For example, Age UK Lewisham and Southwark runs a shopping service for older adults; volunteers handle personal data, including addresses and key safe codes. They have developed robust protocols for doing this work safely, which could be replicated elsewhere. However, it is important to ensure the following measures are in place:

- DBS checks and suitable identification for volunteers who are entering people's homes and/or handling personal data.
- Personal Protective Equipment – you may want to issue all volunteers with gloves and masks.
- Training for new volunteers on:
  - Working with older adults and/or disabled adults (see Age UK website for ideas);
  - Social distancing and safe working practices during Covid-19 – for advice see the Government’s guidance on how to help safely, as well as your local authority and Mutual Aid group which may be running opportunities to train staff and volunteers;
  - How to set up an emergency meal delivery operation (see Made in Hackney’s short video for ideas).
- People handling orders may need to cover basic questions about catering for older and medically vulnerable people, such as hand mobility, sight loss and swallowing issues. They may also be asked general questions about food orders such as dietary requirements, allergens and intolerances. Some useful resources on these issues include:
  - The Government’s How to feed someone you care for page
  - Malnutrition Task Force resources

TOP TIP

If you are a local council wanting to offer practical support to meals on wheels providers, please consider offering an easily visible identification badge for delivery drivers, volunteers and care staff, and make the local police aware that this is an approved service. This is so that meal providers can be identified as key workers, feel confident to deliver food without getting into trouble for appearing to break social distancing restrictions, and be able to park temporarily outside people’s houses without incurring local protest or a parking fine.
Reaching local older people

People who need a meal delivery service can be reached in a number of ways. Some community groups starting up this service have simply made some basic flyers and posted them through letterboxes. Others are linked in with local mutual aid groups and are getting referrals that way. Some schools already do outreach work and are aware of susceptible people within the community and already know how to reach them.

More established ways of reaching older adults arrive via referrals from adult social care teams and/or hospital discharge teams. It is also worth promoting the service to enable older people or their families to self-refer. As well as basic flyering, the council might be able to promote this service on their Covid-19 page on their website, on their social media or, where they have helplines, training staff to ask the right questions and to promote this option to residents who show the signs that they may need this service.

It is worth letting the following local teams know about the service so that they can make referrals:

- Local authority / Local Resilience Forum Covid-19 vulnerability helpline, to be integrated into their triage and referrals process
- Council Public Health team
- Council Adult Social Care – could be a good source of referrals and will have an understanding of the need in the local area
- Local NHS Foundation Trust
- Covid-19 mutual aid groups – may be alerted to local people who would like to use the service
- Local voluntary and community sector organisations that work with older and isolated people and those who are clinically vulnerable, such as an Age UK group
- Local food banks or other emergency food aid organisations

It is worth considering how to promote the service, such as through:

- Council website and mailings
- External local organisations that work with older people, such as a local Age UK
- Local online forums/websites

Some basic resources that you will be likely to need include:

- Cooking facilities
- A cook or chef and helpers with food preparation and food safety experience
- Access to food supplies
- Referrals
- Way to take orders
- Way to deliver
- Routes to promote the work and identify support
The examples below illustrate that there is a way for school caterers to stay open during the pandemic, and to serve members of the community needing meals.

Furthermore, a model of delivery in which a caterer cooks for school children and for adults in the community has precedence. In Plymouth, CATERed, a local authority cooperative trading company, supplies school meals and a meals on wheels service. The meals are prepared from locally sourced, seasonal fresh food. It was formed by schools and the council in April 2015. They have over 200 clients, and offer a 365 day per year service, and, like other meals on wheels services in the UK, offer a ‘more than a meal’ approach which includes welfare checks.

Further afield in Milan, Italy, a large catering social enterprise prepares 85,000 school meals a day alongside 800 meals for older adults in the community which are delivered by local charity partners. This model operates well because a consortium of organisations play to their respective strengths; the caterer runs efficient kitchens which are also able to procure sustainable food at scale and local charities are well-connected to local people and communities.

Case study 1: Enfield Council

When schools closed in Enfield, the council’s in-house school catering team transitioned to provide food for vulnerable and older people in the community. The council decided to meet the community demand with the under-used resource in the school catering team as part of the local response. The local Age UK branch was receiving numerous requests for a hot meal service, so the council determined a meals on wheels service could compliment the food parcels being sent from their food hubs in response to Covid-19. This service would be for those unable to cook for themselves.

How did it start and who is involved?

The school catering team quickly expanded to include a meals on wheels service. They began by seeking advice from Enfield’s food safety team on how to deliver hot food safely, then collaborated with Age UK Enfield who handle older people’s data and manage delivery instructions and dietary requirements. Volunteers from Enfield Council’s Enfield Stands Together Covid-19 response group carry out the deliveries, while Enfield Council oversees the logistics to ensure there is smooth running between every aspect of the operation.

How many meals and who do they deliver to?

The operations started on 6 April 2020, and two weeks in, the school catering team was serving hot meals to 60 older residents every weekday, as well as 120 rough sleepers who had been rehoused in hotels without cooking facilities.
How do people hear about the service?

At the time of speaking to Enfield Council towards the end of April, they had done no advertising. Because the service is run through the council however, people who contact the council and are in need of food are made aware of the prepared meals service. Age UK Enfield also refers people to the service.

Finances

Enfield Council considers this to be part of the local response to Covid-19 and is attributing the finances accordingly to their Covid-19 budget.

Next steps

Although the service is not actively being advertised, it is receiving a high level of interest and positive feedback. In late April, the council were considering how to expand provision to supply meals to more residents and provide the service seven days a week. By mid-May, they had done this by moving operations to a larger kitchen so that more people can work safely whilst social distancing and to expand capacity. Despite this, the future of this service is uncertain. It is unclear whether the kitchens will be available for use when schools reopen.

Key lessons

- Working with a group that knows about older people’s needs and food provision was helpful. In this case, the local Age UK group already had contact with many older people in the area and are familiar with issues older people face with food such as hand mobility, sight loss and swallowing.
- Procurement rules have been relaxed because of the crisis which meant it was easier to get this operation up and running even when a supplier might be struggling to get hold of a line of products.
- Enfield school caterers were able to change their provision in a day. They showed they could quickly mobilise and respond and will take note so they are even better prepared in future.
- There was initial anxiety from the school catering team about the safety of delivering hot meals during a pandemic, but once they had consulted the food safety team, they felt reassured that they were able to adjust their service responsibly.

Enfield’s school catering team during a visit from Age UK Enfield representative and a local MP. Credit: Kenny Newey
Case study 2: Brighton Aldridge Community Academy

The Brighton and Aldridge Community Academy (BACA) is a school in Brighton where staff feel an obligation to their wider community so during lockdown using their resources to provide food for the community felt like a natural step. Inspired by The Bevy Pub, a community organisation nearby that had started serving meals in the community, BACA decided to use its school kitchens – their commercial teaching kitchens and those in which school lunches are cooked – to make meals for older people and others who were struggling to cook daily in the community. The Bevy and BACA are not directly working together but are helping each other by advising on good practice and signposting potential service users to each other. Each runs their service two days per week, on alternating days, to compliment the other organisation’s work.

How did it start and who is involved?

In the early stages of Covid-19 lockdown, several community partners including BACA and The Bevy met to discuss how they would cater to the increased need caused by lockdown. BACA then created their own team of people – chefs and administrative staff working at the school – who would promote the service, take orders, make meals, and deliver.

How many meals and who do they deliver to?

Whilst this varies somewhat week to week, on average they provide 100 meals per week. They deliver meals twice per week – on Tuesdays and Thursdays – and take orders for each the day before. They also offer recurring orders for those who know that they will want meals each week.

How do people hear about the service?

They began by making flyers and distributed them in the surrounding neighbourhood, as well as phoning families known to the school who may be unable to cook for themselves at home. Since then, word of mouth has brought a substantial number of requests, as has the promotion on the website.

Finances

The school is allocating staff time to coordination and management of the system, as well as staff time for cooking the meals. Volunteers are helping by delivering the meals. BACA is receiving free food from a food aid distribution charity to make the meals, and they have received a grant from Sir Ron Aldridge, the patron of their school.

Next steps

BACA have said they will maintain this service as long as it is needed. It is as yet undecided whether this would be beyond lockdown.

Key lessons

• This was made possible through a strong community network, and because many people were willing to help, whether by volunteering, donating food, or referring the service to those they knew who would need it.

• The service is absolutely essential for many older adults who cannot cook due to mobility constraints or frailty, but also provides important respite for many parents or other adults who are struggling to cope. For parents suddenly at home caring for their children during school hours, who have limited time to cook, limited money, or have inadequate cooking facilities in their home, two healthy meals per week can alleviate this new stress and make space for them to cope with the other demands on their time and budgets.
In Lancaster, members of the recently formed Food Poverty Alliance have been coming together to figure out ways to address the various forms of household food insecurity caused or exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. This includes a new service for older, isolated adults in the community who cannot cook for themselves. The service consists of a week’s worth of frozen meals, delivered weekly, which people can heat up. These are healthy cooked meals, delivered to people who are unable to cook for themselves and who cannot afford commercial alternatives.

How did it start and who is involved?

This is being led by a local food redistribution charity, Eggcup. They have collaborated with Lancaster Council, the local Age UK, Lancaster & Morecambe College, and a catering company that usually services the local gold club. Age UK are handling personal data and referring people to the service, whilst Eggcup have oversight of all of the logistics, and their volunteers make the deliveries. The council are also referring new service users, and have provided some funding towards the service. The college catering team and the gold club caterer are cooking and freezing meals, with the college doing the majority of these aspects of the work.

How many meals and who do they deliver to?

They started this service at the end of May, and have had some difficulties in accessing as many new clients as they had anticipated. They are currently serving 15 older adults. Their eligibility criteria for people accessing the service is as follows:

- They have some difficulty (e.g. stamina, pain, general ability) with preparing and cooking a meal from scratch.
- They are self-isolating and/or unable to leave the house.
- They cannot access ready meals from a shop or a commercial meal delivery service because either:
  - there are no available delivery slots from the supermarket
  - they don't have people to go shopping for them or can't afford shopping
  - there is no availability from a suitable commercial meal delivery service
  - they can't afford a paid-for meals delivery service.

Seven meals and desserts are delivered per week with the option also to receive an additional food pack containing items for breakfasts and light lunches. These are delivered either once or twice a week dependent on freezer space.

How do people hear about the service?

People are referred through Age UK, the council, hospital discharge teams and others in adult social care. The eligibility criteria are quite stringent, because the service is aimed only at those for whom food parcels are inappropriate. The referral pathway is also somewhat complex for the end user, and they are looking at how to simplify and streamline this aspect.

Finances

The meals are free of charge thanks to various funding streams including a local response appeal. The council has funded aspects of this work, the school is providing staff to cook the meals and has contributed some funding towards buying ingredients so that the offer can be streamlined. Eggcup are providing free, surplus food, and have volunteers who do the delivery work.

Next steps

They are hoping to expand the service and to continue it after Covid-19 lockdown but are uncertain whether this will be possible.

Case study 3: Eggcup And Lancaster & Morecambe College
Washingborough Academy is a primary school in Lincolnshire that has transitioned to cooking lunch every Thursday for people over the age of 70 who are either self-isolating at home in the local area, or are unable to access food for other reasons.

How did it start and who is involved?

When the Government recommended that people over 70 should consider self-isolating, and in recognition that many older people were already isolated or might struggle to access food, the school anticipated closures, so decided to use their team and kitchen for good. The school kitchen team cooks meals, and the headteacher and school office handle the orders. Initially meals were delivered by teachers and the chair of governors, but parents now volunteer to drive to deliver them. The headteacher has oversight of the operation and has been handling any problems as and when they arise.

How many meals and who do they deliver to?

By the end of April 2020, the school was delivering nutritious prepared meals to 50 households across four villages.

How do people hear about the service?

Older people can self-refer for the service, and relatives can also make a referral. Washingborough Academy has raised awareness of the service through local parish councils, churches, newspapers, Facebook and through word of mouth. Older people or their loved ones are encouraged to contact the school directly to be put on their database.

Finances

The recipients or their relatives pay £2.50 for each meal. This does not cover the costs of the operation, so the school is covering the additional costs. However, they have received a contribution from a local county councillor from funding for community projects to support this service. Volunteer drivers are covering their own expenses including petrol (which is why they are keeping the service to local residents and assigning drivers to deliver in their local area). The school is motivated by its ethical stance that vital services - like support for older people or education - should be funded by public institutions and government.

Key lessons

- They are in early stages of this work, but some lessons are emerging. They are concerned that the decision to make the meals free of charge may actually be acting as a barrier to use. Many people do not consider themselves to be in need of this type of service, even if they could benefit from it and are struggling to cope without asking for help. A small charge per meal may help in overcoming this stigma. They initially decided not to take payment because the administrative burden could be too high to be worth it – so streamlined approaches such as a monthly subscription may help with this aspect.

- Each service user can speak to several organisations before they receive their meal – a streamlined referral and delivery processing process may help this, in which only one organisation manages this aspect of the work.

Case study 4: Washingborough Academy
Next steps

There has been high demand for the service and received ample positive feedback; the school therefore anticipates continuing the service after the pandemic. They previously offered community lunches once a month with local older and other people identified as being in need. When the school re-opens, they may continue to offer a meals on wheels service alongside this, on a weekly basis. However, as they currently rely on volunteer drivers, some of whom are working from home or furloughed, they may no longer be able to deliver when lockdown is lifted.

Key lessons

• Demand for this service has been so high that they have restricted their service to just four local villages.
• Sourcing suitable food containers has been a limiting factor on their operations. The headmaster has spent a considerable amount of time researching and sourcing suitable containers and has often found them to be very expensive.
• Initially there were questions about insurance for the volunteer drivers. These have been addressed as some are covered by the insurance for school activity, with others being covered by their workplaces.
• Their local small-scale suppliers were flexible and keen to supply when notified of the change to operations despite vastly smaller numbers on their orders.
• The school has been overwhelmed with offers from parents and local people wanting to volunteer to do deliveries.
• There are clear benefits to both volunteers and service users. Volunteers say they are gratified by doing something tangibly useful, whilst some service users report that without the deliveries, they would not be speaking to anyone in a week.
For any organisation considering running a meals on wheels service using school catering services or other local foodservice facilities, we advise reference to the table of possible models presented earlier in this report to consider your first steps. We recommend that you should:

- Think about the role that you would like to have in this operation – do you want to/are you able to coordinate or lead? Or are you better placed to take on one key aspect e.g. cooking, taking orders or arranging the deliveries.

- Identify the aspect of the work that is missing – you will need to ensure that cooking, handling orders, delivery, and oversight are all mandated. It is fine for you to do all aspects of this work, if you have the capacity, and appropriate skills, resources and contacts. If you identify a gap, you should research potential partners.

- Identify potential partners that you could work with. Are their community groups working with older adults, catering or transport professionals, retailers, food surplus distribution networks, mutual aid groups, etc. which you could reach out to for potential collaborations? How could your local council help?

- Once you have the basics covered – get going! Trying the model, by serving a small number of people, one or two days per week, is a good place to start. Remember that from our case studies it’s common to start this way and to grow to serve a larger number quite quickly.
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About Sustain
Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming
sustain@sustainweb.org
www.sustainweb.org

Sustain, The Green House
244-254 Cambridge Heath Road
London E2 9DA
Tel: 0203 5596777

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