

Rt Hon. George Eustice MP  
Secretary of State  
Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Seacole Building,  
2 Marsham Street  
Westminster  
London  
SW1P 4DF

Wednesday 15 April  
2020

**Joint letter from disabled, older people's and unpaid carers' charities regarding access to food for vulnerable people during the COVID-19 crisis**

Dear Mr Eustice,

As support and information organisations, collectively, we are in daily contact with thousands of people with long-term conditions and impairments, older people, and their unpaid carers. Our utmost priority is informing and supporting them during this very difficult time.

We understand supermarkets are experiencing unprecedented demand and are working around the clock to feed the nation. Thousands of people across the UK have sensory and physical impairments, and mental health issues, which can make getting to the supermarket challenging or impossible in normal circumstances. COVID-19 is compounding existing barriers to accessing essential food for many of these people. Others that would not normally be considered or self-identify as vulnerable, are now finding themselves in need of support. We have included a wide-ranging list of the urgent issues people are facing, below.

It is right that clinically extremely vulnerable people are being prioritised, and they have a clear official route to support. However, we want to work with the Government and supermarkets as a matter of urgency to make sure everyone can access essential food, especially those who do not have people they can rely upon to help. We are pleased the Government has [acknowledged](#) that people may not fall into the category of being clinically extremely vulnerable, but be vulnerable in other ways and in need of support getting essential food supplies. If the Government and supermarkets act now, we can keep these groups healthy, prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and protect the NHS. We recommend the following actions from Government and supermarkets to address this urgent need:

- 1. The Government to involve our organisations in the work it is undertaking to identify those in need, to prioritise them for home deliveries or support with getting food supplies, and therefore keep them healthy and protect the NHS from avoidable admissions.** It is important that this identification is done in a nuanced way, sensitive to people's circumstances and their existing support system or lack of, as well as their health condition/s. As charities, we are well placed to support this.
- 2. Supermarkets to allow anyone at increased risk from COVID-19 or with a disability under the Equalities Act, of any age, and their carer/s, priority access to home deliveries and stores, if they need it. This should be consistent across the industry and clearly communicated to all customers, not just reliant on online communications and with new customers not excluded from registering.** This approach means that no one who really needs priority access will be excluded or forgotten about. The Government should echo messaging from several supermarkets, encouraging those who don't absolutely need home delivery to shop in store instead to reduce demand on what is a stretched and limited service.
- 3. The Government needs to provide clear information about alternative sources of support for people in vulnerable circumstances that cannot access supermarkets or a home delivery because of demand, and reassurances those alternatives will be safe.** We understand local authorities are putting in place local support systems and community groups to help. What people urgently need is information about how to access this support, whether and when they will be contacted, and reassurance that any help from volunteers will be safe. Again, we stand ready to support local and national Government to communicate and deliver local support.
- 4. Supermarkets to build on the fantastic steps they have already taken and adapt services to better meet the needs of older and disabled people, and carers, in the following ways:**
  - Introduce automated processes online and on the telephone if not already in place, to enable customers (new and existing) to register as vulnerable.
  - Ensure their staff are aware of the spectrum of disability and their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to support disabled people, their families and carers contacting them and in store.
  - Ensure customers that are digitally excluded are aware of support systems and they can place orders by phone. This service must be advertised in various accessible ways at a local level.

- Review and freeze costs of key items, maintain discount deals and ensure sufficient stock of discount or basic equivalents.
- Allow disabled customers and their carers to visit stores together, and carers or volunteers to shop or collect on behalf of a vulnerable person.
- Staff should be made aware that young carers and young adult carers are often shopping for a vulnerable relative and should be supported to do so.

### **What older and disabled people and their unpaid carers are telling us**

- Everyone is facing long waits for both delivery slots and hours on hold to get through to supermarkets on the phone to try and register as a vulnerable customer.
- In a recent survey of older people conducted by Independent Age, out of 2,488 respondents, 52% said they had been unable to buy food or household items as a result of stock levels. These people were based across the UK and all over 65.
- People that are trying to register for the first time are unable to do so or have been told existing customers are priority.
- The criteria for priority customers is not clear or consistent between supermarkets, which is confusing.
- The priority hours are not working. Long queues without seating is causing falls, the timeslots often clashing with personal care appointments leaving people to choose between eating and care, and carers are not being able to shop alone as they cannot leave their loved one.
- Some people have been told by supermarkets that their disability does not qualify them for priority deliveries despite clearly being in vulnerable circumstances. This confusion is increasing the risk of vulnerability to scammers stepping in to 'help', as well as leading people to self-ration food supplies due to the perceived risk or worry about going out.
- People with sensory impairments including sight loss are finding it challenging practicing social distancing in stores, particularly where in-store assistance is no longer provided or stores are not allowing two people to shop together i.e. the person with a visual impairment and their personal assistant.
- Communication with stores is not always accessible and equal for those with hearing loss or those without internet access. With more than 70% of people over the age of 70 living with hearing loss, the needs of this group must be taken into consideration.
- Carers, family members and volunteers not being able to access supplies or online delivery slots on behalf of shielding or at risk people.
- Young carers are being challenged as they are perceived as not having a valid reason to be shopping because of their age.

- Some stores are adding key workers to their reserved shopping hours for vulnerable people, increasing risk for the latter. These hours should be kept separate.
- Difficulty with payment options and e-voucher schemes due to a lack of access to cash or ability to manage their money without internet or phone banking.
- Finally, some people are facing increased costs for shopping, both in terms of the cost of deliveries and low-cost goods selling out. Given many disabled people live on low incomes, this is a further barrier to accessing the food they need.

This is altogether a very distressing and confusing situation for many disabled and older people, and their carers, but we hope this provides helpful insight. We would welcome a further conversation about how we can support government and supermarkets to enable those people that need support to access it as soon as possible. Thank you again for the work you are all doing.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Atkinson, CEO, Action on Hearing Loss  
 Kate Lee, CEO, Alzheimer's Society  
 Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK  
 Helen Walker, CEO, Carers UK  
 Gareth Howells, CEO, Carers Trust  
 Kamran Mallick, CEO, Disability Rights UK  
 Hilda Hayo, CEO, Dementia UK  
 Peter McCabe, CEO, Headway  
 Deborah Alsina MBE, CEO, Independent Age  
 Lynda Thomas, CEO, Macmillan Cancer Support  
 Sally Light, CEO, Motor Neurone Disease Association  
 Nick Moberly, CEO, MS Society  
 Dr Dale Webb, CEO, National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society  
 Deborah Gold, CEO, National Aids Trust  
 Georgina Carr, CEO, Neurological Alliance  
 Steve Ford, CEO, Parkinson's UK  
 Andrew Symons, CEO, PSP Association  
 Charles Colquhoun, CEO, Thomas Pocklington Trust  
 Charles Byrne, Director General, The Royal British Legion  
 Matt Stringer, CEO, Royal National Institute of Blind People  
 Anthony Cotterill, Territorial Leader for the UK & Ireland, The Salvation Army  
 Kate Steele, CEO, Shine  
 Mark Hodgkinson, CEO, Scope  
 Raji Hunjan, CEO, Zacchaeus 2000 Trust