

Pandemic has exposed 'serious weaknesses' in UK food system, new report finds

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The Covid-19 pandemic has shown serious flaws in the UK food system, from supply chain disruptions to inadequate conditions in manufacturing facilities and in the living situations of workers, which - if not rectified - leaves it in a poor position to deal with the long term effects of the pandemic. So found a new study, carried out by Veris Strategies in collaboration with 25 food industry and sustainability experts.

The ['Building Back Better: Fixing the Future of Food' report](#), which draws on in-depth interviews with senior executives at businesses including Roberts Bakery, Cranswick, Nestlé and Greencore, as well as sustainability leaders such as Mike Barry and Liz Goodwin, Senior Fellow & Director on Food Loss and Waste at the World Resources Institute, alongside a poll of 100 consumers, suggests there is a gap between consumer expectations of the effect the pandemic will have on food, and the position the industry is in to deliver change.

While 80% of the consumers questioned felt Covid-19 had affected how they think about and value the food they buy and eat, and nine out of 10 expected change to follow that would lead to healthier, more sustainable and ethical food consumption, confidence about the state of the sector to meet these challenges is fairly low. The majority (78%) of the industry experts polled believe the pandemic has exposed "serious weaknesses", and 96% of those experts feel the UK food system is "not yet equipped to deal with the long-term impacts of Covid-19".

The panel and Veris proposed five building blocks that food businesses must now look to, in order to re-build, meet new consumer expectations, and guard against future threats. One of the most important steps to reform, the experts predict, is a 'reimagining' of the social contract between consumers and food businesses. In the wake of the food poverty campaigning by Marcus Rashford and others, and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement, the most successful food businesses will look to help disadvantaged people further, perhaps addressing their own labour shortages by being more inclusive, for example, and offering career opportunities to the homeless and ex-offenders.

The report suggests another expansion of the idea of 'sustainability' to take a much greater regard of consumers' health. Chiming with recommendations in the government's National Food Strategy that the food industry needs to do more on addressing food inequality and eating well, the report envisages food businesses taking a greater role in guarding against obesity and thus the threat of a second wave.

"The message must be - we know you care about your family, you care about your community, you want them to be healthy, and we're going to help you do that," said Liz Goodwin, report contributor and director on food loss and waste at the World Resources Institute.

"There is a huge opportunity for food businesses to step up and play a crucial role in improving people's health and making societies and economies less vulnerable to future pandemics, and there is clear consumer demand for them to take a lead. Nearly one-third of consumers want retailers to do more to promote healthier food choices, and more than one in five want them to help educate people on diet and nutrition," adds Kate Cawley of Veris Strategies.

Other points in the plan of action focus on the need to relocalise, add resilience and responsibility, and to redefine and reimagine businesses to cope with the so-called new normal, with a big emphasis on direct-to-consumer sales and online retail.

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