



Older people's food needs investment, local people and campaigners say

As local authorities decide their budgets ahead of spring 2021, local people, campaigners, and academics have written to councillors to urge them to invest in underfunded vital food services for older people.

A group of professionals and campaigners, including the National Association of Care Catering (NACC), has written to England's council leaders to urge them to invest in older people's health. The letter was coordinated by the food and farming charity [Sustain](#) and signed by representatives from the third sector, private sector, social enterprise and academia. The group is united by a commitment to ensuring all older people can access at least one good meal every day, and their understanding that as we recover from Covid-19 it is vital that communities and individuals develop greater resilience and better infrastructure to guard against future shocks.

This letter was sparked by Meals on Wheels Week 2020 – more than just a meal, a campaign by the [National Association of Care Catering](#) (NACC) in November to raise awareness of the social value of meals on wheels services as a lifeline keeping the elderly and vulnerable living independently in the community nourished, hydrated, physically and mentally safe and well, and connected. This year, it also recognised and praised the dedicated frontline efforts of those involved in these services during such a challenging time.

It also follows a public [letter writing campaign](#) in which local people across England wrote to their ward councillors to demand action.

In light of council's upcoming 2021/22 budget review, these letters ask local authorities to allocate funding to meals and wheels services. The urgent need for proper investment in meals on wheels was highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, an estimated 1.3 million people over the age of 65 were malnourished, or at risk of malnourishment (1). This situation is largely caused by cuts to older people's food services over the past decade, but has been made worse by disruption caused by the pandemic (2).

Upon the announcement of a national lockdown in March, community groups and existing meals on wheels services across the country launched into action to meet demand posed by the crisis. New groups sprang up within communities and from the hospitality sector, existing community food

organisations adapted to provide meals to those in need, and existing meals on wheels services scaled up to meet increased demand (3).

Over the second lockdown, we have witnessed a concerning lack of shielding provisions for older and medically vulnerable people (4). Despite the creation of numerous innovative meals on wheels services by local community groups during the first lockdown, a lack of funding and local authority support has resulted in many being forced to close because they no longer have the resources to continue this vital work (5). Consequently, many older and medically vulnerable people who were reliant on these services for survival have been left to navigate social isolation and lack of food access alone.

“From speaking to people who use these services, I know just how much difference it makes to their day-to-day life. I spoke to Jane, for whom her local meals on wheels service meant she could leave hospital as soon as she felt well enough, after breaking her hip. And Rasheed said that without the service, his meals would consist of toast. From these conversations, I learned that meals on wheels services are an absolute cornerstone of many people’s health and wellbeing. They’re people’s daily contact, they keep them not only nourished but also connected and safe. It’s hugely concerning to think about how people will cope without them.” Morven Oliver-Larkin, Older People’s Food Campaign Coordinator, Sustain (5)

In this context, it is vital that local councils recognise the need for meals on wheels services. Councils have a vital role to play in sustaining and enhancing these services, through their unique position to both finance these services and to integrate them with adult social care and hospital discharge team, so as to maximise appropriate referrals.

This would bring multiple benefits including:

- Acting as a long-term preventative measure against malnutrition, thus decreasing its £20bn cost to health and social care spending (6); meals on wheels preventative health benefits include enabling hospital patients to be discharged earlier and reducing the necessity of GP visits.
- Providing ‘more than just a meal’ via welfare checks that spot any changes to wellbeing to ensure early intervention, daily social contact and other complimentary services that reduce feelings of loneliness.
- Helping the community by creating local jobs; many meals on wheels services employ people who were long-term unemployed or underemployed (7).

It is vital that new funding and support be made available to ensure that robust meals on wheels services are in place across England, so that communities and individuals have the resilience to face

any future crises and to flourish as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. We cannot afford to compromise this service any longer.

ENDS