

Written Evidence submitted by The Country Trust

Q2 Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

- During the crisis low income families are struggling to afford to feed their families.
 - Many of these families are further disadvantaged by never having had the opportunity to acquire the basic skills required to live well.
 - Those with food knowledge, including cooking skills and an understanding of what is required for a healthy diet, are more resilient to emergencies such as COVID-19.
 - To face future crises, we must ensure that high quality food, farming and countryside education, particularly for the most disadvantaged in our communities, is a priority for government
 - The Country Trust recommends that educational access to farms and the countryside is seen as a public good in its own right within the new Agriculture Bill and National Food Strategy.
1. The Country Trust is a small, dynamic national education charity dedicated to bringing alive the working countryside for children who are least able to access it. Since 1978, The Country Trust has made it possible for over half a million disadvantaged young children to experience high quality farm visits, and for farmers and landowners to share with them their passion for food, farming and the countryside.
 2. The Country Trust provides most opportunity for those who have least, addressing poverty of experience and opportunity. Our work focusses on primary schools with a greater than average percentage of children from low income families and therefore eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), as well as schools and groups supporting children with special educational needs, disabled children, young carers, looked after children, vulnerable and refugee children and their families.
 3. One in three (4.1 million) children live in poverty in the UK, with an estimated 2.5 million living in food insecure households¹ and the COVID-19 pandemic is making matters worse. With schools closed, parents unable to work and children at home, low income families are struggling to afford to feed their families. Many of these families are further disadvantaged by never having had the opportunity to acquire the basic skills required to live well.

¹ The Children's Future Food Inquiry (Debate Pack Number CDP 2019/0110, 7 May 2019)

4. Those with food knowledge, including cooking skills and an understanding of what is required for a healthy diet, are more resilient to emergencies such as COVID-19 because they can actively support their own health and the health of their family. In order to enable as many people as possible to live well in 'normal' times and to make us more resilient to emergencies in the future, there is an urgent need to ensure that those who are most disadvantaged are empowered to become more confident consumers, to make informed food choices and the best use of available food.
5. High quality, tailored food, farming and countryside education for those least likely to have such opportunities can help to develop resilience and put whole families onto a new trajectory. Charities, such as The Country Trust², can connect the most disadvantaged children, and their families with the knowledge and the first-hand experience essential for their health and wellbeing. We can also support their engagement with learning, their food confidence, and their ability to connect with others. Through our Food Discovery programme³ we have worked with some of the most vulnerable families in the UK and seen the impact that food education in its broadest sense has on their lives, from healthier, more affordable diets to improved physical and mental wellbeing.
6. Fiona Sadler worked with the Country Trust to develop the Life Skills programme at Catton Grove Primary School in Norwich where she was the Pastoral Care Manager. The skills gained by children and their families who took part in the programme – for example budgeting, shopping, cooking, eating together, planning a day out and taking a picnic - are genuinely essential to life and to thriving⁴.

Since COVID-19 Fiona has kept in touch with families via text and email. Fiona reports:

They are doing incredibly well considering many of them live in small flats without gardens. It's good to know that those parents from Life Skills are able to cook from scratch and are not wasting any food. Even making soup from left over vegetables.

Initiatives such as The Country Trust 'Food Discovery Programme' are also key to ensuring children gain the knowledge and skills to benefit from time spent outdoors⁵.

7. COVID-19 is shining a light on the significant inequalities in children's lives^{6 7} and is heightening our awareness of the importance of food security. If we are

² <https://www.countrytrust.org.uk/> charity number 1122103

³ <https://www.countrytrust.org.uk/what-we-do/food-discovery>

⁴ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Childrens-Future-Food-Inquiry-report.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/new-report-nature-nurtures-children>

⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/tackling-the-disadvantage-gap-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

to tackle these issues in a meaningful way and become more resilient to face future crises, we must ensure that high quality food, farming and countryside education, particularly for the most disadvantaged in our communities, is a priority for government. The Country Trust therefore recommends that educational access to farms and the countryside is recognised as a public good in its own right in the new Agriculture Bill and National Food Strategy.

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⁷ <http://www.se-ed.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Nature%20Childhood%20and%20Health%20iCES%20Occ%20Paper%202009-2%20FINAL.pdf>