

COVID-19: Food Supply Chain

Availability of PPE - 23 April 2020

This briefing paper highlights the challenges faced by food and farming businesses in sourcing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as part of maintaining essential food production during the covid-19 emergency.

Maintaining food production needs PPE

- During this crisis there has been a significant increase in demand for PPE that has led to availability issues in food sectors
- Healthcare sectors must be the national priority for PPE provision, but there is a clear policy and political argument that food production, as an essential sector supporting the national effort, is worthy of PPE prioritisation
- We are asking government colleagues and politicians to prioritise availability of PPE for essential roles in the food sector
- The food sectors listed below collectively need around 200,000 FFP2/FFP3 face masks every week for regular jobs within their supply chains
- We are committed to working with and supporting the PPE manufacture and distribution supply chain and recognise their efforts to assist food production

Crucial role of PPE in food production

This paper highlights the PPE necessary to carry out tasks in food production, and therein our legal and moral obligation to protect our employees. The main area of concern for availability of PPE is around FFP2/FFP3 face masks used, for example, in dusty environments. There are other items that may quickly join face masks in urgency for supplies, such as gloves, sanitiser, and soap.

The food sector has invested heavily over the past weeks to implement covid-19 related measures in the workplace (distancing, screens, face protection, etc) and will continue to do so to safeguard employees. This has depleted stocks of PPE and we are asking for support from Government to help ensure a consistent supply in order to continue producing food.

Supplies vary from site to site from less than a week up to eight weeks, but all are reporting on the inability to re-stock. We recognise that the PPE supply chain has significant issues of its own at a global scale, which is why a whole-chain solution is needed to focus PPE towards essential sectors.

Science-based practices

Businesses are doing all that they can to maximise the use of PPE, for example, cleaning and re-using where this does not detract from the protection offered.

As a sector we follow the science-based guidance issued by Government, but we urge that any policy for general use of PPE must match the workplace environment, for example, cotton masks used in a cold environment could become a food safety risk.

We are also concerned about the potential of diverting COSHH-level PPE (such as FFP2/FFP3 masks) for non-COSSH uses, thereby possibly exacerbating the lack of availability.

If the general public start sourcing PPE this will put additional pressure on the supply chains, and we urge the Government to be clear on product specification and availability if more general measures are being seriously considered.

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Typical tasks requiring PPE

All tasks in food production require a level of PPE depending on the nature of the job role; be that coats, boots, gloves, aprons, hairnets, visors, or face masks; and skilled roles require specialist equipment. PPE that has a long life-span or can be cleaned and re-used is being closely monitored, but it is the short life-span or single use PPE that are urgently needed. FFP2/FFP3 face masks are the primary concern and are used for:

- Dusty environments on farm or in factory
- Cleaning and maintenance
- Roles that involve the use of chemicals

We estimate that the sectors listed below collectively use around **200,000** FFP2/FFP3 face masks every week as part of their normal food production operations.

Cross sector collaboration to keep food moving

Availability of PPE is a concern for many food sectors as we are aware that food production must continue to ensure national food security. We are calling on our Government departments and agencies (inc. Defra, DHSC, FSA, HSE) to help us meet the nation's need for food during this difficult time.

We welcome the Health & Safety Executive's pragmatic and risk-based approach to managing working environments ([link](#)) to minimise risk and therefore use PPE efficiently; yet this does not lessen the need for PPE to be prioritised and made readily available for food production.

Together we can achieve the following:

- Food sectors can supply the DHSC – which has the lead on PPE supply across Government – with a supply and demand profile over the coming weeks and months to aid prioritisation
- Government should include the need for prioritising PPE in its regular briefings and other public support for food production
- Food sectors and Government should support prioritisation for PPE in food production through social media initiatives such as #foodheroes and #clapforkeyworkers

Sectors involved

The following sector organisations have been involved and/or support this briefing paper:

- Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (AIMS)
- British Egg Industry Council (BEIC)
- British Frozen Food Federation (BFFF)
- British Plastics Federation (BPF)
- British Poultry Council (BPC)
- Chilled Food Association (CFA)
- Federation of Bakers (FoB)
- Food and Drink Federation (FDF)
- National Association of British and Irish Flour Millers (NABIM)
- National Farmers Union (NFU)

Contact

Richard Griffiths, Chief Executive, British Poultry Council
E: rgriffiths@britishpoultry.org.uk M: 07545 922117