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## Food banks may close as covid cases surge, charity warns

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Food banks may be forced to close unless the UK government takes immediate action to reduce demand for their services, a food aid charity has warned in a letter to the prime minister.

The coordinator of the Independent Food Aid Network wrote to Boris Johnson on 4 January to highlight the effect of rising covid cases and the emergence of the B.1.1.7 variant on the provision of food aid services.<sup>1</sup> The network, which represents over 400 independent food banks in the UK, called for immediate action to protect people using food banks and the staff running them.

“Heightened restrictions, continued job losses, and school closures are certain to increase the need for food banks,” Sabine Goodwin wrote in the letter. “We are very concerned that the highly contagious new strain of covid-19 could put food bank staff, volunteers, and the people they support at increased risk of infection and that self-isolating measures may involve the reduction in service or closure of food banks.”

The charity has seen demand for emergency food aid rise sharply during the covid-19 pandemic. Data from a sample of 83 independent food banks, of at least 960 around the UK, showed that they had distributed a total of 354 613 emergency food parcels from February to November 2020, compared with 168 560 emergency food parcels from February to November 2019.

“Since March 2020, against a backdrop of increasing demand, independent food bank teams have devised ways to provide emergency food parcels to minimise the risk of covid-19 transmission to beneficiaries, volunteers, and staff members,” Goodwin wrote. “Many are exhausted and in some places volunteer numbers are running low. Now, the rapid spread of the new covid-19 variant presents far greater challenges and risks.”

The charity is calling for the government to ensure adequate, ringfenced funding for local authorities to provide cash grants directly to people unable to afford food. “We firmly believe that, to protect public health and limit further transmission of the new strain of covid-19, the government must reduce footfall to food banks by prioritising a ‘cash first’ approach to escalating hunger across the UK,” the letter said.

Goodwin told *The BMJ* that the letter served as a warning that a fragile charitable food aid system cannot replace robust social security and fair wages. “Given how much is at stake, we hope that the prime minister will urgently respond to our calls for cash based solutions to food insecurity,” she said.

*The BMJ*'s appeal this year supports the Independent Food Aid Network. You can donate to the campaign at <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/bmj>.

<sup>1</sup> Independent Food Aid Network. Letter to the prime minister. 4 Jan 2021. [https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/f2659244-fb8b-4ee2-bfc1-02eed12850b7/IFAN\\_LETTER\\_FOR%20THE%20PRIME%20MINISTER\\_4.1.21..pdf](https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/f2659244-fb8b-4ee2-bfc1-02eed12850b7/IFAN_LETTER_FOR%20THE%20PRIME%20MINISTER_4.1.21..pdf).