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By Fred Searle

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Covid-19 has exposed 'serious weaknesses' in UK food system



For a period during lockdown empty shelves were a common sight at supermarkets

Experts concerned that UK supply chains are ill-equipped to deal with long-term effects of pandemic, according to new report

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed serious flaws in the UK food system, from supply chain disruptions to inadequate conditions in manufacturing facilities and workers' living conditions.

These are the findings of a new study by Veris Strategies in collaboration with 25 food industry and sustainability experts, warning that if not rectified, we will be in a weak position to deal with the long-term effects of the pandemic.

The 'Building Back Better: Fixing the Future of Food' report draws on in-depth interviews with senior executives at businesses including Roberts Bakery, Cranswick, Nestlé and Greencore, as well as sustainability leaders at the World Resources Institute and a poll of 100 consumers.

The majority (78 per cent) of the industry experts polled believe the pandemic has

exposed "serious weaknesses", and 96 per cent of those experts feel the UK food system is "not yet equipped to deal with the long-term impacts of Covid-19".

The report also 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.

Some 80 per cent of the consumers questioned said Covid-19 had affected how they think about and value the food they buy and eat, while nine out of 10 expect change that will lead to healthier, more sustainable and ethical food consumption. However, confidence about the state of the sector to meet these challenges is fairly low.

The panel and Veris proposed five building blocks that food businesses must now look to in order to rebuild, meet new consumer expectations, and guard against future

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 more, perhaps addressing their own labour shortages by being more inclusive 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 to address food inequality and promote healthy eating, the report envisages food businesses taking a greater role in

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threats.

guarding against obesity and making people healthier and better equipped to deal with a potential second wave of Covid-19.

"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," added 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.