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Nicola Sturgeon MSP
First Minister
Scottish Government
St Andrews House
Regent Road
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3rd June 2020

Dear First Minister

Joint letter from charities representing disabled people, older people, unpaid carers and consumers regarding access to food for vulnerable people during the COVID-19 crisis

Collectively as organisations, we are in contact with thousands of people with long-term conditions and disabilities, older people, and their unpaid carers on a daily basis. Our primary concern is to provide them with the most up to date information and support during what is a very difficult time.

While we recognise the efforts of supermarkets and the Scottish Government to ensure access to food, we are concerned that we are still hearing regularly of people at greater risk of illness and infection who are unable to access support from their local authority or delivery slots from supermarkets.

It is right that clinically extremely vulnerable people are being prioritised, and those who are shielding have a clear official route to access support. However, we want to work with the Scottish Government and supermarkets as a matter of urgency to make sure everyone can access essential food, especially those who do not have friends, relatives or neighbours to rely upon.

We understand supermarkets are experiencing unprecedented demand and are working around the clock to feed the nation. While we all adapt to follow the latest guidelines, thousands of people across Scotland who have sensory and physical disabilities, mental health issues, and unpaid carers already face access issues which can make going to the supermarket challenging or impossible even in normal circumstances.

COVID-19 is compounding existing barriers to accessing essential food for many of these people. Others that would not normally be considered or self-identify as vulnerable, are now finding themselves in need of support.

Below we have listed the actions that we collectively believe would provide the most benefit to those who need more support to access food during this pandemic:

- 1. Supermarkets to work with the Scottish Government to ensure all vulnerable consumers, of any age, and their carers receive the support they need to access food. This should be consistent across the industry and clearly communicated to all customers, not just relying on online communications and with new customers not excluded from registering. One way to make progress on this would be to set up a referral system, similar to the UK Government scheme which allows someone who is not shielded but who is vulnerable in another way to be referred by their local authority to a priority delivery slot.** Not everyone with a disability or at increased risk, or who is providing unpaid care will require or use priority services, but this approach means no one that cannot access supermarkets will be excluded or forgotten about. The Scottish Government should echo messaging from several supermarkets encouraging those who don't absolutely need home delivery to shop in store instead to reduce demand on what we know is a stretched and limited service.

- 2. Supermarkets to build on the steps they have already taken and adapt services to better meet the needs of older and disabled people, in the following ways:**
 - Enable customers that are digitally excluded to place orders by phone, and advertise this service in various accessible ways.
 - Introduce automated processes online and on the telephone if not already in place, to enable customers (new and existing) to register as vulnerable.
 - Ensure their staff are aware of the spectrum of disability, including hidden disabilities, and their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to support disabled people, their families and carers contacting them and in store.
 - Review the cost and supply of essential items as the pandemic progresses.
 - Consider specific dietary requirements, including where a child or adult with autism or a learning disabilities has strong preferences for a narrow range of food, to allow for more than set maximum amounts to be purchased.
 - Allow disabled customers and their carers to visit stores together, and carers or volunteers to shop or collect on behalf of a vulnerable person.
 - Staff should be made aware that young carers and young adult carers are often shopping for a vulnerable relative and should be supported to do so.

- 3. The Scottish Government to involve our organisations in work it is undertaking to identify those in need to prioritise them for home deliveries or support with getting food supplies, and therefore keep them healthy and protect the NHS from avoidable admissions.** It is important that this identification is done in a nuanced way, sensitive to people's

circumstances and their existing support system or lack of, as well as their health condition/s. As charities, we are well placed to support this.

4. Improved coordination between the Scottish Government and local authorities, the food industry and local charities so that all options for providing food deliveries – from supermarkets to local shops and volunteers – are fully exploited.

Based on the reports we are continuing to receive from older and disabled people and their unpaid carers we are aware of the following problems:

- Many people are facing long waits for both delivery slots and hours on hold to get through to supermarkets on the phone to try and register as a vulnerable customer.
- There is a lack of consistency on how supermarkets treat vulnerable customers – with some only registering those who are shielding as priority customers for online deliveries.
- According to a recent Age Scotland survey of older people during this crisis, 32% of respondents struggled to get food from a supermarket in person and 39% struggled to get online delivery.
- A RNIB survey found that 74% of blind and partially sighted people reported being concerned about getting access to food during lockdown, 21% said that they had had to ration food and 67% had had difficulty finding a timely supermarket delivery slot.
- According to recent research by Carers UK & Carers Scotland, 70% of carers in Scotland are spending more on food e.g. because of getting food deliveries or having fewer choices about what to buy. It also found that 64% of carers are having some or significant problems accessing the basic necessity of food.

This is altogether a very distressing and confusing situation for many disabled and older people, and their carers. While we appreciate all the effort made thus far, we believe urgent action is needed to address the problems people continue to face. We hope this insight can help to facilitate further progress. We would welcome a meeting to discuss how we can support both the Scottish Government and supermarkets to enable those people that need support to access it as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

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