

COVID-19 learning and reflections: Use of shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food provision



Background

The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) supports and connects independent frontline food aid organisations while advocating on their behalf at a national level. Our vision is of a country without the need for emergency food aid and in which good food is accessible to all.

IFAN's Cash First Project in Scotland involves co-developing practical tools and resources to improve access to cash-based options for those experiencing food insecurity as well as working collaboratively with food aid providers to understand, record and share learning about how the Scottish Government's cash-first measures support a reduction in the need for food aid.

Summary

Food bank managers who contributed to this briefing¹ have found that offering shopping vouchers provides a more flexible and dignified way of supporting people. In the right circumstances, shopping vouchers can:

- empower people to purchase food that they and their families would choose;
- be a more effective way to support people to access the food and essentials that will make the most difference to them;
- be a more efficient way for community groups to support people than sourcing, purchasing, sorting, parcelling and distributing food (especially in the context of social distancing measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic).

These models are not a replacement for ensuring that people are accessing all their existing financial entitlements and discretionary support from the UK Government, Scottish Government and local authorities. Providing shopping vouchers is also not a long-term solution to the drivers of food insecurity – low wages and insecure work, benefits levels not meeting the costs of living and waiting times and delays to benefit payments leaving people without money for essentials. IFAN and its members remain committed to working with our partners towards a country without the need for emergency food aid and in which good food is accessible to all.

Barriers to food banks implementing these strategies include:

- lack of financial resources to purchase vouchers when model is currently based on collecting and distributing food donations;
- restrictions from funders about how to use funding;
- concerns about how to communicate this approach with donors (e.g. individuals, businesses and churches), who are accustomed to supporting a food provision model.

Food banks will need to balance practical considerations both for their organisation and for the people they are supporting. There may be some work to do with funders, donors and retailers to share feedback and encourage improved working practices.

¹ In September 2020, IFAN hosted discussions with members of its network in Scotland about use of vouchers by community food providers instead of or alongside food provision. The examples informing this briefing are based in seven local authority areas, including urban, semi-urban and rural contexts.

Practice examples: How food banks are currently using shopping vouchers

1. Through referral partners

At the start of lockdown, one organisation started working through some of their referral partners to provide supermarket vouchers directly to clients who would ordinarily have been referred for a food parcel. This provided more choice and flexibility to those receiving support and reduced pressure on the food bank staff and volunteers at a time when the pandemic had created operational challenges alongside an extraordinary rise in referrals.

Supermarket vouchers were purchased by the food bank and given to a select group of referral agents, who then distributed them directly to families struggling to afford food (approx. £50 for a family of four). After seeing that there were many provisions in place for families but fewer for other groups, the food bank expanded this approach with select referral partners (social work, child protection, drug & alcohol team) who could reach other groups of people.

Reasons for implementing this approach included:

- Funding available at the start of lockdown could be used more flexibly to support people in financial crisis than in ordinary times
- Finding a more efficient way to support people during lockdown. Requests for food parcels rose dramatically at the start of lockdown, at the same time that social distancing and operational changes meant there were fewer food bank staff and volunteers to cope. It was less resource intensive to purchase and distribute supermarket vouchers than to source, purchase, stock, sort, parcel and distribute food to people.

Learning:

- Confidence in referral partners was key – food banks want to be sure that people are being supported to access all their entitlements and support through existing measures.
- Relationship with referral partners was key – food banks worked with select referrers who they believed would keep a good record (i.e. fill in and return basic information about how the vouchers were used and distributed so that the food bank could report to funders).

2. Alongside food parcel

Some organisations offer shopping vouchers for £5, £10, £20 alongside their food parcels. This is often a way to support people to 'top-up' the contents of the food parcel with fresh foods like eggs, dairy and sometimes fresh fruit and vegetables if those are not included.

One organisation started providing vouchers alongside parcels following discussion with families they had been supporting throughout the summer. The food bank wanted to understand what each family needed as they transitioned away from regular food provision during lockdown. Honest feedback from some families revealed that while they appreciated the food support, there were some items that had not been used by the family and others that they would have wanted instead. This food bank has a strong relationship with people they are supporting, and they work hard to tailor food provision to people's dietary requirements and preferences. However, they found that people felt more empowered by being able to make these decisions by purchasing food directly.

Another organisation explained that as a small food bank, they were not able to keep fresh food in stock. They partnered with local businesses in their rural area to provide vouchers to

butchers and local grocers so that people could purchase fresh food alongside the ambient food parcel contents, which had a secondary effect of supporting local trade.

Reasons for implementing this approach included:

- Responding to feedback from people about the benefits of being able to choose the food that meets their needs.
- Feedback from people that purchasing food that their children liked gave them a sense of pride and empowerment as a parent.
- Funding during lockdown was more flexible, allowing food banks to work differently with people they are supporting.
- Stocking fresh foods is more of a challenge than ambient, and it can be more efficient and effective for people to have the voucher to purchase these themselves.

Key learning:

- Being able to purchase the food and other essentials that you and your family need feels empowering – food bank managers report that people receiving vouchers have been much more likely to be in touch to say that this has made a difference.
- Vouchers to local shops can be a way to build relationships and secure support from local businesses.

3. Instead of food parcel

Where possible, food banks usually try to ask those receiving parcels about any dietary requirements and preferences, as well as other circumstances (e.g. not having access to a full kitchen) that would affect how useful certain items would be. In some cases, food banks work with referral partners and individuals to collect this information before the parcel is made up, and in other situations, the person is asked about this when they come to collect the parcel.

In some situations, food banks have chosen to distribute a voucher or gift card instead of a food parcel. Examples include when it is too difficult to source food that would meet the person's dietary requirements and preferences or during the early stages of lockdown when the food bank was closed to the public. Issuing vouchers in these circumstances has allowed the food bank to continue to support community members while overcoming these barriers.

Reasons for implementing this approach included:

- Funding available at the start of lockdown could be used more flexibly to support people in financial crisis than in ordinary times.
- Vouchers were a more efficient way to support people during lockdown, as they enabled people to choose the food and essentials they needed.
- Food banks can find it challenging to source and distribute food that is not normally provided in a food parcel.

Key learning

- Issuing vouchers can be a more efficient and effective way of supporting people, e.g. by not requiring them to travel to the food bank, if they are unable to eat or make use of the food that is normally included in a food parcel.
- Food parcels offer a relatively standard set of items, which means some people cannot make use of the contents.

For further consideration

Vouchers to purchase food and other essentials can provide greater dignity, choice and empowerment to people who are experiencing financial hardship. For this to be implemented more widely, there are a number of considerations:

Integration with existing financial support

IFAN is committed to a [cash first approach](#) to food insecurity. Our members are working with partners to support benefit uptake strategies and reduce barriers people face to accessing all their financial entitlements and discretionary support from existing benefits and provisions from local authorities. All existing entitlements and support should be exhausted before someone is referred for charitable support from a food bank support – whether food parcels or vouchers.

Support from funders and donors

Providing vouchers requires a different form of funding and support. Food banks do not purchase most of the food they distribute but rely on surplus food and food donations from collection drives at supermarkets, schools and businesses. Despite the advantages described here for the food bank and by people they are supporting, food banks are aware that funders and donors may be unwilling to support a change of approach. There is a concern about how to communicate the advantages in offering a more flexible option.

Flexibility of the funding situation in the early stages of lockdown was a catalyst for implementing a voucher approach for some organisations, and some individual, church and business donors have also started donating cash to food banks rather than food. Now that the initial crisis and related funding have passed, there is a concern that funders and donors will be less willing to provide resources to food banks to purchase and distribute vouchers.

There is a sense that it is easier to attract funding for vouchers and gift cards that provide some assurance to the funder or donor that the money will be used to purchase food.² Different companies provide varying restrictions on the items that can be purchased with vouchers, e.g. Orange Vouchers from Aldi cannot be used to purchase alcohol or lottery tickets; Farmfoods does not sell alcohol. This needs to be balanced against the aims of the support, however, and restricting which vouchers to distribute based on these concerns can mean they are less useful or less empowering than intended.

Practical considerations

Purchasing: Every company has different processes for purchasing vouchers, including whether they need to be purchased in store or online, how many can be purchased in one transaction, the total value that can be put on a card and whether people need to be issued a physical card or simply a voucher number. These practicalities affect how easy it is for a food bank to source and distribute them.

Redeeming: Every company has different processes for redeeming vouchers, such as whether you can use a part of the gift card or need to use the full amount in one transaction, restrictions on sale of certain items and how long they are valid. These practicalities affect how easy and helpful it is for people to use them.³

² Food bank managers feel there would be an even greater reluctance to distributing cash to people as it would not provide this assurance.

³ For example, Aldi Orange Vouchers are particularly easy for organisations to purchase and distribute, but they only come in £5 and £10 value, which need to be spent in full rather than as a gift card, and Aldi may not be the most convenient location for people to do their shopping.