

Using a cash-first approach at local level: towards ending the need for emergency food aid in Scotland

Summary:

Between June and November 2020, IFAN will undertake a project to support a cash-first approach at a local level. The project will involve co-developing practical tools aimed at improving 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 these 'cash-first' options support a reduction in the need for food aid. Key findings will inform ongoing discussions about how Scotland will pursue its commitment to end the need for food banks during the pandemic and beyond.

Context:

When measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 were announced by the UK Government in mid-March, it was initially unclear whether food aid providers would be considered key workers or advised to stay at home with other non-essential businesses and organisations.¹ By 26 March, the Scottish Government issued guidance to community groups, stating that:

We recognise that community food groups and other organisations providing food are a vital service at this time and, as per the latest UK Government guidance, are not being asked to close.²

This guidance to community food initiatives also contained the beginning framework of what would become described as the 'cash-first' approach,³ explaining that:

As far as possible we want to ensure that:

- Those who can get to the shops to purchase food have the money they need to do this. The budget for the Scottish Welfare Fund has been more than doubled to

¹ Emergency independent food banks ask: "Can we stay open?" as UK goes into coronavirus lockdown, 24 March 2020:

https://www.sustainweb.org/news/mar20_independent_food_banks_ask_can_we_stay_open/

² 2 COVID-19: Guidance for community food organisations, Scottish Government Food Insecurity Team, email circulated 26 March 2020 (copy posted by Community Food and Health Scotland 1 April 2020 and available: <https://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/2020/covid-19-guidance-forcommunity-food-organisations/>)

³ 3 Emergency free meals to those most in need, 20 April 2020:

<https://www.gov.scot/news/emergencyfree-meals-to-those-most-in-need/> When announcing Communities Secretary Aileen Campbell stated: "Uniquely among the countries of the UK, the 'cash-first' elements of approach mean that where people can safely get out to buy food, we make sure they have access to the cash to do so. This is the most dignified way we can provide food support and we will continue to do all we can to help people overcome any barriers in their way. I am pleased that these charities have welcomed this approach as the most dignified way of supporting people with food insecurity."

ensure it can meet the needs of those facing financial crisis. Information on how to access it is available here:

<https://www.mygov.scot/scottish-welfarefund/apply-or-track-your-application/>

- Community organisations may also choose to provide vouchers or cash as an alternative to direct food provision. We have had reassurances from the Department for Work and Pensions that this will not affect benefits.
- Food delivery is available for those who can't get out.
- Where the above is not possible that community food organisations can provide food in a safe and dignified way.⁴

It is clear from Scottish Government communications that it was hoped that people facing food insecurity would be able to access the cash they needed without needing to rely on emergency food provision, primarily through the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF).

Unfortunately, analysis of food parcels distributed during the pandemic by IFAN and the Trussell Trust shows that despite increasing funding to SWF, demand for emergency food soared in the early stages of lockdown. IFAN reported a 184% increase in the number of people and referrals supported between April 2019 and April 2020 in Scotland.⁵ The Trussell Trust has reported a 47% increase in parcels distributed - and a 62% increase in parcels distributed to children - between April 2019 and April 2020 in Scotland.⁶ While startling, these figures represent only a proportion of food aid responses for those experiencing financial crisis. Alongside an increased supply of food, we have seen a considerable growth of new food aid providers during this same period.

Project description:

This project will explore how a 'cash-first' approach is being evidenced on the ground by emergency food aid teams while at the same time supporting these frontline food aid organisations to best promote and access cash-first solutions for the people they are supporting. The project hopes to support a reduction in need for the services of food banks across Scotland.

Aims:

- Understand how the Scottish Government's 'cash-first' measures were understood and utilised by food aid providers during the initial stages of the pandemic.

⁴ 4 COVID-19: Guidance for community food organisations (see note 2; emphasis added).

⁵ 5 Independent Food Aid Network (June 2020) IFAN Scotland June 2020 data release:

[https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/378499b3-c557-4d97-879ea3a1692bed01/Scotland%20breakdown%20for%20IFAN%20data%20release%20June%20160620V 2.pdf](https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/378499b3-c557-4d97-879ea3a1692bed01/Scotland%20breakdown%20for%20IFAN%20data%20release%20June%20160620V%202.pdf)

⁶ 6 Trussell Trust (June 2020) 'Summary findings on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on food banks': https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/APRIL-Data-briefing_external.pdf

- Provide practical support to food aid providers to help manage down the need for emergency food provision and increase accessibility to financial advice and support.
- Gather best practice examples and qualitative evidence to support improvements in the delivery of the 'cash-first' approach in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and beyond.

Objectives:

- Support the ongoing development and dissemination of practical tools to support food aid providers to promote a 'cash-first' approach and corresponding reduction in the need for emergency food provision.
 - Alongside the Trussell Trust, develop a standard referral pathway tool for financial advice and support and working with food aid providers across Scotland to adapt for use in their local authority area;
 - Work with IFAN and the Trussell Trust networks to engage local authorities around how Scottish Welfare Fund delivery can reduce the need for emergency food aid.
- Work collaboratively with food aid providers to a) understand their experiences of and barriers to cash-first options for those they are supporting with emergency food provision, b) continuously record and share good practice for accessing financial advice and support during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Themes:

- increased funding to Scottish Welfare Fund;
- option to purchase and disseminate vouchers instead of food through Food Fund, etc.
- effective partnerships between local authorities and third sector;
- proactive work by local authorities and advice providers to support people who might be at risk of financial crisis.
- Produce a summary report of key findings to inform a roundtable discussion with wider sector (e.g. members of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty⁷, Poverty and Inequality Commission and representatives from food aid providers and local authorities).
- Establish draft recommendations for further improvements in the cash-first approach to food insecurity as the period of renewal and recovery continues.

⁷ Members included: Big Lottery Fund, Bridging the Gap, Child Poverty Action Group, Church of Scotland, City of Edinburgh Council, FareShare, Food Commission, Nourish Scotland, Oxfam Scotland, Poverty Truth Commission (now Poverty Truth Community), STV Appeal, The Poverty Alliance, The Robertson Trust, Trussell Trust.