



Using shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcel provision

Background: IFAN and a 'cash first' approach

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 everyone can afford adequate, healthy and nutritious food.

While calling for structural changes that would eliminate the need for emergency food aid in the long-term, IFAN supports its member organisations with their work in the short-term to provide support that is as dignified as possible. This includes calling for a 'cash first' response to food insecurity at a local and national level. That is, the prioritisation of accessing income or crisis cash payments, rather than emergency food aid, as a response to food insecurity. This is based on the understanding that food parcels are not a solution to the poverty that drives the need for them and that cash payments enable choice and dignity for people facing financial crisis. As part of this work, IFAN has been supporting the co-development of cash first referral leaflets to help people in financial crisis access any of their existing financial entitlements and maximise their income.¹

The long-term aim of a cash first response to food insecurity is to eliminate the need for food aid in the UK (see Figure 1). However, while campaigning for income-based solutions remain, IFAN recognises it is possible to provide more effective and more dignified alternatives to emergency food parcels. This briefing considers the use of shopping vouchers, instead of or alongside emergency food aid parcels, recognising that while a shopping voucher is not a solution to food insecurity, the distribution of vouchers could provide a less stigmatising form of support to people who are food insecure.

¹ www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets

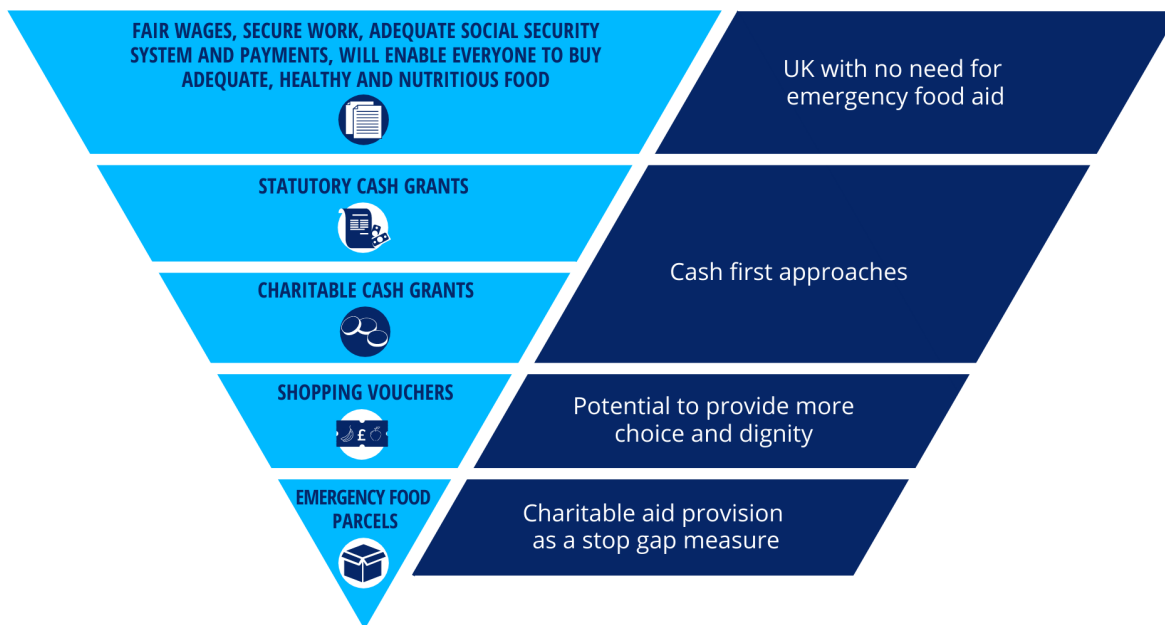


Figure 1: Effective responses to food insecurity; From an adequate social security system, fair wages and secure work (most effective) to emergency food parcels (least effective)

Using shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels

This document builds on [IFAN's previous briefing](#) on the use of shopping vouchers published in September 2020.² Based on discussions with representatives from five of IFAN's member organisations, we explored the advantages and considerations involved in using of shopping vouchers. To build on this, the current document is based on a further seven interviews with representatives of IFAN member organisations and explores in more detail:

- Distributing shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels
- Distributing shopping vouchers via referral partners
- Distributing shopping vouchers through self-referrals
- Further considerations, including:
 - the practicalities of purchasing, storing and redeeming shopping vouchers,
 - communicating with funders,
 - the risk of further institutionalising charitable provision.

We are very grateful to all the contributors for their time and help.

² COVID-19 learning and reflections: Use of shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food provision www.bit.ly/3cNwBnH

Summary of Findings:

In the right circumstances shopping vouchers can:

- **empower people with choice** to purchase food that they would have had if they could access sufficient income;
- promote health and wellbeing by giving people the chance to buy the **food and other essentials that will suit their dietary and cultural needs**;
- be a **more efficient** way for community groups to support people, as opposed to sourcing, purchasing, sorting, parcelling and re-distributing food (especially in the context of social distancing measures in the COVID-19 pandemic);
- **empower local community businesses** through shopping voucher distribution;
- **cut CO2 emissions** created by the food aid supply chain and reduce dependency on surplus food redistribution (which is often mistakenly represented as a way to address hunger).

Common barriers to food banks adopting the use of shopping vouchers can include:

- lack of financial resources to purchase shopping vouchers when their model is currently based on collecting and distributing food donations;
- concerns about how to communicate this approach to donors (individuals, businesses, churches) who are accustomed to supporting a food aid provision model.

Food aid providers need to balance the practical considerations of their organisations and the individuals they support. This briefing is not a comprehensive guide but is intended to support organisations that are trialling or considering the use of shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels.

IFAN Member Organisations' Experience

1. Distributing shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels

Some food aid providers we spoke to chose to distribute shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels. The vouchers were usually worth £5, £10 or £20 and could be redeemed either in a local shop or supermarket.

One IFAN member organisation started providing shopping vouchers alongside food parcels following discussions with the families they had been giving support to. They wanted to understand the needs of each family and honest feedback revealed that while families appreciated the food support, there were some items that had not

been used, and other items that were felt to be missing. This food bank has a strong relationship with the 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 representative of an IFAN member organisation explained that, as a small food bank, they were not able to keep fresh food in stock. They partnered with local businesses, a butcher and local greengrocer, so that people could purchase fresh produce alongside the ambient food parcel contents.

Other reasons for adopting this approach were logistical. During the pandemic, some members decided to distribute shopping vouchers when it became too difficult to source food that would meet the person's dietary requirements and preferences. This occurred both during the early stages of lockdown when many operations were closed to the public and, later on, when it was difficult to store the amount of food necessary to meet heightened demand.

Reasons for implementing this approach:

- Food bank staff believed that people should be free to choose the food and essentials they needed and preferred;
- 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;
- Availability of more flexible funding at the start of lockdown, which could be used more freely to support people in financial crisis;
- A more efficient way of supporting people in lockdown, as regular volunteers couldn't help, and/or sourcing and sorting the increasing amount of food to meet growing need was logistically difficult;
- Stocking fresh foods is more challenging than storing ambient food, and it can be more efficient and effective to provide a shopping voucher for fresh food;
- The challenge of sourcing food not normally provided in a food parcel. For example: baby products that are specific to individual need.³

Key learnings:

- Being able to purchase the food and other essentials that people and their family need is empowering and enhances a sense of agency. Some food bank managers report that people receiving vouchers are much more likely to get in

³ IFAN shares the [UNICEF guidelines on the provision of infant formula by food banks](#) but understands that in many cases it's impossible for food bank teams to only signpost to health visitors given the immediacy of requests being made.

touch to say that this has made a difference than after having received a food parcel.

- Shopping vouchers for use in local shops can be a way for the food aid provider to build relationships and secure support from local businesses.
- It is useful to have a system in place. Shopping vouchers can be stamped to allow the food bank or the referral agency to be able to know how vouchers have been used.
- It is critical for food aid providers to have frank conversations with the businesses redeeming the vouchers with regards to the danger of creating stigma (for example: discouraging businesses from questioning people when they are presenting their voucher)

2. Distributing shopping vouchers via referral partners

Another approach is to promote the use of shopping vouchers with referral partners, explaining that this could be a more dignified option than a referral for a food parcel. Most of the members who were interviewed for this briefing mostly, or exclusively, use referral partners to distribute their vouchers.

One organisation started purchasing supermarket vouchers directly and gave them to a selected group of referral agents, who then distributed them to families struggling to afford food (approximately £50 for a family of four). While providing more choice and flexibility to people, this approach also reduced pressure on the food bank staff and volunteers at a time when an extraordinary rise in referrals during the pandemic created significant operational challenges.

Another organisation highlighted that, while food banks cater for urgent requests for food aid, the referral agency has the power to assess the situation according to the person's wider needs and offer holistic support including helping people access any existing social security measures or statutory cash grants as a first resort. They found that donors are often reassured by the idea that the vouchers are not allocated by a food bank operating on an open-door basis and that people's needs are assessed. The same member organisation organises a meeting with all its referral agencies every six weeks via Zoom to share learning and plan collaborations in the local context.

Reasons for implementing this approach:

- Most interviewees felt that by using an agency they could ensure that the agency was responsible for assessing people's needs, rather than placing this responsibility on a food bank team.
- They also felt it was important that the agency was in a position to refer people to any existing financial entitlements/cash grants.

Key learning:

- Confidence in referral partners was key. Food bank teams want to be sure that people are being supported to access all their financial entitlements and advice on income maximisation, that a cash first response to food insecurity is being prioritised.
- Some of the interviewees found it helpful to work with referrers that keep a good record of the distributed vouchers, helping the food bank to monitor and evaluate its shopping voucher scheme.
- All interviewees expressed that they would prefer for every person to be assessed and supported immediately through advice by an agency. However, they all feel that using agencies brings a minor risk of institutionalising the food banking system even further as the vouchers are sourced by food banks.

3. Food banks distributing shopping vouchers directly

Some of the food banks interviewed for this briefing distribute vouchers directly to people. The percentage of vouchers distributed directly by food banks varied between 5% and 30% of the total number of shopping vouchers allocated.

One organisation also runs a takeaway voucher scheme. The scheme offers beneficiaries takeaway vouchers for £10, £15, or £25. People decide which of the four options of takeaway they want (Thai, fish and chips, pizza and Indian) and call the takeaway venue saying that they will pay for their meal with a voucher - no questions are asked. As well as a positive impact for the beneficiary, this initiative had the secondary effect of supporting local trade.

Reasons for implementing this approach:

- Responding to a situation quickly, while people navigate the social security system and get referred for existing support.
- When finding themselves in in-work poverty, people can be in need of immediate help. Often these people would be unable to count on other social security measures and/or on the benefits system and, rather than reaching referral agencies, the food bank would be their first contact.
- Ability to give different vouchers from the ones given to the referral agency (such as takeaway vouchers)

Key learnings:

- All the interviewees spoke of the challenge in making a choice that should be taken by a competent referral agency. It was highlighted that creating boundaries for assessment (for example, on frequency) is fundamental for the mental health of the food banks' staff.
- Being able to provide immediate support without having to rely on a food parcel option was useful.

For Further Consideration

While shopping vouchers can provide greater dignity, choice and empowerment to people who are experiencing food insecurity, there are a number of issues with this approach that should be considered.

1. Storing vouchers

Many of our members have suggested that storing vouchers is very similar to storing cash and involves similar issues and risks. Considerations should include:

- A place to store vouchers safely.
- If there is an insurance policy, does this limit the number of vouchers that can be stored at once?
- A risk assessment both if vouchers are kept on-site or at a staff member's home.

2. Purchasing vouchers

Organisations interviewed for this briefing either **purchase pre-made shopping vouchers** from supermarkets or **create their own voucher scheme**.

Some points to consider for organisations purchasing shopping vouchers:⁴

- People's proximity to a supermarket and accessibility needs.
- People's choice of shop/s.
- Can the shopping vouchers be redeemed on the supermarket's website and would the person qualify for free home delivery?
- Can vouchers be purchased in cash at the local supermarket or is it necessary for the food aid provider to have a debit or credit card to purchase the vouchers online?

For organisations considering establishing their own voucher scheme:

⁴ See the final page of this briefing for a comparative list of UK supermarkets and information on how to purchase their shopping vouchers.

- One of the interviewees approached different local food businesses by asking whether they would have been interested in running a food voucher scheme in collaboration with the food bank. They found this helps divert resources into the local economy and possibly give increased access to more culturally appropriate food choices.
- It is crucial to have a conversation with the businesses redeeming the vouchers to ensure discretion on their part when vouchers are redeemed. All shop staff should know not to question people or increase stigma and to make the transactions very discreet.
- A diversity of businesses should be picked to ensure that people can access more culturally appropriate food.
- Some members suggested that having a system in place (printing, stamping, numbering) is useful to reassure donors who see vouchers as prone to fraud, and for accountability and monitoring purposes.

3. Redeeming shopping vouchers

Every supermarket or local store will have a different process for redeeming vouchers, such as whether you can use a part of the voucher or need to use the full amount in one transaction, restrictions on sale of certain items, and how long vouchers are valid. If a member is creating its own voucher scheme it is important to consider carefully and agree with the local store:

- Whether the voucher will have to be redeemed before a certain date.
- If the local store will accept a partial spending of the voucher or whether the voucher should be redeemed fully at once.

4. Finding funding for shopping vouchers and communicating with funders

The rise of cash donations, in place of food, in the early stages of the pandemic was a catalyst for some organisations starting to use shopping vouchers. Often financial donations were made in place of food donations. Now that lockdown is lifting, there is a concern that funders and donors will be less willing to continue to provide flexible cash donations. However, one organisation found that, after communicating through social media and press releases why they think vouchers are more dignified, they were able to attract significant funds to finance this.

There are some funding and grants that are not specifically ring-fenced for buying food.

5. Restricting voucher use

There is a sense that it is easier to attract funding for vouchers and gift cards that provide some reassurance to the funder or donor that the money will be used to only purchase food. 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. However, this should be balanced against the purposes of the support in the first instance. Arguably, restricting vouchers based on these concerns might risk weakening their impact of empowering through choice.

Conclusion

IFAN is committed to a cash first approach to poverty and food insecurity. Our member organisations are working with partners to support benefit uptake strategies and reduce the barriers people face in accessing all their financial entitlements. IFAN believes that all existing financial entitlements and support to maximise income should be exhausted before a person is referred for charitable support whether that is offered in the form of food parcels or shopping vouchers. Although shopping vouchers might represent a less stigmatising form of support than a food parcel, their provision still risks normalising stop gap provision as opposed to statutory cash payment support for a person facing financial crisis. When shopping vouchers are used it's vital that they are not seen as a long-term solution to poverty and food insecurity but rather as a potentially preferable alternative to an emergency food parcel if administered appropriately.

List of supermarkets selling vouchers and related information:

Store	Can buy in store	Can buy online	Where to buy online	Can buy multiple vouchers online at once	E-voucher / physical voucher available online	Voucher Value	Limit on quantity of vouchers you can purchase at once	Can bulk buy	Link to buy in bulk
Asda	Yes	Yes	cards.asda.com/gift-cards	Yes	Both	£5 - £100	3	Yes	https://www.asdaforbusiness.co.uk/
Aldi	Yes	Yes	www.aldi.co.uk/gift-cards	Yes	Both	£10 - £100 (e-voucher), £5 or £10 (physical)	30 for e-vouchers, no limit for physical vouchers	Yes (pay in BACS)	contact: vouchers@aldi.co.uk
Tesco	Yes	Yes	www.tescogiftcards.com	No	Just e-voucher	£5 - £150	1	Yes (Must be registered charity)	www.tescoforbusiness.com/gift-cards
Morrisons	Yes	Yes	morrisonshstar.com/store?locale=en-gb	Yes	Both	£10 - £250	None (but total value of order can't exceed £500)	Yes	https://morrisonshstar.com/login/login (Takes 10 mins to sign up and 24-48 hours to process. Complete every line of application or it may be delayed. If you need support you can contact Darren Cleeve: 0203 747 2385, darren.cleeve@bhnetwork.com).

Sainsburys	Yes	Yes	sainsburysgiftcard.co.uk	No	Just e-voucher	£5 - £250	1	Yes	Call to order over the phone (specify you mean Sainsbury's as this number also does Argos vouchers): 0345 640 0889. For physical cards
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