



CASH FIRST: THE LCC PILOT

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INTRODUCTION

The Legendary Community Club (LCC) is a community organisation set up last summer to support families and young people in Lewisham with food packages and lunches. We soon started to campaign for better support for families in financial difficulty on top of distributing food. As a member of the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) we are keen supporters of a cash first approach to food insecurity [1]. It became very clear through our work that giving money directly to families, in place of food packages or even shopping vouchers, would directly reduce financial hardship. People unable to afford food know how to manage their own finances and make their own choices just like everyone else. Income-based solutions address poverty whereas food packages act like a sticking plaster on a financial crisis.

However, charitable food aid provision has become normalised in the UK, and, so too, the notion that people struggling with food poverty are not capable of making their own choices about how to spend money. In order for LCC to be able to promote a cash first approach to food insecurity in Lewisham to the local authority, we realised it would be vital to be able to demonstrate the impact of giving out cash instead of food packages. We ran a small project involving 7 families who usually received food packages from our organisation and this report details our findings [2].

PREFERENCES FOR CASH, FOOD PACKAGES OR VOUCHERS

Although participants found the food packages helpful, there was a clear preference for cash over food packages. The findings and themes around the experience of cash are described in the next section, and include choice & autonomy, flexibility, and room to experiment.

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“So the cash is more helpful for me [than packages] because I can buy what I need exactly.” - P4

“Even the last four weeks [of cash], the difference it's made. It's been good.” - P7

“It kind of eased the...eased the financial pressure” - P3

“The cash was better” - P5

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The main themes of participants experiences were choice & autonomy, flexibility, and room to experiment. Each of these themes will be described in turn below, including a section on how the themes are linked.

FLEXIBILITY

The flexibility of cash allowed people to shop around to get the best deals or find items elsewhere that were out of stock at one shop. This meant people could get more food for the same money, and as one participant explained meant that the money used to purchase food package ingredients could be used more effectively. This ability to shop around was particularly important in allowing people to cater for the specific needs of the family, such as buying allergy-safe foods or culturally appropriate foods, which food packages could often not cater for. With food vouchers, people are usually restricted to main supermarkets (often there were issues with using the vouchers at the tills) which meant they could not shop around to save, making it difficult if shops had no allergy-safe milk in stock for example.

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“So instead of the food shop being like, okay, we've got this food [from package], but we still need to go and buy food cause [child]'s allergy... We can just buy all the food in one. So we were able to do more with the money” - P5

P2: “Yeah, well imagine you get a Tesco voucher, and you go to Tesco's but Tesco's...like obviously your kid's got allergies. My kid's got allergies. Tesco doesn't have my son's milk, which happens a lot. So then...”

P1: “So you need to go Lidl's.”

P2: “...you have to go Sainsbury's, Lidl's, everywhere else. But then the voucher doesn't work.”

P1: “Changing the voucher, you can only do it once.”

The flexibility of cash also meant people could budget across their needs for a particular week, for example if the child needed new shoes for school or they needed to pay for more gas or electric.

“Sometimes I will do shopping, or one week I might not need shopping...and I need gas, or...you could use it for whatever you needed.” - P1

“You know, I kind of use that money in another area...which was really helpful because, you know, I’ve got bills to pay and things like that.” - P3

Being able to shop around and budget across different needs eased some of the juggling and financial pressure participants often talked about feeling. One person talked about how they did not need to borrow from others that month, which felt good, and reduced worry:

“Yeah, so I felt like it allowed me to be able to have a clean slate. So I was like, okay, I don't owe anyone this month when I get my benefits. When I get my benefits and I won't give anybody anything and that felt good, you know?” - P7

“It's like, you know when you're juggling? I didn't have to juggle as much.” - P3



CHOICE & AUTONOMY

Linked to the flexibility of cash, people were not only able to buy the specific kinds of foods they needed, such as allergy-safe milk, but the specific foods they wanted and liked. Some people found they didn't like some of the foods in the food package, which meant they gave some away so it wouldn't go to waste.



“It was useful for me because my kids they don't eat everything. So in the package most of the things I share with my friends. So the cash is more helpful for me because I can buy what I need exactly.” - P4

The autonomy to make their own food choices and budget across their needs allowed room for non-essentials and small spontaneous treats. Having the choice and autonomy to buy what you wanted and give your child treats also appeared to ease the psychological impact of poverty, as one participant describes below:

“So it mentally it felt good to not have to be, you know, reliant on other people's pocket as much. I'm crying because I'm angry. It's not even sad but just want to get myself out of the situation. So yeah, it was helpful in that way too, mentally. And like even when we come to go pick up the money, sometimes I'll bring him with me. And he'd be like, oh, mum, can we get ice cream today? And I'd be like, yeah son! You know, I feel good for like, I could get him something that he wants. And not just the necessities. Something outside of what I'm budgeting every month” - P7

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ROOM TO EXPERIMENT

In some families, the additional cash gave children the room to learn to budget, shop around, and cook new recipes themselves. One parent suggested that, although they did cook new foods with the food package, the cash was more motivating for the child than food packages as they were able to choose what recipe they wanted to make and buy the specific foods they needed for it.

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“It's giving them more incentive really to come home and cook. And to be in the kitchen to do something different than to be sitting there on their phone. It encourages them to want to be in the kitchen to discover new recipes” - P6

For this mum, she now feels more able to trust her son and give him autonomy in the kitchen *“Yeah, so all those things I can trust him now to do.”*. Another described how their child was learning how to budget in supermarkets and understand best value for money.

“There would be £1.49 for a small mince, but it's £3 for a big one, but he's [child] worked out the big one works out more, so he'll be like “let's get a big mince”. And [child] will make a lasagna and a chilli for dinner. Or a spag bol and Backlava, because they like to cook Turkish. So it it worked out a lot easier.” - P5

In one family, having the cash available also meant the children were able to go to the shop to top up the gas meter or get additional ingredients they might need for cooking with, without having to wait for their parent to get home from work.

“And of the ways that was quite useful to us is when I never went shopping that week and I left the money in the cupboard and I would run out of gas I went... “Yeah, just get £5 or £10 from out the cupboard”. Before,...if it was on emergency and we had run out, it'd be “Oh I'll be home in about 10 minutes 5 minutes”. So that was useful because it was there.” - P6



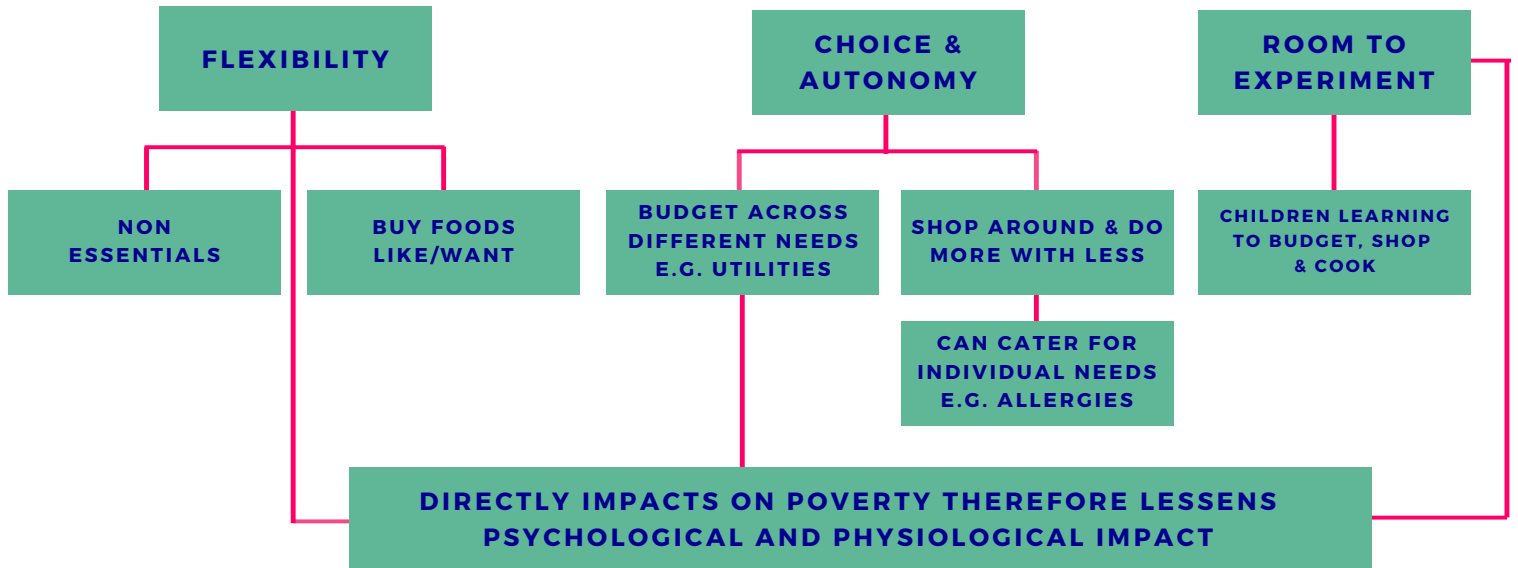
The room to experiment and be creative was psychologically and educationally positive for the children. The flexibility the cash provided appeared to create a safety net which enabled one parent to allow their children to experiment as it didn't matter as much if the experiment (i.e. a new recipe) didn't work out, thus have a positive psychological impact.

LINKS BETWEEN THEMES

Links between themes are illustrated in Figure 1 and described in the sections above. The main links are:

- The flexibility of cash enables choice & autonomy and room to experiment.
- A few different aspects of the experience of cash linked into easing the psychological impact of poverty:
 - Choice & autonomy – through things like being able to treat your child, and being able to choose what you like (not just accept what you've given even if you don't like it).
 - Budgeting across different needs – less juggling and worry, and a reduction in the need to borrow from others.
 - Room to experiment – This goes both ways. Being able to experiment & be creative is positive for children, which in turn is positive for the parents to facilitate. Having more money creates an environment where this can happen as it reduces parents worry about not having enough for essentials.

SUMMARY



CONCLUSION

The interview results were very similar to what the families had predicted – that cash would provide more choice, less waste and better budgeting opportunities. Overall, the results suggest that participants found the food packages helpful, there was a clear preference for cash over food packages. The results from the questionnaires indicate a general trend towards increased material wellbeing during the pilot scheme and that there was no evidence of harm.

Notes of methodology

Design:

A mixed methods design was used to meet the goals of the pilot. This meant that both quantitative (data from questionnaires)

and qualitative data (what participants say in interviews) were gathered. Participants completed questionnaires over three time points, once four weeks before the trial started and again at the beginning of the trial (baseline). At this point each participant was given £36 in cash in replacement of their food package, this continued for four weeks. This amount was chosen because the price of LCC's weekly food package for an average family was calculated as £36 (based on price comparison's using a website of a big supermarket). At the end of the trial the questionnaires were completed again and an interview (either individual or group) was held with each participant. The interview was recorded transcribed, anonymised and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2014). Each participant was given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form prior to starting the trial and prior to the interviews.

Recruitment

Initially questionnaires were given out to all the families we work with which included questions about how they managed during the pandemic, financially and emotionally and included an opt-in question about the pilot for those living on a particular estate (This was because we were able to secure a small amount of funding for the pilot from two contractors - Mulalley and Equans as part of their social value for this estate). In total 8 families expressed an interest to take part, from here each person was called to discuss more details and we met with 7 of the 8 families to talk about the idea for the pilot, the suggested measures and ideas for interview questions.

The interview questions planned for the end of the trial were co-created based on the participants' suggestions. Participants identified as female, Black British (3), white British (4) and white Polish (1).

Ethical considerations

All participants were aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and that not participating would not risk the food aid they might usually receive from LCC. The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct and the Helsinki ethical principles informed our thinking during throughout the pilot process. The potential impact of families benefit entitlement was researched and Lewisham Citizens Advice clarified that any entitlement should not be impacted given the nature of and sums involved. Upon the advice of Citizens Advice we advised participants that they should inform the DWP but that the pilot would not impact on their entitlements.

Authors

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Acknowledgement

Thank you to the families working alongside us on designing and delivering the pilot and all the team at LCC including its founder Alexandra McMillan.

END NOTES

[1] IFAN's infographic explains a cash first approach to food insecurity - ifanuk.org/infographic or [https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/bf9f4bfb-abfc-4c08-b2e6-a3a04a27a8b4/IFAN Infographic \(1\).pdf?id=3713853](https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/bf9f4bfb-abfc-4c08-b2e6-a3a04a27a8b4/IFAN%20Infographic%20(1).pdf?id=3713853)

[2] As this was a small-scale pilot involving seven participants, nothing definitive can be taken from any quantitative data. However the results from a financial well being scale suggest a general trend for higher satisfaction scores over the pilot scheme. Well-being scores (WEMWBS) were mixed across different individuals, and probably reflects some of the different, individual pressures that people struggling financially face week-to-week, though it could just mean that this isn't the most useful questionnaire. Importantly, the scores do suggest that the pilot did not cause any psychological harm to participants.