

COVID-19 learning and reflections: IFAN members reflect on doubling of need for food parcels in Scotland since last year



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

The [latest data from Scotland](#) revealed that after a sharp increase in need for emergency food parcels during April and May 2020, independent food banks continued to distribute more than twice as many parcels in June and July than during the same months in 2019.

In the context of a sustained doubling of food aid provision since the start of the pandemic, IFAN asked its members in Scotland to reflect on what these figures meant for their work in communities:

- How had food banks coped during this time?
- What were their thoughts about what was to come in the coming months?

This briefing is a summary of responses from eight independent food banks operating in six local authority areas in Scotland, including urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Further lessons are included from independent food aid providers operating throughout Scotland.

Despite the challenges of adapting and responding to the extraordinary increase in need for their services during the early months of the pandemic, IFAN members mostly reported being able to cope well as a result of a corresponding increase in support from communities, local authorities and the Scottish Government. Short-term support included:

- increased availability, accessibility and flexibility of funding that enabled food banks to invest in staff time, purchase the food they needed (including fresh fruit, veg, dairy and meat) and distribute supermarket vouchers instead of or alongside food parcels;
- increased availability of new volunteers while local funding and national support schemes were in place.

Looking ahead, however, food banks are deeply concerned that they are headed for a 'perfect storm': further pressure on people's finances with the end of the furlough scheme, continued job losses and reduced hours, increased winter fuel costs and uncertainty of a 'No Deal Brexit' at the same time that volunteers are feeling overworked and overwhelmed with no reprieve in sight.

For those on the frontline, the message is clear – food aid is not what people need to overcome this crisis, and the community and voluntary sector cannot be left responsible for meeting people's essential needs.

Adapting and responding to increased need

When lockdown began in March, food banks across Scotland braced for what they expected would be a surge in need for their support.

At the same time that thousands of people were suddenly at risk of not being able to access food and other essentials, and guidance was issued to stay at home to stay safe, food bank staff and volunteers worked quickly to adapt their services to entirely new circumstances. This required food bank teams to change how they source, sort, parcel and distribute food safely within government guidelines, while many experienced volunteers had to step back and new volunteers needed to be trained. In particular, the first weeks of lockdown required incredible effort to make changes to their services and support people in their communities while local authorities determined how to respond and before initial funding was rolled out.

"The last five months have been a busy challenging time for food banks and many other charitable organisations that have stepped up to help during this COVID pandemic. This has truly highlighted how adaptable voluntary organisations have been and how quickly they were able to mobilise and help those in their local communities in a time of crisis. We are so grateful to the amazing volunteers who worked so hard in order to allow us to keep supporting those in need in such difficult circumstances."

Increased and flexible funding

Many food banks welcomed the additional funding that was quickly made available by funders and the Scottish Government, the low level of administrative hurdles involved and the increased flexibility to use the funding in a way that responded to local context.

Flexible funding has enabled some organisations to hire additional staff or increase staff hours to compensate for the loss of experienced volunteers during this time: "We coped by being able to access funding to increase staff hours. Otherwise we would have found it very difficult as many of our volunteers took a step back due to their age or health conditions."

Receiving financial donations from individuals, businesses and churches – instead food donations – has meant that some food banks were able to purchase and distribute fresh fruit, veg, meat and dairy to supplement food parcels or offer people supermarket vouchers alongside or instead of food parcels to enable greater choice.¹

"We are getting a lot of monthly donations by standing order, direct debit and other methods such as phone donations."

"We received funding from the Scottish Government Supporting Communities fund, along with several donations, which we used to purchase supermarket vouchers. During the time our office buildings were closed to the public, the vouchers allowed us to continue to provide for our community members who were able to choose the food and essentials they needed."

¹ For more information, see IFAN's briefing: [Use of shopping vouchers instead of or alongside food provision](#) (September 2020).

Practical support and volunteers

In some cases, local authorities offered practical support, such as use of vehicles or buildings to move their operations to larger premises that would facilitate social distancing: “We also only coped because the council allowed us to use one of their empty council buildings to work from as our own base is too small to work safely in during Covid.”

Public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have affected who and how people could volunteer in community-based settings. Many experienced volunteers were suddenly required or expected to stay home, while many other people came forward to lend their support. Thousands of volunteers have continued to work throughout the pandemic to purchase, collect, sort, stack, parcel and distribute food to people who have struggled to access basic essentials.

New volunteers were often young people or those who had more time to share due to being furloughed. In particular, many food aid providers were able to change to or expand a parcel delivery model with the support of volunteers with cars who were normally at work. This fresh influx of volunteers was a welcome but temporary reprieve for some food banks as schools started in August and people began returning to work.

Concerns about what lies ahead

Food aid providers across Scotland have raised concerns about what the coming months will hold for them and the people who are already struggling to afford the food they need. Some have described the next few weeks and months as a ‘perfect storm’ – the combination of the end of the furlough scheme, continued job losses and reduced hours, increased winter fuel costs, uncertainty of a ‘No Deal Brexit’ and volunteers being overworked and overwhelmed with no reprieve in sight.

Increased financial insecurity

Even though many food banks continued throughout the summer to distribute [many more food parcels per month](#) than in previous years, they anticipate a further significant rise in need when the furlough scheme ends in October.

“The uncertain financial situation, and in particular the ending of the Furlough Scheme in October and potential job losses, is very concerning and an additional contributory factor to what looks like being a very difficult winter.”

Many people who have approached food banks for support since March have done so for the first time, including those who were receiving 80% of their wages while furloughed. The influx of new people seeking support demonstrates the pressure that household incomes have been under even while the furlough scheme has been providing an important level of support. It is also a warning of the severity of what is to come.

“We have seen many people register with us over the last few months who have never used a food bank before but have reached crisis point due to the effects of COVID. We anticipate that the economic downturn caused by the pandemic is going to continue to affect many households over the coming months and only see the demand for food banks increasing for the foreseeable future.”

Widespread economic challenges will be combined with increased heating and electricity costs as winter approaches, which always places additional pressure on people who are struggling to make ends meet: “As we move towards the winter months, when there are greater competing demands on scarce financial resources by both food and heating, we anticipate an increase in demand again, as we do every year.”

Initial support winding down

Since March, a variety of measures have been put in place by local authorities to support people to access food, including:

- shielding boxes, sometimes supplemented by additional fresh items
- shopping support for those who could afford food, but could not access the shops (e.g. self-isolating, or because online shopping was unavailable or unaffordable)
- Free School Meal replacements for eligible families (e.g. supermarket vouchers, direct cash payments, food deliveries, food collection)
- food parcels distributed by community and voluntary sector (e.g. community groups that refocused their work with the support of temporary funding, housing associations, new food banks and food aid providers, etc)

All of these initiatives are likely to have contributed to a temporary ‘buffer’ for food banks that existed prior to the pandemic. This may have been direct, by supporting people who were and may continue to be experiencing financial insecurity, or indirect, because the food provided was shared with friends and family who were not eligible or because it did not suit the person’s needs. As these measures have drawn to a close, independent food banks have raised concerns that they will be likely to see even more requests for their support.

“I am concerned that if there is a second lockdown and shielding and vulnerable people are unable to go out to the shops then this will have a massive impact on foodbanks as [local authority] are not anticipating doing another food box scheme. If the government also doesn't provide food this will cause us significant problems.”

“I get the impression that some of the local pop up food aid agencies are now winding down [which will put more pressure on our service].”

Furthermore, some food banks are concerned that as their staff and volunteers begin suffering from overwork and overwhelm, the community is also beginning to experience ‘compassion fatigue’.

“Lost many of our new volunteers and some of our previous ones have not returned. Struggling to maintain deliveries as drivers and reliable afternoon volunteers are difficult to obtain.”

“Loss of donations – harvest giving from schools and churches is not likely to exist unless it is translated into money. Recent trolley drop donations over a 3 day period provided ¼ tonne as opposed to 1 ¼ tonne pre-Covid.”

The rise in infections in the community and government restrictions mean that more people are self-isolating and / or are unable to reach shops beyond their immediate area, meaning the price of their shopping is likely to be higher.

Lessons for next steps:

Despite their agility to adapt and respond during the initial stages of this crisis, independent food aid providers are calling for the Scottish Government and local authorities to learn from the first stages of the pandemic and invest in strategies that will do more than provide food to people who are struggling financially. Food bank teams are clear that their services are not what will help people overcome the long, uncertain winter ahead.

The Independent Food Aid Network welcomes the Scottish Government's [renewed commitment](#) to a 'cash-first approach' in its recent funding announcement to tackle financial insecurity. The £10 million allocation to continue free school meal support during the Christmas, winter and Easter holidays will provide reassurance to eligible families. Experience shows that when this is delivered as cash transfers to families, they have more autonomy and dignity to purchase the food of their choice and meet their family's needs. Moray Council's [Flexible Food Fund](#), which offered people facing financial hardship support with immediate costs and ensured they were accessing their full entitlements, is a helpful example of how local authorities can use the remaining £20 million that was previously held in reserve for the Scottish Welfare Fund to enable even more people to access cash when facing financial hardship.

Food aid is a temporary response to an emergency situation, and no one should be expected to accept this in the longer-term. Most of what made food banks able to respond to the [extraordinary rise in need](#) this spring cannot be counted on for a second lockdown. But more than that, food bank teams know that more of the same is not what is needed to address the challenges that face their communities. There is a clear need for longer-term solutions to the financial insecurity that drives the need for food aid, and food banks are calling for proactive steps to ensure their services are no longer needed.