



Would you like a food parcel or supermarket gift card?

Results from a trial testing what happens when you give people a choice of support in a food bank setting

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Foreword

By Nina Parmar, Head of Food Aid, Sufra

At Sufra, we meet people in crisis every day. Through over 13 years of experience, we know that food parcels, while providing vital emergency support, are no solution to poverty. Being involved in this research gave us the opportunity to measure with rigour the real difference that supermarket vouchers can make compared with food parcels, moving beyond our anecdotal experience to understand the impact on financial resilience, dignity, diet and wellbeing.

For us, the findings confirm something we see every day in our work: our service-users (we call them 'guests') know their own needs best. Supermarket vouchers gave people greater control over how they managed limited resources and gave them a sense of dignity and choice that food parcels could not. At the same time, this study is a reminder that emergency food aid, in any form, cannot solve the root causes of food insecurity. Low incomes, insecure work, unaffordable and inappropriate housing, debt and barriers to accessing our social security system all continue to drive people to seek help from food banks.

Short-term emergency support must be dignified, flexible and rooted in choice, but the real longer-term impact is made when support helps to change guests' circumstances and address the wider pressures that have brought them to crisis. This is why wraparound support is so important. Food or vouchers can provide immediate relief, but guests also need access to advice, advocacy, signposting and practical support that can help them stabilise their lives, increase income, reduce debt, improve housing situations and access the services and entitlements they are eligible for.

We hope this report helps food aid providers, local authorities, funders and policy makers think differently about how support is designed and delivered. It shows that trust, flexibility and choice can make a meaningful difference, particularly when they are connected to wider support.

For Sufra, the next step is to take the learning from this research and integrate it into our service design. As an organisation, we will continue to explore how choice-based emergency support can sit alongside stronger wraparound pathways, so that our services respond to immediate need while also creating more opportunities to improve guests' longer-term circumstances.

We are grateful to everyone who took part in the trial and shared their experiences so openly. Their voices should guide what comes next: a shift towards emergency support that is more dignified all while continuing the work to end the need for food banks altogether.



Nina Parmar, Head of Food Aid, Sufra

Summary

What is already known?

Food insecurity is a widespread problem in the UK. Over 2024-25, 6 million people lived in households experiencing food insecurity every month, and about 900,000 people used food banks every month. Food banks often struggle to serve the number of people who seek their assistance, though it is also clear that many people experiencing food insecurity do not use food banks at all. A mismatch between people's needs and the food aid provided from food banks may be one reason for low uptake.

Against this backdrop, local authorities, food banks, and other frontline services, are increasingly providing wider wraparound support, but also alternatives to in-kind food provision, such as cash transfers or supermarket gift cards (often referred to as vouchers). These forms of support enable people to choose and buy their food directly from supermarkets. Some pilot evidence suggests these alternatives to food parcels are a more dignified, effective and efficient way to respond to people's needs and preferences. Providing cash or vouchers may also be less resource-intensive for food banks, as they do not require the time and effort involved in preparing and distributing food parcels. But more evidence is needed to understand how giving people the option to receive supermarket vouchers instead of food parcels might make a difference to diets, health and wellbeing, and how food banks operate.

What did we do?

In partnership with a community-based organisation, Sufra, we spent 10 months running a research trial in their food bank, which is based in borough of Brent in north-west London. Participants joined the trial for 6 weeks. Standard practice in Sufra's food bank is to provide people referred with an entitlement to receive six pre-packed food parcels. During the trial, participants were either randomly placed in a group who just got food parcels as usual (we called this group the "Food Parcel Group") or a group we called the "Choice Group": this group was given a choice to either continue to receive food parcels or instead, to receive supermarket vouchers.

We then examined how many people in the Choice Group chose to receive supermarket vouchers instead of food parcels, and we compared how food insecurity changed over the six weeks, between the Food Parcel Group and the Choice Group. We also examined if how often people reported eating fruit and vegetables differed between groups over time and if there were changes in how often people were able to meet their food preferences. The types of food and non-food items acquired by the Choice and Food Parcel Groups during the study were also examined.

To find out more about participants' experiences over the trial, we conducted interviews with them to ask about what it was like to receive food parcels or supermarket vouchers. Our process evaluation team also did another set of interviews, this time with food banks staff as well as food bank users, to find out how difficult it was to make these changes in the food bank and if they thought it was a good idea.



What did we find out?



Overall, results for the Choice Group were better than for the Food Parcel Group.

- In the Choice Group, almost everyone chose to receive a supermarket voucher instead of continuing to receive food parcels (97%).
- In the middle of the trial, food insecurity was reduced by 21 percentage points in this group compared to people in the Food Parcel Group.
- The advantage of vouchers over food parcels in relation to food insecurity wasn't observed by the end of the trial, but both groups had a significant reduction in food insecurity from where they started.
- The Choice Group also had a significant increase in how often they ate vegetables throughout the week compared to the Food Parcel Group, and they also experienced a rise in being able to meet their food preferences.

- People really appreciated and valued being offered the choice to receive a supermarket voucher, and the choices that supermarket vouchers enabled in terms of when to shop, how much to buy, and what to buy. This included the ability to buy other non-food essentials.
- Participants were acutely aware that the choice was only temporary and a part of the trial. At the end of the trial, and given the financial challenges participants were facing, food insecurity continued to be an ongoing experience for many.
- Offering vouchers instead of food parcels was less labour-intensive and was considered more efficient for both recipients and food banks.

What did we conclude?

There are many immediate benefits to offering people facing food insecurity the means to shop for food and other essentials themselves. Just like other forms of food aid, supermarket vouchers do not address the root causes of food insecurity. However, they do give people the means to better meet their food and non-food preferences.

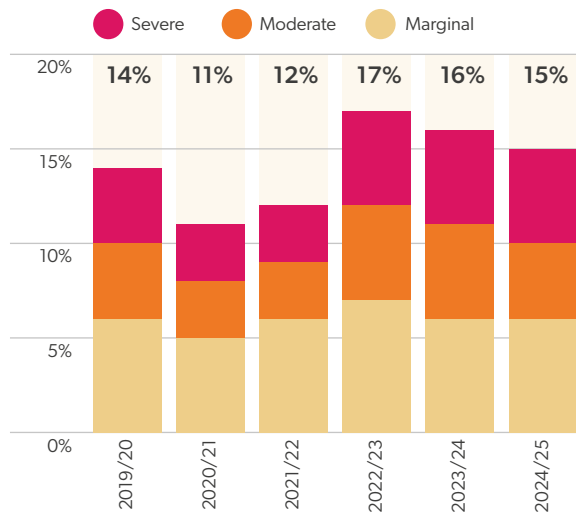
Background

Food insecurity (inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints) affects 1 in 10 households every month in the UK (Figure 1).¹ This rises to 1 in 6 when marginal experiences of food insecurity, such as worrying about not having enough food are included. Unemployment, disability, low incomes, low levels of savings, and debt are all well-established risk factors for food insecurity.^{2,3}

The provision of food aid in the form of “food parcels”, where bags of groceries are provided from food banks or other community and social service agencies, has become a normalised response to food insecurity in communities.

It was estimated that about 900,000 people lived in households supported by food banks each month in 2024-25, though these numbers are an underestimate because they do not include people who are unhoused or living in temporary accommodation.¹ Food banks have become a normalised form of support and many question whether the provision of in-kind food aid is the most effective way to help people experiencing insecure food access. And many more people experience food insecurity than those reached by food banks.⁴

Figure 1: Monthly prevalence of household food insecurity in the UK, 2019-20 to 2024-25.



Source: UK Family Resources Survey, Department for Work and Pensions

In 2023, an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ending the Need for Food Banks released the report “Cash or food? Exploring effective responses to destitution”.⁵ It gathered information from groups involved in responding to financial crises across the nation to develop recommendations around the best forms of crisis support. The recommendations emphasised a cash-first response. Since the report was released in 2023, we’ve seen an increasing number of local authorities offer cash or flexible supermarket gift card options to people seeking their assistance. We’ve also seen food banks pilot, and in some cases exclusively switch to, supermarket gift vouchers or cash provision (for examples see reference 6).

In January 2026, the Department for Work and Pensions released new guidance on the Crisis and Resilience Fund, which recommends that local authorities offer default cash-first crisis payments rather than food aid for people facing acute financial crisis.⁷

Despite these recommendations and growing interest in cash-first approaches, there can still be reluctance among food aid providers, local authorities and the general public: should people really be allowed to spend on what they want rather than being given food? And do they really prefer to shop themselves, rather than being given food directly?

These types of questions were the background to this project. As part of a wider research programme called SALIENT,⁸ we identified the need for more evidence on providing alternate forms of support in food banks. Previous trials in food banks have focused on improving the nutritional content of food parcels.^{9, 10} But we wanted to ask, what if instead, we give people the choice to shop for themselves, providing access to our current retail food system, just like most people have in the UK?

To do this project, we partnered with Sufra, a community organisation that, among other services, runs a food bank in the north-west London borough of Brent (see Box 1). When we started designing the project, Sufra was having to purchase a large volume of non-perishable foods to supplement the donated food they were receiving.

The storage of food, and packing and distributing food parcels every week, were taking up large amounts of their space. They were aware that their financial, space and people resources could potentially be better used to more effectively serve people seeking their support. Sufra wanted to try offering a different way of supporting people to get food, and wondered, first would people prefer to just be given a supermarket card instead of food parcels? And second, if they receive this form of support, are they better able to meet their needs? Up for trying something different and hosting a research trial, Sufra helped the research team to design the study and was supported by funding for the research to enable this trial to take place.

Box 1: About Sufra

Sufra is a community organisation in the London Borough of Brent (Figure 2). Sufra exists to prevent hunger, fight poverty and build a united, resilient community across Brent. They take a rights-based, holistic approach: food aid is a vital lifeline, but alone it cannot end food poverty, so they combine immediate relief with pathways from crisis to stability.

Their aims are to:

- Ensure no one goes hungry, regardless of background or circumstance.
- Uphold dignity through hospitality, choice and respectful support without discrimination.
- Address root causes via welfare advice, skills development, volunteering and advocacy.
- Embed environmental sustainability across their operations, from renewable energy use and food waste reduction through to their community food growing initiative.

They deliver these aims via an integrated food aid service that brings together food bank hubs, community kitchens, a cafe and shop alongside welfare advice, social activities and community events.

With over 220 referral partner agencies registered with them, and over 260 volunteers contributing more than 16,000 hours annually, they support around 14,000 people each year across all of their services, including families and people who are homeless and socially isolated.

Their mission is to fight poverty and build community by providing access to food, emergency support and impartial advice, alongside opportunities for volunteering and self-development. They campaign for fairer policies, amplify lived experience, and design and deliver services with the community that reduce dependency on emergency aid, so guests can move forward with dignity and hope.

Figure 2: Population information for Brent, data taken from 2021 Census. Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2021 and 2011 Censuses.



Residents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups



14.7%

Residents had a disabling long-term health condition or illness

56.2%

Residents aged 16 years of age or older were in employment



57%

Residents weren't born in the UK



4.5%

Residents aged 16 or older were unemployed

21.4% Muslim

38.8% Christian

15.6% Hindu

How Sufra's food bank works

Sufra is a member of the Independent Food Aid Network and runs a food parcel distribution service (food bank) from two sites. Its main site is a multi-purpose food hub. It sits in St Raphael's housing estate. Food parcels are distributed twice a week from its main hub (Tuesday and Thursday 11:00 to 15:00). Sufra also distributes food parcels from a satellite site at the Pakistani Community Centre.

Sufra operates a referral-based model of food bank. Their community services partners provide referrals. Once referred, clients (referred to as guests by Sufra) are entitled to receive six food parcels; they have an indefinite amount of time to receive these. Whilst they can come every week for a total of 6 weeks, many people do not come every week. Some people are also referred to have food parcels delivered or they can also be referred to receive the prepared meal service rather than bags of groceries. Once a guest has collected their six food parcels, they can seek another referral from Brent Hubs, however, a second or any subsequent referral then only entitles them to receive one food parcel a month.

At each food bank session, anywhere from 40-90 people come to collect food parcels for their household. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sufra's guest numbers were low enough to enable people to come into their building, have a cup of tea, and choose items they would like in their food parcel from a selected list. The pandemic resulted in a large increase in the numbers using their services and necessitated a move to pre-packed standardised food parcels. Their numbers have remained high. There are about 22 new referrals per week. They don't have enough space to enable people to come into the building. Pre-packed parcels have continued to be provided so that people receive these efficiently when the food bank is open.

What's in a Sufra food parcel?

Standardised dry goods, mostly purchased through supermarket wholesale.



Range of fresh donated foods surplus to grocery stores; delivered by surplus food redistributor.

In addition to the basic food items provided in pre-packed parcels, there is a selection of surplus fresh food items available to add to food parcels each week, but the nature and quantity of these food items vary.

Sufra has an advice service team. Food bank guests can call the service line on Mondays and Wednesdays to book an appointment. Signposting to services is also available.

Find out more about Sufra's work at:
www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk

Co-designing the trial

The SALIENT research programme aimed to use the best possible methods to understand what interventions work for people interacting with the food system in real life. One important element of study design is randomisation, which means assigning people or places to an intervention by chance. This makes it likely that the group who receives an intervention shares the same characteristics of the group who doesn't receive it. Without randomisation, it's hard to be sure whether any improvements are due to the intervention or simply because the groups were different to begin with. Thus, we set ourselves the challenge of running a randomised controlled trial in a food bank setting. We knew this would be difficult, so we spent a lot of time designing the trial with our partner and getting input from a variety of stakeholders, including Sufra staff and volunteers, community researchers, the general public, and people receiving support from Sufra. They provided input on the nature of the intervention (should it be supermarket vouchers, cash or something else?), how to ensure people would and could take part in the trial, and how to obtain the best measures of outcomes possible without placing too much burden on participants.

First, we asked for feedback on the idea of giving people money as our trial intervention, instead of vouchers for supermarkets. Some people didn't feel too sure about this. The food bank was concerned about the logistics of distributing cash, particularly the risks associated with holding money onsite and the possibility that recipients could become vulnerable to theft after receiving it. Whilst money transfers were considered, at the time of designing the trial, many services had user fees, and there were worries that recipients may not have the digital literacy required to redeem voucher codes at cash points. Supermarket vouchers were highly acceptable as an idea because they could be purchased directly from supermarkets and pre-loaded with funds, but also because they still enabled people to purchase a variety of items flexibly.



It was suggested that participants should not be randomised to receive a payment option without the option to choose food parcels instead. Offering a choice of support, given that people referred to Sufra's food bank were expecting to receive food parcels, was felt to be important. For some, food parcels may be preferred. By offering a choice to people, we would learn what form of support people preferred, and this was also important to our stakeholders.

Stakeholders also provided input on our study materials to ensure our questionnaires were as simple as possible and didn't take too long to complete. Sufra work with a very diverse community, and so we learned we would need to translate our materials and also work with real-time interpreters to be able to engage people who spoke a wide range of languages and who spoke limited English.

During co-design and in our first weeks of implementing the trial, we learned that connecting with people and having the opportunity to verbally tell them about the study was key, rather than just relying on the information materials. This was because people were often cautious engaging in the research, or unsure about what the research activities were in practice. We offered a friendly, casual space for people to talk about the study. During these discussions, researchers had the opportunity to build trust and rapport with people, identify and overcome barriers to study engagement. Often people coming to collect food parcels from Sufra wanted to come and go as quickly as possible. Getting people who are picking up food from a food bank to come in and find out about the study wasn't easy, and it was important that no one felt pressure to participate. Over the course of the study, we employed more researchers to help with recruitment and this team spoke a range of languages, enabling more opportunities to connect with people, alongside the use of interpreter services when required.



How the trial worked

From September 2024 to July 2025, the research team ran a randomised controlled trial in Sufra's food bank (see reference 11 for the registered protocol). Recruitment happened on a rolling basis. People who were newly referred to Sufra for six food parcels were invited to find out about the research by a member of Sufra staff. If people were interested in hearing more, the research team provided information about the study, either by text, phone call, or in-person discussions. If people indicated they wanted to take part, they completed a consent form and baseline questionnaire.

Participants were then randomised to one of two groups: the "Food Parcel Group" or the "Choice Group".

- The Food Parcel Group continued to receive Sufra's regular service, i.e. the offer to come to collect the rest of their six food parcels. They could come anytime to collect these, but no more than once a week.
- The Choice Group was offered a choice: they could continue to receive food parcels, or they could choose to receive supermarket vouchers instead. Participants in this group still had to come and collect vouchers, again anytime, but no more than once a week. They could choose vouchers that would enable them to shop at major supermarkets: Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, Morrison's, Aldi, Lidl, or other supermarkets that enabled vouchers to be purchased online and printed as a voucher. The monetary value on the card was matched to the estimated retail value of the foods that are provided in Sufra's food parcels. More details on what was provided are below.

Randomisation was participatory and transparent. Participants picked one of two concealed balls out of a bag, where a red ball put them in the Food Parcel Group and a blue ball offered them a choice of food parcel or supermarket voucher. By participating in this activity, participants could see that the group they ended up in was by chance and not the research team's decision.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire again after 3 weeks (at the study midpoint), and after 6 weeks (at the study endpoint). These questionnaires were intended to be completed over the period of time that participants had food parcels or vouchers available to them. In reality, some people took some time to complete the final questionnaire and may have been answering questions after they had received all of their food parcels or vouchers. Others didn't come to collect food parcels or vouchers every week, so still had some available to collect when they were completing their final questionnaire.

The main study questions were:

- When people referred to a food bank are given a **choice** between receiving standard food parcels or supermarket vouchers of equivalent value, what do they choose?
- Does providing people referred to a food bank a choice to receive either standard food parcels or supermarket vouchers **reduce food insecurity** after six weeks compared with people who are referred to a food bank who are given no choice? We also looked at this outcome after three weeks, in the middle of the intervention period.

Box 2: What do we mean by household food insecurity?

Around the world, surveys are used to learn about the health and well-being of populations and subgroups within populations. Survey questions are developed to specifically capture different types of health and wellbeing outcomes. One widely used set of questions, developed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, is the Food Insecurity Experience Scale. It asks questions about whether people have had different experiences that reflect insecurity around access and consumption of food.

We used these 8 questions to capture food insecurity over the course of the trial. Answering affirmatively to any of these questions is an indication of insecure access to food. But we used a commonly used threshold of having three or more experiences to capture moderate or severe food insecurity. This was our primary outcome measure.

The questions in this scale and used in this research were:

“During the last two weeks, was there a time when, because of a lack of money, you (or other adults in your household):

- **were worried you would not have enough food to eat?**
- **were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?**
- **ate only a few kinds of foods?**
- **had to skip a meal?**
- **ate less than you thought you should?**
- **ran out of food?**
- **were hungry but did not eat?**
- **went without eating for a whole day?**”

Source: openknowledge.fao.org/items/d98883c8-a6ba-4ad0-ace5-d8276972970e

Outcome measures

Food insecurity was measured by asking households eight questions about their experiences of running out of food, skipping meals, experiencing hunger and going without eating in the last two weeks because of a lack of money (see Box 2). If people answered three or more questions indicating these types of experiences, they were classed as experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity.

In addition to measuring food insecurity, we also asked questions about:

- How many times people ate fruit in the past week, ranging from none at all to more than once a day;
- How many times people ate vegetables in the past week, ranging from none at all to more than once a day;
- Whether or not they were able to always eat the kinds of food they want to eat (able to meet food preferences);

In addition, participants were asked to send photos of what they purchased or what they received in food parcels once during the study. This enabled us to look at what types of things were being purchased by those who selected supermarket vouchers during one week of the study and to compare their selections to what was being provided to people receiving food parcels.

To complement the quantitative data we collected on questionnaires, we also interviewed people to talk about their experiences of receiving these interventions and how they were impacted, from their perspective. Interviews were carried out with people allocated to the Food Parcel Group (n=11) and allocated to the Choice Group (n=20). This enabled experiences of the different forms of support they received over the trial period to be compared. Similarities and differences were identified.

Table 1: Value of supermarket cards provided in place of food parcels, with corresponding estimated value of food parcel provided to equivalent household size.

Household size	Estimated weekly retail value of Sufra food parcel contents	Weekly value loaded on supermarket cards
1	£25.97 non-perishables + £15.41 perishables bag = £41.38	£40.00
2-3	£38.74 non-perishables + £15.41 perishables bag = £54.15	£55.00
4-5	£49.91 non-perishables + £15.41 perishables bag = £64.82	£65.00
6-8	1 person parcel + 4-5 person parcel + £15.41 perishables bag = £91.29	£90.00
9+ people	2-3 person parcel + 4-5 person parcel + £15.41 perishables bag = £104.06	£105.00

There were other elements to the trial too. A team within the SALIENT consortium led a process evaluation, interviewing 20 people who were in the Choice Group to explore the acceptability of the intervention and its perceived impacts. They also interviewed the staff from the food bank team to find out about the implementation of the intervention. We share some findings from this evaluation here. Another team is conducting an economic evaluation, looking at the costs of implementing the offer of a choice of supermarket vouchers and how costs compared for running a food parcel service alone. The economic findings will be presented elsewhere.

Lastly, in this report, we also share six case studies. More detailed data from six participants' interviews and questionnaires are used to highlight the diversity of participants' experiences, with the interventions and more generally. Using data from their questionnaires and interviews together provide richer descriptions of their experiences. Some cases help illustrate the quantitative trial findings, others share experiences that deviated from the average outcomes observed. Names have been changed for all case studies.

What did people receive if they chose a supermarket card?

The monetary value of items provided in food parcels (shown in Table 1), including dry goods and surplus food items, were used to guide how much money was loaded onto supermarket vouchers. The aim was to provide a matched value to what would be received in a food parcel. Here, differences in outcomes could then be attributed to differences in the nature of what is purchased, rather than a change in the value of support.

People could choose what supermarket they received a voucher for with some exceptions where vouchers proved not to be reliable. No limits were imposed on how the gift card received could be used, however, in some cases, supermarkets had their own restrictions. For example, Asda gift cards can be used for online shopping but not to purchase petrol, whilst Tesco gift cards couldn't be used for online shopping but could be used for petrol. Vouchers were either handed out as physical gift cards or printed as bar codes from supermarket websites.

Who participated in the trial?

A total of 203 people participated in the trial. By random chance, 96 were allocated to the Food Parcel Group, and 107 were randomised to the Choice Group. There were 11 participants who only completed the baseline survey and didn't participate any further. This was more common among people who were in the Food Parcel Group. However, 91.7% of participants completed the final questionnaire.

Figure 3: Participant demographics



Some key characteristics of participants were:

- Most participants (90%) were between the ages of 26 and 64.
- 58% had children in their household
- Participants came from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, broadly reflecting the diversity of people living in Brent. Some were relative newcomers, but 43% had lived in the UK for 7 years or more, and 15.8% were born in the UK.
- 68% of participants were women.
- Over half of participants (55%) had a physical or mental health condition.
- 34% of participants had at least one adult in employment in their household.
- Almost all participants (96%) were experiencing some level of food insecurity at the start of the study; 83% were moderately or severely food insecure. Many were also struggling to keep up with household bills and/or debt payments.

Findings

Key finding 1:

When offered a choice, most people preferred supermarket vouchers over receiving food parcels.

- Of 107 people randomised to be offered a choice of food parcel or supermarket card, 98.1% (105 people) chose supermarket vouchers over continuing to receive food parcels
- 1 person switched back to parcels after choosing supermarket vouchers, so 97.2% (104 people) chose and continued to receive supermarket vouchers during the study.

In our qualitative interviews with participants, the reasons why people in the Choice Group chose supermarket vouchers were explored (everyone from this group interviewed made this choice). People really valued being offered the option to choose whether to have food parcels or supermarket vouchers. Being offered this choice increased their personal sense of dignity and agency. They also spoke about the multiple choices supermarket vouchers additionally offered them: what supermarket to choose, when to shop and how often, how much to buy at a time, and what to buy. None of these choices are provided through pre-packed food parcels.

We heard that being able to choose the foods they preferred was the huge benefit of the vouchers. This meant being able to cook and prepare foods they like, foods that were culturally appropriate, and foods that were good for their health. They also enabled them to select a range of non-food items such as baby products where needed. However, a downside was that when people had to buy non-food items that they needed, there was less money available to spend on food. It was also noted that due to high prices of food, supermarket vouchers sometimes did not stretch far enough.

The lack of choice was felt by people who received food parcels. While some people were happy with the food parcels they received from Sufra, many felt the contents of the food parcel were not suited to their food preferences or dietary needs. People talked about their non-food needs that could often not be met by the food bank, such as the need for hygiene and sanitary products, electrical equipment, clothing, and baby products. For example, amongst parents with young children, the inconsistent supply of nappies, baby formula and wipes was a limitation of food parcels. People also often commented on how heavy food parcel bags were to carry home, and on the overabundance of tinned food provided. Tinned foods were acceptable for some but were often not preferred because having food in tins was unfamiliar to people or because the contents were not to their taste. Receiving foods past “best before” dates was a concern for people receiving food parcels for taste, safety, and dignity reasons. Participants mentioned having to throw away expired foods or worry about the risks of consuming them.

People receiving food parcels were keen to express how grateful they were, however, even if they would have preferred supermarket vouchers. Some spoke positively about the quantity of fresh food received in food parcels, and some felt that the quantity of food provided in parcels in general was generous. Even if the foods provided did not meet their food preferences, participants shared they generally provided enough food to feed themselves and their families.

Case Study: Ahmed*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: severe food insecurity

End of study: severe food insecurity

Food Parcel Group

Ahmed is a father of three in his 40s. He had previously accessed support from Sufra many years ago, but returned recently due to difficulties managing some financial debts combined with rising living costs causing him to experience severe food insecurity. Although Ahmed is currently working, he described being under increasing financial pressure and hopes to increase his working hours to better support his family.

“...personally I’m struggling with debt so, I will be in touch with them (Sufra) and with National Debt Line”

Ahmed was randomly allocated to receive food parcels from Sufra. Although he was able to collect food parcels weekly, he did not always collect them regularly. He felt the food provided in the parcels did not meet the needs of his family. He explained that the parcels often relied on tinned foods and did not include enough fresh items such as fruit, vegetables, or meat. As a result, he would return many items that did not meet their needs and leave them at the food bank for others to use.

“ They rely a lot on tins... but I need other types of food... you cannot eat rice or pasta alone unless you have something with it.”

While the food parcels provided some support, and he appreciated the kindness of the Sufra volunteers, he felt the food provided was inconsistent and did not fully meet his household’s needs. This may be why Ahmed and his family continued to experience severe levels of food insecurity throughout the trial with no improvements.

*** All names of case study participants have been changed to protect anonymity.**



Key finding 2:

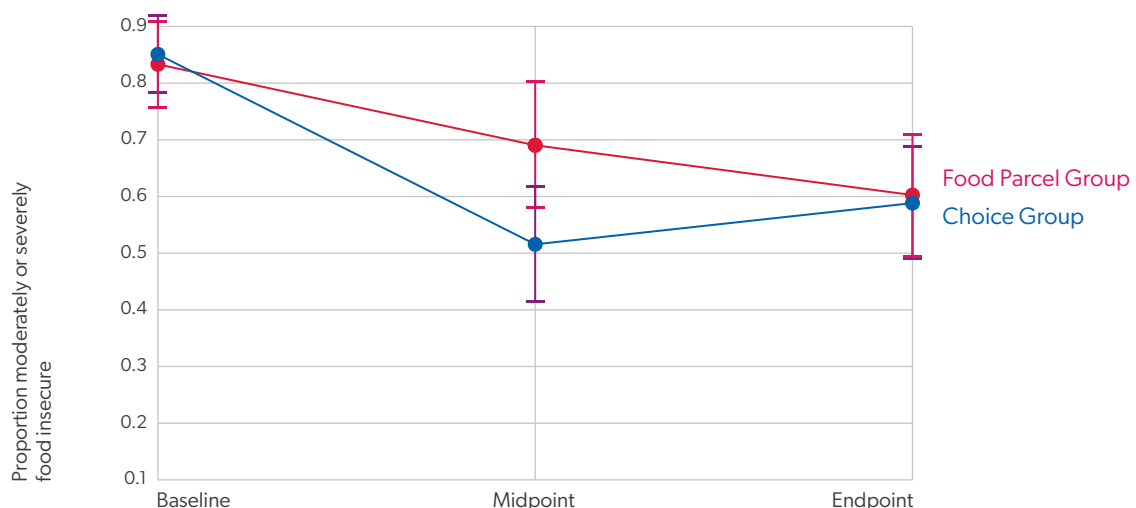
Midway through the intervention period, food insecurity was significantly lower in the Choice Group than in the Food Parcel Group.

“They said you can pick, and I picked the voucher, and I was really happy. The difference is like, voucher, and this it’s a big difference, when you got voucher you can go shopping; you can buy whatever dish you can eat, you know what I mean? I find it very easy than for this one, your own choice.”
(Participant in Choice Group)

When we compared trends in food insecurity between those offered a choice of a supermarket card with those not offered a choice (Figure 3), both groups improved, but the group given a choice had significantly lower food insecurity in the middle of the trial. The average within person reduction from baseline was 21 percentage points more than the Food Parcel Group, a big difference! This advantage wasn’t observed at the end of the trial, where both groups had similar levels of food insecurity, significantly reduced from baseline.

For people who have concerns that supermarket vouchers may not be used to buy food, we did not find reason to be concerned about this. People offered this choice had lower levels of food insecurity compared to the group given only food parcels in the first weeks of the trial, during the height of the intervention, and also experienced the same overall reduction in food insecurity by the end of the trial. This suggests that people in the Choice Group were directing their vouchers towards food in a way that reduced their food insecurity.

Figure 3: Moderate and severe food insecurity reduced more among people in the Choice group in the middle of the trial.



Case Study: Randal*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: no food insecurity

End of study: moderate food insecurity

Choice Group

Randal is in his 30s and lives alone. He came to Sufra after he stopped working to get treatment for an illness. At first, he was able to live off his savings, but as these ran out, he began to experience severe food insecurity.

“ It was one of the more lowest points I’ve ever been. ”

Randal described initially feeling hesitant about coming to Sufra as he felt he had “worked hard not to be in poverty” but was now in need of support. He also reflected on the stigma he felt around going to a food bank and worrying what other people might think.



Photo: © Martin Cleveland

“ I think the stigma part of it I think it’s just pure down to my own, I don’t know, maybe it’s vanity, isn’t it? Maybe it’s the fact that oh did I feel like I’m too good to go to a food bank or something, you know? ”

When Randal was randomly allocated to the Choice Group, he chose to receive supermarket vouchers. He described feeling pleased with this, as the vouchers gave him more choice over what he could eat and allowed him to buy healthier food and his favourite granola. He also preferred spreading the money from the voucher across several days and buying smaller everyday items. With this flexibility, Randal was no longer food insecure during the trial.

“ I was really happy that I got the blue ball, and I think I would have been a little bit upset (with the red ball) but I think that upset would have been like 10 minutes of being like Randal you’re being selfish, you’re getting food. ”

Towards the end of the trial, Randal was aware that his vouchers would be coming to an end and his wider circumstances had not changed. He began to adjust what he was buying and described becoming more disciplined in how he shopped, focusing on buying healthier foods first and only buying treats if he had money left over. The vouchers provided short-term support, and through Sufra, he found other types of food support in the area. But his food insecurity increased towards the end of the trial as he was still out of work and continuing to focus on his health, meaning he would still need support with accessing food.

However, it should be noted that during the interviews, some people shared doing things even when they were receiving supermarket vouchers to make the money stretch. They also saved some for future weeks. In some cases, this again meant cutting back on meals and eating less. Thus, while the vouchers offered some relief, it was clear that food insecurity was an ongoing experience for many participants too. Ultimately, our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that hardship persisted for both trial groups. Though there was evidence of people struggling significantly less in comparison to how they were doing at the start of the trial, around 60% of participants, regardless of the group they were in, were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity at the end of the study. Our interviews with participants highlighted ongoing financial struggles and the need for people to request further referrals for food parcels at the end of the study. This is because the causes of food insecurity (e.g. unemployment, barriers to employment, low incomes) often had not changed much over the course of the six weeks of the trial.

One example of this can be seen in the case study of Franco. Even though he shared how receiving supermarket vouchers benefitted him, he remained severely food insecure over the course of the trial. In contrast, while Sally experienced severe food insecurity at the start of the trial, but this was reduced to only marginal food insecurity over the trial. The vouchers supported her whilst she applied for Universal Credit, and then having Universal Credit in place at the end of the trial meant a significant change in her financial circumstances, and hopefully, a lasting exit from severe food insecurity.

It felt great to be honest to have a choice, to choose a food voucher over a food parcel. You know it just makes you feel as if, you know, you actually have the option to buy groceries that you actually need and that you're actually going to consume, and especially for people that have specific dietary requirements. Like for me, you know, having had gestational diabetes you know. I have to make sure that I'm incorporating a lot of fruit, vegetables, things like that into my diet. So you know, having a food voucher really allowed me to go a supermarket and then select those items that I know I need. (Participant in Choice Group)



Case Study: Franco*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: severe food insecurity

End of study: severe food insecurity

Choice Group

Franco is a man in his 30s. When he first came to Sufra, he was homeless and struggling to access food. He was referred to Sufra through the job centre and had previously tried to access food through other food banks and support services, but had been unsuccessful. Franco was randomly allocated to the Choice Group and chose to collect supermarket vouchers.

“ It was difficult for me to be homeless and to stay hungry for a long time. If the Sufra food was not there, I would have died. ”

Whilst Franco was on the trial, his housing situation improved, and he was able to move into a hostel. However, he described that in the hostel, there were limited cooking facilities. In this context, the supermarket vouchers were more appropriate than food parcels, as they allowed him to purchase ready meals and ready-to-eat snacks that did not require storage or preparation. Having access to supermarket vouchers meant that Franco was able to eat despite his circumstances.

Although Franco's food insecurity remained severe throughout the trial, the vouchers provided a consistent way for him to access food during a time which he was experiencing significant uncertainty in both his housing and food situation. While this did not lead to improvements in his diet quality, it allowed him to maintain access to food and provided a level of stability and dignity during an otherwise highly uncertain time. Franco continues to seek support with housing and work.



Case Study: Sally*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: marginal food insecurity

End of study: marginal food insecurity

Choice Group

Sally is in her 50s and lives with her husband, who is retired and has a long-term health condition. She had been working at the same company for over 15 years before being made redundant. As the sole earner in her household and a full-time carer for her husband, she found herself struggling to afford food. When she first came to Sufra to collect her food parcel, Sally found that the food parcels did not meet her needs and lacked fresh foods.

“ At first, when I went to the food bank, I wasn’t happy with what I received. ”

When Sally joined the trial, she was randomly allocated the choice between continuing with her food parcel or receiving a supermarket voucher instead. When she was offered the choice, she opted for the supermarket vouchers and described feeling more positive about the support, as it allowed her to choose the foods she was used to buying and manage her budget more flexibly.



She explained how she would spread the vouchers across multiple shopping trips and prioritise buying fresh fruits and vegetables alongside larger portions of dried food to help reduce costs, allowing her to make the vouchers stretch even further.

“ I was so grateful for the voucher... I was so happy to go and choose the things we love. ”

During the trial, Sally’s food insecurity reduced from severe to marginal, as the vouchers allowed her to access food that better met her household’s needs, and to manage her spending. The vouchers also eased some financial pressure after her unexpected redundancy and provided her with the time to apply for Universal Credit. By the end of the trial, Sally had started to receive her benefit payments and noted that although this would not match her previous income, it helped ease her household food insecurity.

“ It’s not going to be a big difference [receiving Universal Credit payments] but at least it can help to put the gas on, and the lights. ” Photo: © Martin Cleveland

Although the supermarket vouchers initially helped ease Sally’s food insecurity, she noted that her budgeting skills and meal planning helped extend her vouchers. In addition, it was her eligibility for Universal Credit which provided more stable, longer-term financial support beyond the supermarket vouchers which helped to her exit moderate and severe food insecurity, even once the intervention had come to an end.

Photo: © Martin Cleveland

Key finding 3:

The group offered supermarket vouchers had more frequent vegetable consumption and were better able to meet their food preferences.

Participants in the Choice Group saw larger improvements in **the frequency of** their vegetable consumption and in being able to eat their preferred foods compared to those only provided food parcels over the trial (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Even though vegetable consumption did not increase among food parcel recipients, and they were unlikely to always be able to eat foods they preferred, some participants receiving food parcels did receive foods that worked for them, like Samuel in the case study below. This showcases how for some, food parcels were OK, even if they weren't the preferred option of food aid.

“Actually by luck, I got vouchers instead of food parcels so that was a very good experience because I had the authority to buy fresh and good food for myself and any time. You know, I save some of the vouchers and still now I am buying somethings from that, that was very good because I had the authority and choice to buy good food like other people from the Tesco.”
(Participant in Choice Group)



Figure 5: People offered the choice of supermarket vouchers were much more likely to be able to get the foods they wanted to eat than those only given food parcels.

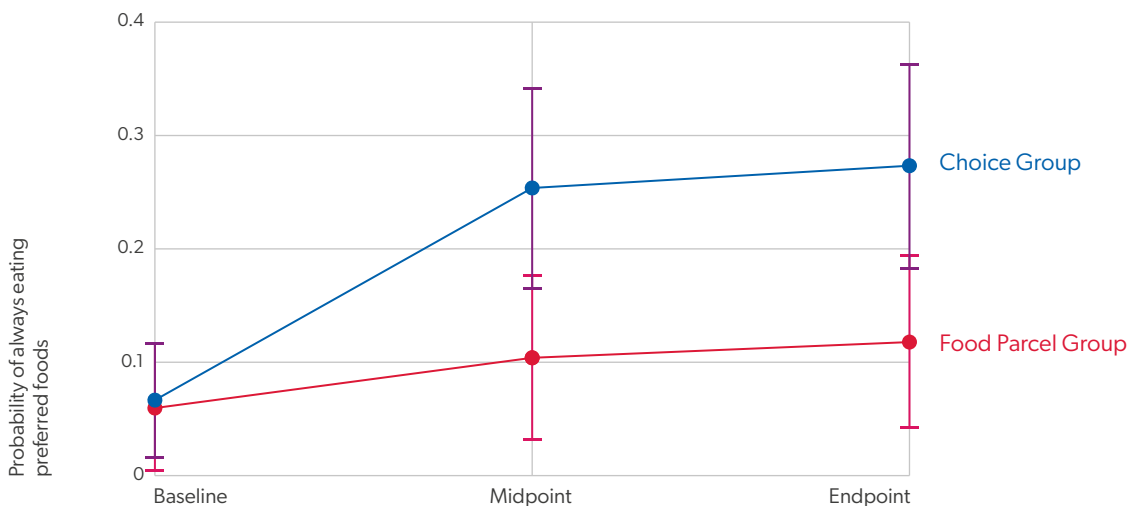
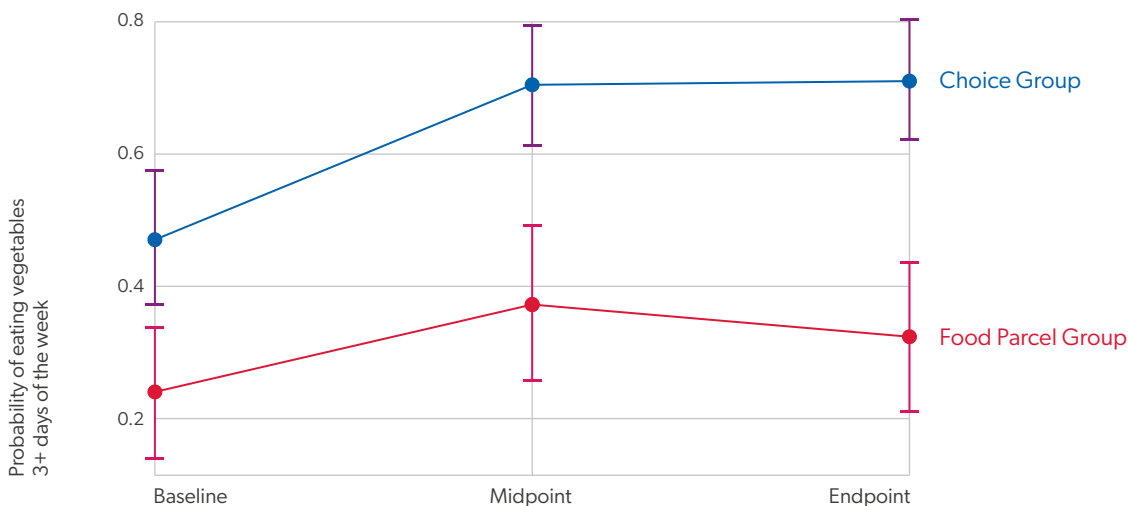


Figure 6: People in the Choice Group increased the frequency of their vegetable consumption over the course of the trial, whereas consumption in the Food Parcel Group did not significantly improve.



Case Study: Samuel*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: moderate food insecurity

End of study: marginal food insecurity

Food Parcel Group

Samuel lives alone and is in his 50s. He came to Sufra after unexpectedly struggling to afford food and was experiencing severe food insecurity. At the time, he was receiving Universal Credit, but the amount was not enough to cover his basic living costs. His work coach suggested visiting Sufra for support. Although Samuel was initially hesitant, he found the experience more positive than he expected, due to the friendly volunteers and the food he received.

“ I was a little bit a little bit apprehensive, a little bit proud to say I don’t need a food bank, but I was desperate, so I went for it, and I was pleasantly surprised. ”



When he joined the trial, Samuel was randomly allocated to continue receiving food parcels. Samuel felt that knowing he could collect six parcels of food, when he needed to, provided him with reliable access to food. Although he could collect a parcel every week, he was surprised by how much food he received and did not always go to Sufra weekly, as the food provided often lasted longer than expected. His food parcels also included fruits and vegetables, which was not consistently the case for everyone receiving parcels; this contributed to him eating fruits and vegetables 3-4 times a week. He also shared how the food parcels encouraged him to cook more:

“ I didn’t used to like cook a lot.... It made me start doing it more and also other things. You know I will... just do like a vegetable stir fry once in a while these days when I never used to do that, you know? ”

Throughout the trial, Samuel’s food insecurity levels reduced from severe to moderate levels as he received support from Sufra and the parcels helped meet his needs. By the end of the trial, his food insecurity reduced even further because Samuel found a job which increased his financial stability and played an important role in reducing his food insecurity.

Photo: © Maaria @justmebreathing

Key finding 4:

People in the Choice Group purchased more fresh fruit and fresh vegetables than the Food Parcel Group received in their parcels. The Choice Group also accessed more non-food essentials.

Not all participants provided photos of what they purchased or received in food parcels, but we conducted an exploratory analysis of the photos we did receive. In total, we analysed a weekly set of photos received from 87 people in the Choice Group and 56 people in the Food Parcel Group.

We categorised all items in the baskets by whether or not they were fresh fruit and fresh vegetables, reflecting items that are often not purchased when people are experiencing constrained incomes. We found that items purchased by people in the Choice Group were more likely to be fresh fruit and more likely to be fresh vegetables than items provided in food parcels. This offers some confirmation of the trends we saw for self-reported frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption.

We also observed that people in the Choice Group were more likely to have acquired non-food items than people received in food parcels. They made up about 15% of all items purchased for the Choice Group, but less than 5% of items provided in the food parcels. When we looked at the nature of what these items were, the most commonly purchased non-food items were cleaning products, kitchen tools and electrical appliances, and laundry products. Baby items were also frequently purchased. Some items identified in shopping baskets that were not identified in any food parcels were pet food, stationary, clothing and footwear, and medicines and nutritional supplements.

When we spoke to people about what they received, we heard about the types of foods they prioritised and what motivated different types of purchases of foods and non-foods. Below, we highlight some key findings from our qualitative interviews.

“ Receiving a parcel, you don’t get to choose what’s in the parcel first, and you may get many things you don’t use. But with the voucher you buy what you need, actually, what you use, what you need, so that was better of course. ”

(Participant in Choice Group)

Participants described a range of foods they purchased from the supermarket vouchers. This included buying the things they really needed and stocking up on healthy foods:

“ So, I bought chicken, fish, salmon and things like that. Yes, I brought just the things that I kind of needed as foodwise and it was really, really helpful. So, you know, a variety of the things that I needed like, you know, frozen vegetables and chicken and milk because I don’t drink cows’ milk, I drink oat milk. So, like honey and some of those things are a bit expensive. So yes it was really, really helpful. Such a weight off my shoulders as well, it was more trying to get the healthy stuff in, I think once or twice I may have got the wrong things but yes, it was mainly healthy stuff I got. ”

(Participant in Choice Group)

“ I tried to get like a few things, a lot of vegetables, I buy rice, I buy oil, buy some tinned stuff, buy some fruit, so it was good being able to get a few stuff that I really needed, buy chicken and stuff like that. ”

(Participant in Choice Group)

Participants also reflected how the supermarket vouchers enabled them to purchase foods that were preferred and more culturally relevant to them:

“ ...he bought eggs in bulk, so even the lady at the till was surprised what are you going to do with all this egg, so, he explained to her that my children eat a lot of eggs, it's for them really...either have it boiled or fried egg but it's a main staple in Arab cultures to have eggs especially for breakfast, a good source of protein. He said because eggs is a staple dish, it has a lot of vitamins and sources of mineral, so it's really good. ” (Participant in Choice Group, translated by interpreter)

Some participants purchased kitchen appliances with their supermarket vouchers, and one of the participants explained how this purchase supported her child's fruit consumption:

“ I bought a blender... because my little boy, he doesn't eat fruits unless I blend them for him, when I blend them then he eats them. ” (Participant in Choice Group, translated by interpreter)

Supermarket vouchers enabled participants to purchase things that would serve to enrich their lives, beyond food:

“ The thing about the money it just went towards to do other things. It's not simply just groceries... I can buy things that which just adds spark to their lives instead of just the spark in the kitchen or the food that is always included... ” (Participant in Choice Group)



Case Study: Rosetta*

Start of study: severe food insecurity

Mid-study: marginal food insecurity

End of study: severe food insecurity

Choice Group

Rosetta is in her 20s and lives with her partner and two young children. She came to Sufra for the first time whilst on maternity leave. Rosetta initially felt ashamed coming to Sufra and during her first visit, described waiting for an hour outside in the cold with her children whilst waiting for her food parcel. When she was offered a chance to take part in the trial, she was reluctant.

After signing up, Rosetta was randomly allocated to receive a choice between food parcels and vouchers. After her first experience with the food parcel and the parcels not being a good fit for her family because she received expired foods and several tinned products, she opted for the supermarket vouchers. She explained that the vouchers allowed her to buy food that met her dietary requirements but also purchase nappies, formula, and healthy snacks for her children. The vouchers supplemented her maternity pay and during the trial, her food insecurity reduced significantly.

“ It felt great to be honest, to have a choice to choose a food voucher over a food parcel. ”

However, by the end of the trial, both her supermarket vouchers and maternity pay had come to an end. As a result, her food insecurity increased to a level higher than when she first entered the study. Rosetta was preparing to return to work but was still arranging childcare.



Key finding 6:

Offering vouchers instead of food parcels is a lot less work than packing and providing food parcels, and overall was more efficient use of resources, for both participants and implementers.

The process evaluation study included interviews with food bank staff who implemented the intervention, as well as with the research team, who also observed implementation. They shared how offering supermarket vouchers was more efficient, reducing the need to expend resources on sourcing food, storing food, and packing and distributing food parcels. Whilst given the short timeframe and temporary nature of the trial, significant gains in operational efficiency were not observed, it was felt that in the long-term, switching to providing supermarket vouchers would free up more staff resources for the work on poverty that Sufra wanted to be doing.

For participants, supermarket vouchers also made a lot more sense. They reduced the need to travel to the food bank and enabled them to choose the foods that they would use. Many participants spoke about giving foods back that they received in food parcels because they wouldn't use them. This highlights just how inefficient giving out pre-packed food parcels can be.

Importantly, food bank staff highlighted how giving out food directly receives wide support from donors, trustees, and the public in general. It was acknowledged that there can be reticence to giving people the means to purchase food for themselves, and they hope that the results from this study can help build support for a transition to supermarket voucher provision.

However, given how acceptable and popular this form of support was, it was acknowledged that a change like this could also increase demand.

Indeed, over our trial, we observed that people in the Food Parcel Group were less likely to collect food parcels than people in the Choice Group were to collect supermarket vouchers. By the end of the trial, 74% of people in the Food Parcel Group had 1 or more parcels remaining to be collected. In contrast, only 41% of the Choice Group still had one or more vouchers remaining when they completed their final questionnaire. These numbers further underscore the acceptability and demand for supermarket vouchers, whereas the mismatch of food parcels to people's needs possibly meant that people were less likely to come to collect them.

This raises a paradox for food aid providers: better meeting needs likely means more people will seek their support, which may further strain their capacity and service provision. Providing a more limited offer in the form of pre-packed food parcels is one way of managing demand. Providing supermarket vouchers may also be more expensive than preparing food parcels, which is being explored in the economic analysis. This shows how important it is to address the root causes of food insecurity to reduce the need for any form of food aid, whether in the form of food parcels or supermarket vouchers.

“Food parcels are free and then it's a help, so even if it's not your preferences, you kind of just take it, you wouldn't need to say “oh I don't eat this kind of food or this is really not, this is not what I was expecting...” Whether you like it or not it's free, and whether it's your, the food you used to eating or not, you wouldn't complain so you would just take it...”

(Participant in Food Parcel Group)

Key takeaways

Though offering food parcels has become the dominant response to people experiencing food insecurity in the UK, it isn't always what people prefer when they are in these situations. Though food parcels help reduce food insecurity in the short-term, we found evidence that supermarket vouchers help reduce food insecurity while also offering layers of additional benefits. Participants were given the freedom to go to the supermarket to buy the foods they needed. They were able to choose items they preferred, that they were familiar with, that they enjoyed, and they were enabled to shop like everyone else. 🍷 🟡

The big picture, however, is that any short-term food aid provision isn't enough to address longer term food insecurity and poverty. Most people in the study were still experiencing food insecurity by the end of the six weeks of the support they were offered. As illustrated in some of our case studies, some households whose circumstances significantly changed over the 6-week period moved from being food insecure to food security.

Things like having benefit problems resolved, being able to find employment, or being able to move into secure and affordable housing were changes that participants described as changing their financial circumstances in a way that led to them being able to have more secure access to food.

This study is important because it challenges assumptions that people can't be trusted with freedom to choose the support that is best for them and the freedom to purchase what they need. It shows how much people value being given this choice and how meaningful it is to enable people to shop in supermarkets and buy the foods that they are familiar with, prefer and that meet their health, cultural and dietary needs.

But this study also underscores how the circumstances driving people to seek charitable food aid in the first place need to be addressed; any short-term emergency provision is unable to address the significant and enduring systemic issues driving food insecurity and wider issues of poverty. Given that food insecurity continues to be widespread, this study emphasises the importance of providing support that is useful and acceptable to those who need it.



Policy implications

The Department for Work and Pensions recently released guidance for how local authorities should use the new Crisis and Resilience Fund, which launched in April 2026. This guidance recommends that councils provide default cash-first crisis payments as the preferred form of support for people facing financial crisis, incorporating a cash-first but not only cash-only approach. This approach recognises that money may not meet the needs and preferences of every individual.¹²

Our research supports this recommendation for a move to cash-first models. This is the preferred form of support when people face a shortage of food, and it appeared to work just as well, if not better, than food aid in the form of pre-packed food parcels. This research also underscores that giving people the agency to choose what form of support is best for them is also important, as it shouldn't be assumed what people need. Offering people this choice is important for their personal sense of dignity and agency and to enable them to best meet their needs.

Find out more

About the analysis and findings

The findings shared in this report are based on academic papers prepared for academic publication by different researchers working on this trial. Findings are still undergoing peer review. Slight differences in findings may result due to the progress of peer-review. These papers also contain more findings than what could be reported in this short report. You can request a copy of these working papers from the authors:

- For the main trial outcomes, and findings from qualitative interviews, please contact Rachel Loopstra: rachel.loopstra@liverpool.ac.uk
- For the process evaluation findings, please contact Steven Cummins: steven.cummins@lshtm.ac.uk

About the SALIENT programme

The aim of the SALIENT research programme was to co-design and evaluate interventions that support healthier diets and reduce the environmental impacts of our food system. You can find out more about the full programme of research on the website: studies.epi.ims.cam.ac.uk/salientfoodtrials

About Sufra

You can find out more about the work Sufra does on their website and in their Impact Reports. www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk

About taking a cash-first approach to food insecurity

The Independent Food Aid Network website has a wealth of information about taking a cash-first approach to food insecurity and the new Crisis and Resilience Fund. Please see their website: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk

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The process evaluation was carried out by Bea Savory, Oliver Huse, and Steven Cummins, with support from co-authors. The economic evaluation was carried out by Emma Frew and Bisola Osifowora.

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- SALIENT co-Principal Investigators: Peter Scarborough and Martin White

Photos from the Sufra archive, Martin Cleveland, Maaria @justmebreathing, and trial participants.

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