**Input from the Experience of the UK:**

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Through the [Covid Realities](https://covidrealities.org/) research programme, we have been working directly with over a hundred parents and carers to document life on a low income during the pandemic in the UK. By keeping online diaries, responding to pre-recorded audio questions, and participating in virtual discussion groups, parents are sharing their experiences, and taking part in conversations about what needs to change, and why. [Their accounts](https://covidrealities.org/learnings/) reveal the shortcomings with the social security system before the pandemic, but also the profound limitations of the government’s economic response to Covid-19. Just as social security provision deteriorated and weakened so too—and in direct response—[charitable food provision increased](https://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h1775). As the state withdraws, the charitable sector expands, providing much needed emergency provision in the form of food parcels, community food hubs, and the sharing of excess, “waste” food from retailers.

The [Independent Food Aid Network](https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/) (IFAN) has been a leading advocate for dignified, nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate charitable food provision. However, above all, IFAN argues that charitable food can never be a viable replacement for the money to purchase food in “normal” ways—in supermarkets, local grocers, and cafes; a claim which is robustly supported by Covid Realities’ emergent evidence base.

Through local-level partnerships, [IFAN is pioneering a “cash first” approach to food poverty](https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/food-banks-in-scotland-call-for-cash-first-approaches-in-the-face-of), aligned to its broader call for a systemic approach to tackling poverty. IFAN are in the process of supporting the co-development of cash first referral leaflets with key stakeholders in local authorities in Scotland, England and Wales. The leaflets are co-designed as straightforward resources for people facing financial crisis, and anyone supporting them, to quickly see available advice and cash first support options and which agencies are best placed to help. The aim of this project is to reduce the need for emergency food aid by helping people access any existing financial entitlements and advice on income maximisation as a cash first response to food insecurity. The most up-to-date record of published leaflets and the local authority areas we are currently working in can be found [here](http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets).

The work of IFAN, like the Covid Realities participants, illuminates the reality that emergency food aid cannot and never will be the answer to the underlying problem of rising poverty and everyday hardship for millions of households. Instead, what is needed is a stronger social security system, which invests in adults and their children as part of a preventative strategy to reduce poverty and inequality. Emergency food aid is a sticking plaster for the problem of poverty; we need to refocus the corrective lens away from increasing the number of food banks towards campaigning for a bolder and better social security system.