

Reforming our Referral Pathways





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Summary

Since January 2024, Edinburgh Food Project (EFP) has been undergoing a review of our referral system to ensure that those being referred into the foodbank are receiving support to alleviate their crisis. This report reflects on the progress made over the course of these two years.

The project began following an unprecedented rise in foodbank usage which prompted EFP to focus on going beyond just the provision of vouchers and place more emphasis on the support alongside it. It was clear that to do so, we needed to work with referral partners to emphasise the necessity of quality support in helping our foodbank users out of crisis. This project sought a more collaborative relationship with our referral partners with a focus on their client's pathways to the foodbanks. In doing so, it became clear that there was often excellent capacity for support but a lack of awareness around the referral process and what foodbanks provide.

To address this, we established criteria based on the needs of our foodbank users to identify who should be issuing referrals and how they should do so. Through meeting with partners, creating and sharing resources, and establishing minimum requirements, we now have much clearer and well communicated practices for referring. This included mandatory training for all referrers to ensure all partners know what we expect of them, why this matters, and how the foodbanks can fit into their support.

The result of this was a reduction in 15% of registered agencies, but due to increased awareness in the referral process and foodbank provision, a growth in the number of new referrers registered with 443 new partners joining. Despite more people being registered, we saw a 10% fall in the total vouchers issued with consistently 31% fewer referrals from referral partners over 2025 compared to the peak in Q4 of 2023. Of these referrals, we saw unfulfillment fall from 25% to 18% from partners demonstrating greater awareness and relevance of referrals.

This reflects the focus the project had on retaining foodbank accessibility while emphasising a cash-first approach. There was less emphasis on who can make referrals and more on how referrals are made and raising awareness of alternatives. Accordingly, we have more referrers making fewer referrals with greater focus on supporting people's incomes, particularly in regards to maximising statutory support. In doing so, building relationships with partners has not only strengthened referral pathways but has served as a launching point for future partnerships and collaborative work.

Introduction

For the last two years, Edinburgh Food Project have been undergoing a review of our referral system. This Referral Pathways Project has resulted in significant changes made to the way in which we work with fellow support agencies, and ultimately in our approach to supporting people facing crises in Edinburgh.

This report reflects on the progress made over the course of these two years, re-examining the context and catalyst for change, the actions and approach taken, and assessing the progress made so far. In doing so, this report seeks to provide an overview of what the project is, what has been achieved, and what we are seeking to achieve in the future.

Under the Trussell referral system, foodbanks sign up support agencies onto their referral systems which enables them to issue vouchers to the foodbanks. This is designed to direct people to services which can support them in addition to simply directing them to the foodbank. Registered agencies are called 'Referral Partners'.

Under this referral system, foodbanks are dependent on these partners for the provision of support. At the start of the project, around 80% of the people using our foodbanks were being referred in from these partner agencies. As foodbanks have grown to place greater focus on the causes of poverty, it has become clear that the role of these partners is key in people's pathways out of crisis.

The referral pathways project was a focused effort to better understand our partners and what the role of a referrer should be. In doing so, we could therefore restructure our referral system to ensure that most relevant partners are making referrals. Following this, we focused on setting out clear expectations and information regarding the foodbanks to ensure a quality of practice.

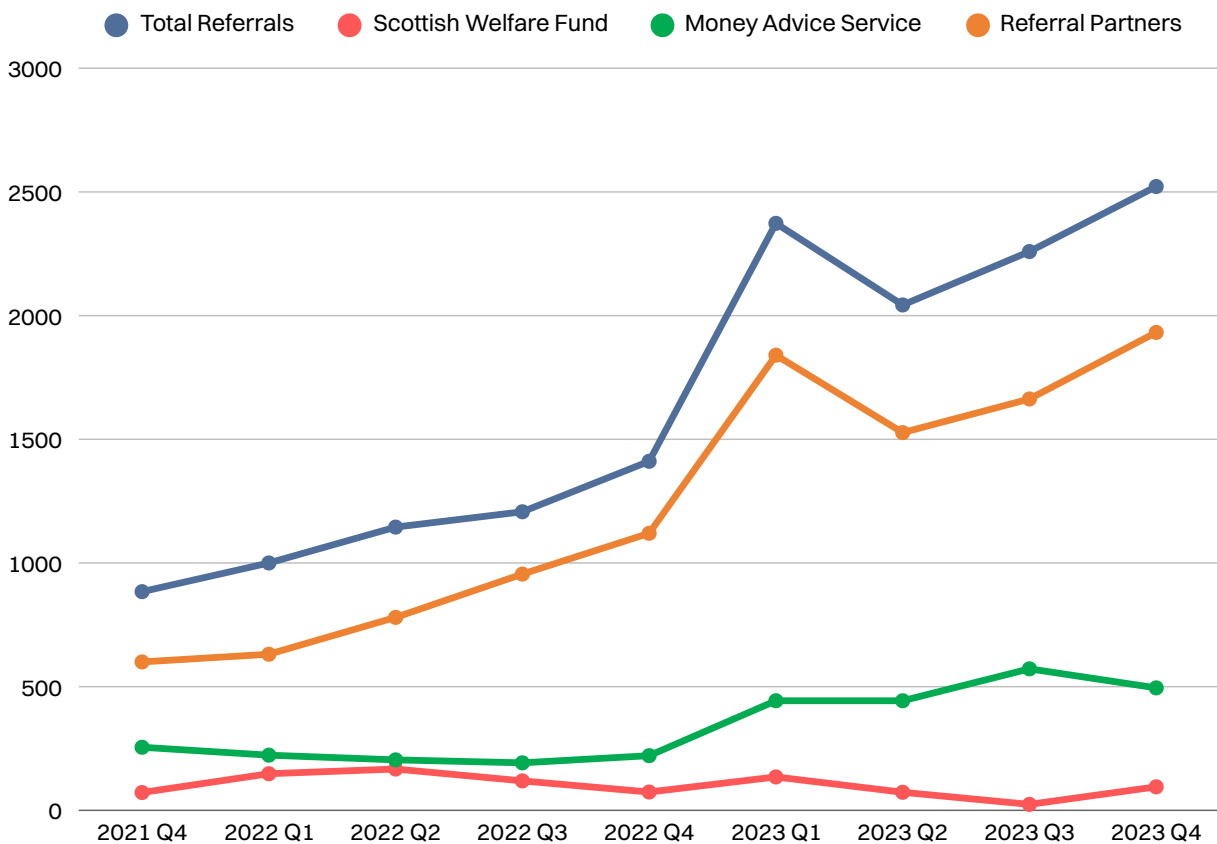
In doing so, the referral pathways project ultimately aimed to have more relevant and better informed partners with the hope that this would enable more relevant and meaningful support for those using our foodbanks that addresses the root causes of their poverty.

Project Context:

This section outlines the context that prompted reforms to our referral pathways. The project came about at a time of organisational and strategic change. At the beginning of 2024, Edinburgh Food Project launched a new strategy that recognised the shift in the organisation beyond simply providing food to those in crisis into one which sought to address the causes of food poverty. This shift came about as a result of some key shifts seen in the years prior:

1 Growth in Foodbank Usage

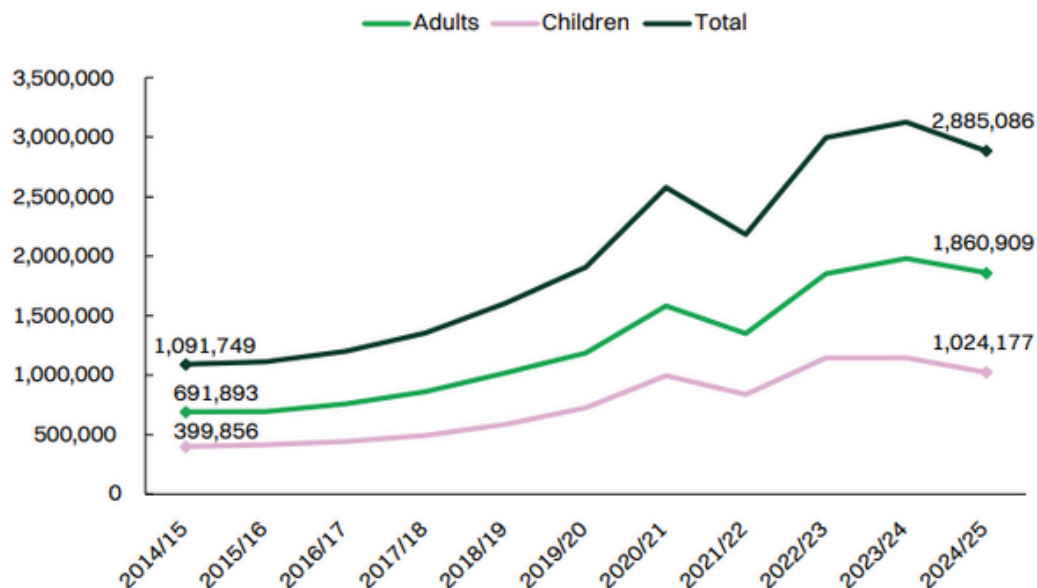
We went into 2024 facing an unprecedented level of demand, with significant spikes in foodbank usage due to both Covid and the Cost-of-living crisis. Over the 2010s EFP went from not existing to seeing consistent growth in foodbank users, with around 2,500 referrals providing food for 5,100 people by 2019. The extent of this changed rapidly due to Covid with an 180% increase from 2019 to 2021. Following this, the need for foodbanks did not return to previously levels but spiked again due to the rising cost of living in 2023. By 2023/24 we saw 9535 referrals, meaning 19,752 food parcels distributed. This was double the rate of 2022 and was quadruple the number of referrals we saw in 2019, resulting in a completely different landscape compared to the relative consistency of the 2010s when EFP first opened.



The number of parcels distributed by Edinburgh Food Project leading up to the 2023 split by source of referral

These changes are not exclusive to Edinburgh, but reflect a huge growth seen across the UK and Scotland. Austerity policies in the 2010s cut welfare spending for children and families by 44 percent between 2010 and 2018 through freezing rates, setting caps for families, and limits for child payments. As a result of this, people have been unable to afford the essentials to live on and foodbanks have gone from rare to institutionalised with Trussell documenting an increase from 26,000 to 1.33 million parcels distributed between 2008 and 2018¹. It has grown to an extent that the Scottish Government launched a national strategy to end the need for foodbanks, acknowledging the benefits of a cash-first approach over food provision. Progress on this has been limited however with foodbank use having remained at near-peak levels rather than ending since the strategy’s publication in 2023.

Figure 5 Number of emergency food parcels distributed in the Trussell community, UK: 2014/15-2024/25⁴⁶

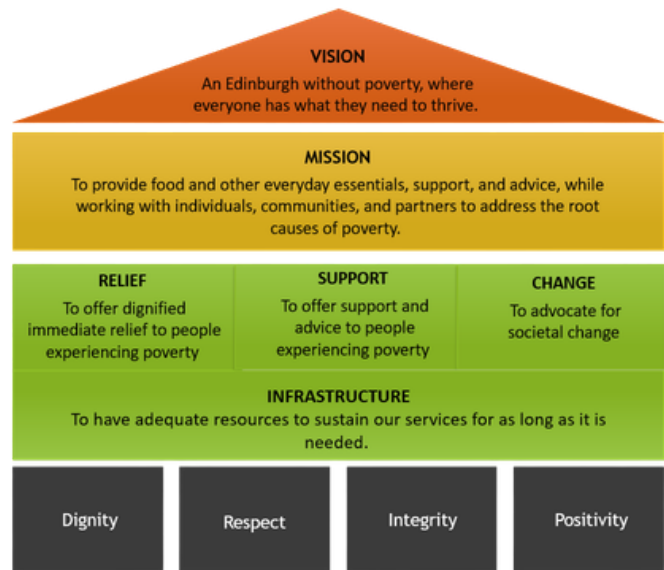


The number of parcels distributed across Trussell Foodbanks across the UK, demonstrating a shared rise in need experienced by foodbanks over the country.²

The result of this increased foodbank usage has not only been unprecedented levels of strain on our supply of food, but less certainty on what demand may be in the future. Foodbanks don’t have the capacity to keep providing increasing amounts of food, we’re already stretched. The omnicrisis of covid and rising cost of living has demonstrated that foodbanks need to think outside the box, beyond just meeting the need for emergency food, to fighting the causes of poverty through advice and advocacy.

2 Growing emphasis on support

Edinburgh Food Project’s 2024 Strategy reflected our expansion beyond providing relief through food parcels to an organisation which provides financial support and advocates for change. EFP began as a foodbank organisation but for some time our foodbanks have offered more than just emergency food parcels. The rise in need demonstrated the importance of not only offering a sticking plaster to get people through the next few days, but of ensuring their pathway to the foodbank can get them to a place where this is no longer necessary.



This aligns with a national shift in foodbank priorities encapsulated by the changes to Trussell’s strategy from “every town should have a food bank” to a new vision of “A UK without the need for food banks”. For Edinburgh Food Project this has been most notable in the expansion of our Money Advice Service, a service providing Budgeting, Benefits and Debt advice to those in need. As this grew in scale, our understanding of the extent of support people were entitled to became clearer. We found that those working with our advisors were typically eligible for and missing out on considerable statutory funding. Over 2025, the average client has received **over £4000** in financial gains. This is money that has greatly reduced or negated their need for accessing foodbanks and substantially improved people’s lives. We want everyone that’s accessing our foodbanks to be receiving this level of support, no matter their pathway to the foodbank.

It was clear that people were not missing out on these cash payments due to ineligibility, but due to a lack of awareness. The financial gains are primarily from accessing Crisis Grants, Community Care Grants and seeing increases in Universal Credit. This is statutory funding, money the government has allocated to address poverty, that people were eligible for but weren’t aware of. Trussell report that only 41% of people referred to foodbanks had applied for or received a grant from the Scottish Welfare Fund in the last three months. This means 59% had not applied despite being in severe enough crisis to need a foodbank³. Not only is this cash-first approach more effective than food parcels alone, it is also a more sustainable and fair manner of helping those in need by redistributing public funds according to need rather than depending on charity services to fill the gap created by government policy shortcomings.

What is the role of Referrals in this process?

As is typical for most foodbank organisation, the majority of individuals accessing our foodbanks were and remain to be directed to our foodbanks by a support organisation. Once an organisation is signed up, they are called a 'Referral Partner'. This is done on the Trussell's referral system, the most common system used by foodbanks across the UK. Directing people via referral partners serves several purposes:

1 Directing those in need to support

For those looking to access a foodbank, directing them to a support service rather than immediately to the foodbank itself immediately opens up options for additional support. The person making the referral is encouraged to understand their situation and explore options that wouldn't be made available if the individual had been offered a food parcel in isolation.

2 Directing those getting support to foodbanks

It allows support organisations to raise awareness of the foodbanks for those in need who were unaware or who wouldn't have considered them an option. For those already engaging in a service, it gives support agencies another tool for them to offer.

3 Ensuring appropriate access

Referrals are a light-touch way of ensuring that support reaches people who are genuinely experiencing hardship. To avoid any formal means testing, having people engage with services allows professionals to confirm need as part of helping that person. This allows foodbanks to manage limited resources responsibly while maintaining a welcoming space for anyone looking to access our services.

What was our approach to Referrals prior to the project?

Prior to the project, referrals worked on the general principle that the more avenues available to the foodbank the better, as long as they were supporting those in need. This was fulfilled by our administrator as one part of their wider duties. Each incoming request to become a referrer was judged on a case by case basis and not against any particular standards. This is typical for foodbanks across the Trussell network, where referral agencies and foodbanks work on the basis of mutual trust without formal criteria and training to increase understanding of how foodbanks function.

What were the limits to this approach?

This light-touch management of referrals was standard practice for Trussell foodbanks, and while functional did result in some limitations:

1 Who should be making referrals?

The system was unclear with no written definitions of who qualifies as a referrer or specific qualities given to what we want out of a referral. There was more focus on the level of encountered need rather than the capacity to support these people.

2 What is required of referrers?

It was reliant on organisations having a good understanding of the role of foodbanks, yet this was not made clear enough. The vast majority of referrals were made by external agencies without any guarantee they were informed of our practices or strategy. The resources provided to them were generic UK-wide guidance on how to navigate the system, without a focus on why.

3 How can this be managed?

For internal data management, this was messy and time consuming. Having a system that accurately reflects every support agency in the city requires considerable mapping, outreach, and the reassessment of a huge number of partners. This could be done for individual cases, but a comprehensive review requires considerable capacity

The result of this was that most people applying to make referrals were registered leading to around 300 teams and roughly 900 individuals on our system. This was a similar experience to other UK foodbanks who have generally seen an expansion in the number of people registered. While more referrers isn't necessarily negative, it was this growth alongside a lack of assurance that partners could provide relevant and well informed support that was concerning. Accordingly, this work was funded as part of Trussell's pathfinder programme and has contributed to their pathfinder learning shared across the whole foodbank network.

Project Aims

Objectives:

The referral pathways project sought to both address the limits of the referral system and use referrals to meet the strategic objectives of centring support alongside food parcels. In order to achieve this, we set out a number of objectives:

- Build better relationships with our Referral Partners so that we have a greater understanding of their provision and they have a greater understanding of our expectations and strategy
- Clarify our definition and expectation of Referral Partners based on this understanding and use this to re-structure and re-classify our referral partners
- Work with these partners to share training, resources, and build relationships with the aim of improving the quality of referrals
- Raise awareness of why it's so important to not issue vouchers in isolation but to make sure that people are getting the necessary support in addition to it
- Maintain these relationships through ongoing communication to retain this awareness of the foodbanks and uphold these standards in the long run

This approach can be seen as part of a refocusing towards a cash-first approach where we sought to prioritise the maximisation of people's incomes alongside or instead of the provision of food vouchers as a first resort. In the long-term, this aims to move away from foodbanks and charities filling the gap of an inaccessible welfare system to one where people's social security entitlements are adequate and accessible to prevent them from going hungry.

Underlying principles:

Underpinning this approach was an emphasis on the responsibility of the referrer - avoiding passing responsibility for engagement on the individual. Instead, the focus was on making sure the person referring them was aware of what our process was, why this mattered, and was held accountable for enacting this properly. Changing the system through which people access the foodbanks has the potential to affect the accessibility of the services, so it was essential to consider and avoid this throughout the project.

Implementation

The following steps were taken to achieve the project aims. While set out in the order they were undertaken, it's worth noting that these were ongoing processes which overlapped and informed one another, not distinct individual steps. While the basic steps to be taken were established from the offset, it's worth noting that the project was intentionally flexible and adaptive throughout. As an exploratory piece of work, each step was informed by the findings and feedback of other steps. This section sets out what the steps were, what informed this, and how we went about implementing it.

1 Meeting with Partners:

The project began by meeting with referral partners to gather how the foodbanks fit into their work. We first reached out to two distinct groups: smaller partners least likely to meet stricter standards, and our largest partners who were issuing the most vouchers. This built an understanding of what these organisations are providing, how food vouchers fit into this support, and what their awareness was of the foodbanks' aims and services.

2 Re-defining Referrers:

On the basis of this research, the initial changes made were around clarifying categories of referrers. This was based on the capacity organisations had to provide additional help to people in addition of the food voucher. For those who had the awareness of signposting but not the capacity to provide support themselves we created a new category of 'information partner'. This enabled us to avoid referrals being made from those who weren't in a position to support people themselves while making sure they still had accessible routes to the foodbanks.

These new criteria were shared with and used by all Trussell foodbank organisations across Edinburgh so there was a consistency in standards regardless of which area of the city people were operating or receiving support. This served to provide internal guidance to inform who we should add as a referrer going forwards, but also informed potential and existing referrers of our expectations of them.

Our requirements to qualify as a referral partner shared with all support agencies

Criteria	Expectations
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Having conversations to understand the underlying causes of a person’s financial insecurity 2. Providing the individual with support which either addresses their financial insecurity directly or involves regular ongoing specialist help to meet their specific needs 3. Aware of and utilising the available wider support to refer people to the most appropriate services 4. Not making referrals in isolation but as part of a wider package of support 5. Committed to ensuring that all members of the team operate to these principles 	<p>Those meeting these criteria will remain responsible for issuing vouchers. EFP will work to understand what they offer and where our partners should be referring to them to best meet individuals needs</p> <hr/> <p>This seeks to produce a clear and concise group of referral organisations where all referrals are being made in addition to support that addresses the causes of food poverty and prioritises a cash-first approach</p>

3 City-wide Collaboration

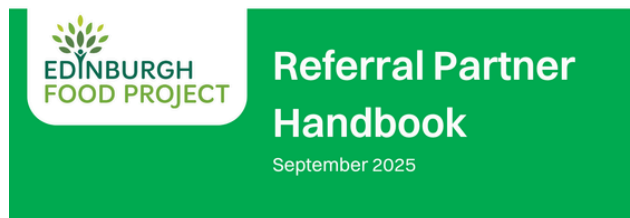
Across the City of Edinburgh, there are four foodbank organisations registered on the Trussell system, each with their own approaches, databases of referrers, and relationships built with partners. As such, it was essential to ensure that there was a shared understanding and agreement in why and how the project would apply to the wider city. While this project was undertaken by Edinburgh Food Project, as we share a referral system any actions taken by one foodbank organisation impacts others, and it was clear that a consistent approach across the city would be far more effective.

To achieve this, we made sure to consult and collaborate with the other foodbank organisations throughout the design process to make sure there was a collective agreement before any changes were made. There was a shared interest in reviewing and reforming the referral process and a willingness from other foodbank organisations to take onboard our findings and implementation plans.

This involved all registered referrers from Edinburgh North-East, South-East, and South-West being invited to the same referral training, and all incoming registration requests meeting our referral standards. Individualised handbooks were also made for each organisation highlighting the same expectations for partners, but with foodbank-specific information and resources so be shared with existing and incoming partners.

4 Providing Resources

To make sure partners were informed of our expectations, we put together resources to clearly outline the key information about the foodbank and referring to it. This includes an overview of the foodbank services, what services we provide, what parcels contain, and how the referral system works. It also goes over our strategy and contextualises our expectations of referrers in how we're seeking to end the need for foodbanks and the importance of support. Finally, it expands on the step-by-step guidance on issuing referrals with Edinburgh-specific information outlining why each step is important and what partners should prioritise.



5 Training for Partners

Once referrers were evaluated based on new standards and the above resources had been created and distributed, the focus became ensuring that all referrers were aware and actively implementing this. For this, we put together a short training session that applied to all partners and focused on why referrals play such an important role in supporting people, what our expectations of referral partners are, limitations and guidance on issuing vouchers, and best practice for issuing vouchers in Edinburgh.

These sessions were initially offered to all partners as optional and were required for all new referrers before they are added to the system. The training was always offered in-person, where whole teams could be reached and greater quality of conversation could be had, but were also hosted online in the form of webinars that were more easily accessible due to their regularity and shorter length. Over time, these were rolled out as mandatory for every individual to attend in order to remain on the system to ensure that everyone making referrals was up to date on the foodbanks and our expectations.

6 Maintaining Communication

Following the initial outreach work, partner training sessions, and distribution of shared resources, ongoing communication has been maintained through structured monthly email updates to all pathway partners. These updates serve multiple purposes: keeping partners informed about current activities and developments across the foodbank network, highlighting upcoming internal and external events that may be relevant to their work, and communicating any procedural or resource changes that could enhance their referral processes. This regular communication cadence ensures that partners remain connected to the project, stay informed about evolving services and opportunities, and maintain awareness of how their referrals are supporting clients within the broader foodbank system. By establishing this consistent touchpoint, the project has sustained partner engagement beyond the initial implementation phase and created a reliable channel for information sharing that supports the continued effectiveness of the referral pathways

7 Building Relationships

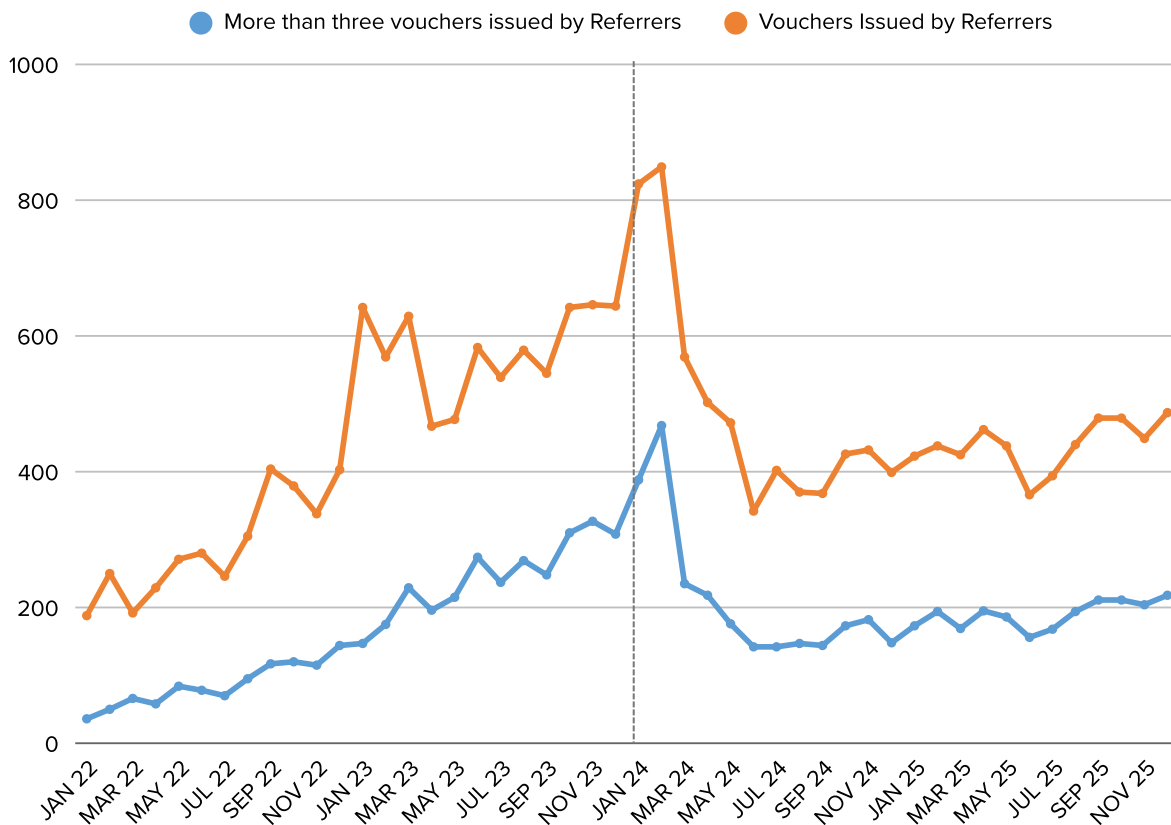
The outreach noted in the above steps not only fulfilled the purpose of making partners more informed about referral pathways, but served to improve our relationships with partners more broadly. The mutual growth in awareness for EFP and our Referral Partners has enabled us to make better use of their expertise in informing our own practices, particularly in regards to the Change element of our strategy. Where partners have been more aware of the work we do through conversations and had this reiterated through monthly newsletters, we've seen greater engagement from them. This has allowed us to host events with our partners where they have contributed valuable insights into the challenges faced by people experiencing crisis in Edinburgh and helped identify collective approaches to addressing these issues.

This was best exemplified by the referral forum held in September 2025, which brought together approximately 50 partners to discuss how we could work together more effectively to meet community needs. This functioned as a practical space for discussing referral processes whilst offering networking opportunities where partners could connect and develop a stronger shared understanding of the support landscape. In turn, not only were agencies better aware of EFP, but were more aware of one-another and the alternative support pathways available locally to them.

Results

Number of Referrals issued by Partners

The number of referrals we're receiving from partners was a key metric to address given the consistent rise seen throughout 2023. By stressing the importance of food vouchers as emergency measures and through helping people beyond their need for foodbanks, we would hope to see a partial reduction in the number of vouchers issued. The number of vouchers issued cannot be tied to referral changes alone and is affected by a range of factors, but does demonstrate some changes in line with what we would expect to see from the Referral Pathways changes.

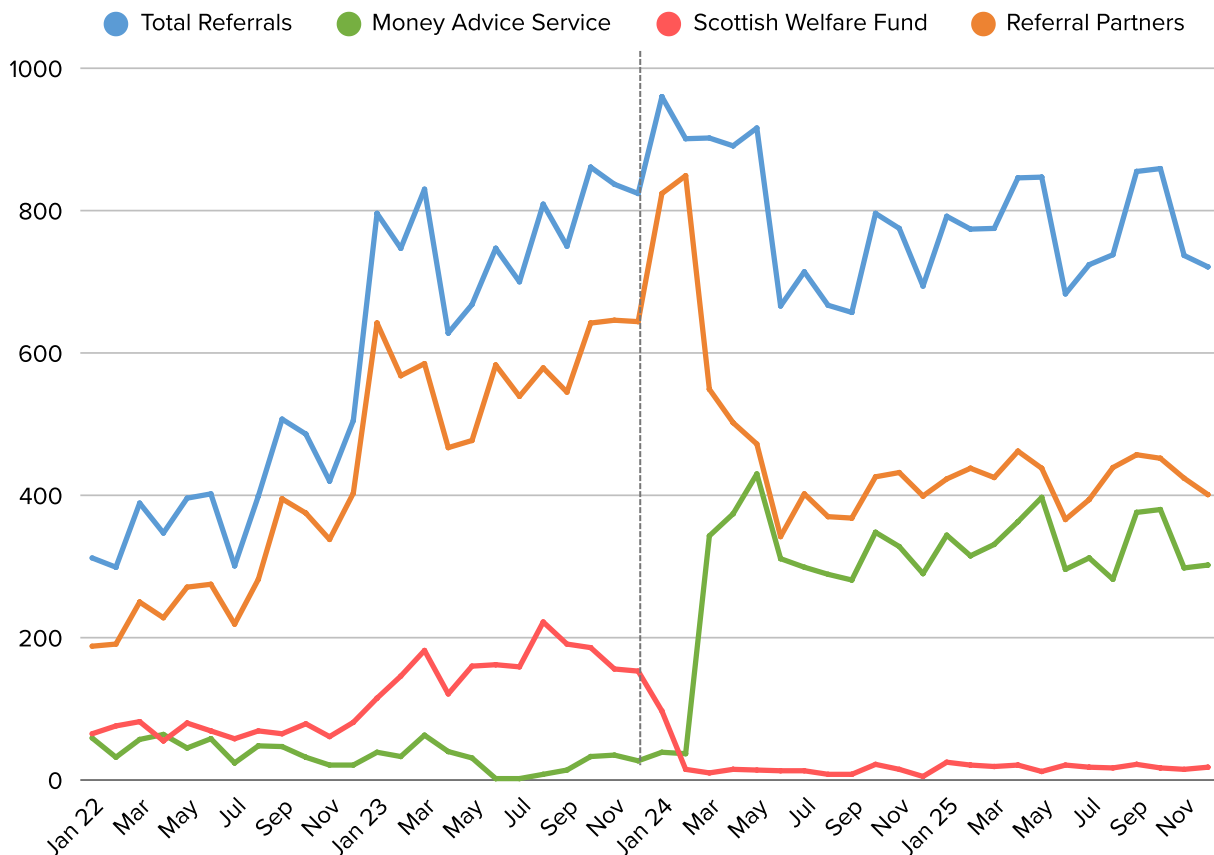


This shows the vouchers issued by referral partners in orange with the number of vouchers issued for the same client more than three times in blue. The dotted line indicates the initiation of the referral pathways project.

The most notable change was the fall in the number of vouchers issued by referral partners from its peak in late 2023 to early 2024 of over 800 referrals per month down to around 400 monthly referrals throughout 2025. This rate has remained consistent throughout the year and is 42% lower than at the peak. The most notable drop was over the beginning of 2024 where the stricter requirements for referral partners were introduced alongside increased engagement requirements with our advice service for self-referrals. This emphasis on meeting support requirements resulted in a significant fall in referrals relative to the peak, but to levels consistent with 2022. This level has remained relatively stable throughout 2025 with 4949 vouchers issued in the financial year 2024/25, 31% fewer than the 7133 issued in financial year 2023/24.

Total Vouchers Issued

Over 2024-25 we have seen a sustained decrease in total referrals for the first time in Edinburgh Food Bank’s history. The fall in vouchers from referral partners came about alongside an increase in the amount of vouchers issued by our money advice service, with our MAS now accounting for around 40% of all vouchers. In spite of this, the total number of referrals has fallen from its peak in Q1 2024 of over 900 per month to an average of 760 per month over 2025. Comparing year on year vouchers, this has resulted in a 10% drop in vouchers issued from 10,017 in financial year 2023/24 to 9,020 in financial year 24/25.

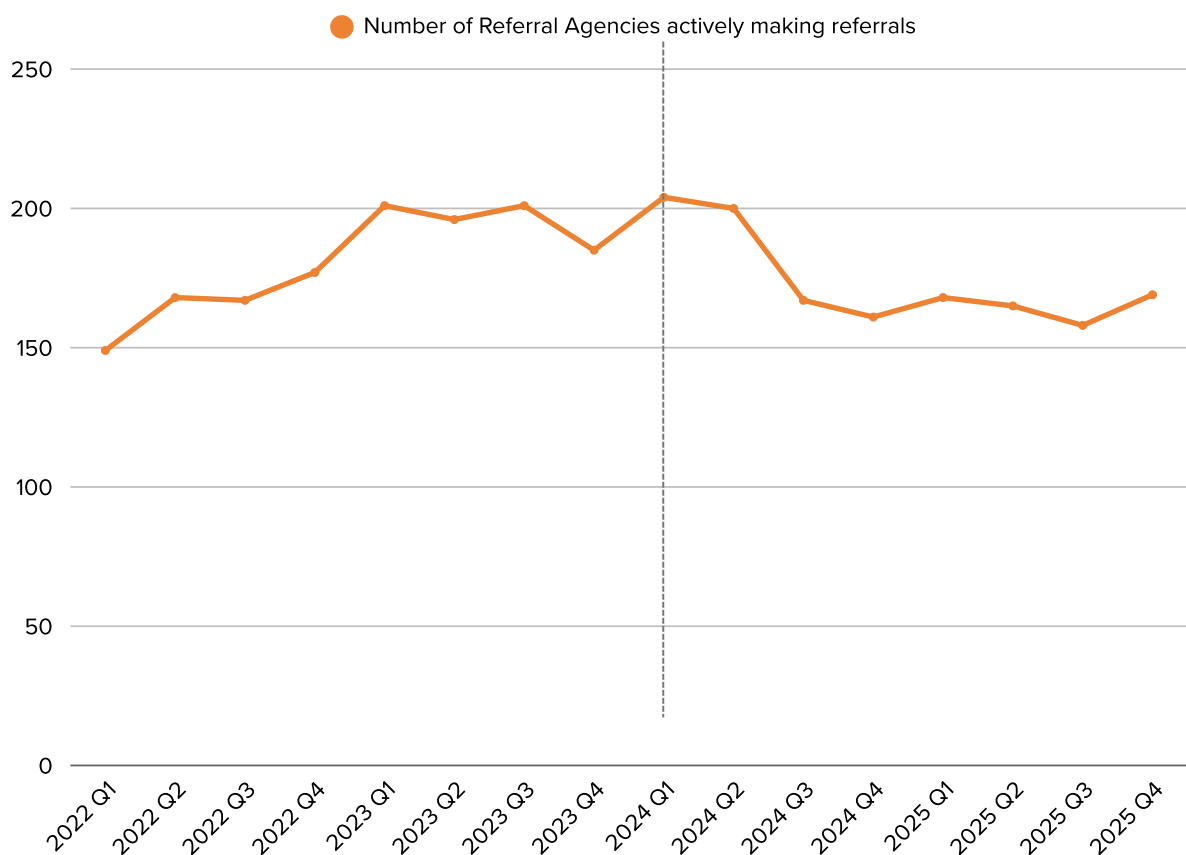


This shows the vouchers issued from different sources over time, with the dotted line indicates the initiation of the referral pathways project.

The increase in referrals from our internal money advice service jumped in Q1 2024 where the MAS took over referrals on behalf of the Scottish Welfare Fund. Following this, the MAS have continued to take on a significant amount of referrals on behalf of other partners. Therefore, while the number of referrals we have received from Referral Partners has dropped by a third, it's clear that many of these were still accessing the foodbanks but instead did so via the MAS. There are a number of factors contributing to this, including the reduction in the number of referral partners, the growth of the MAS team, the increased awareness of signposting to MAS as an alternative to making referrals.

Changes to Referral Agencies:

The number of agencies that are making referrals has followed a similar trajectory to the amount of vouchers issued, having fallen since its peak in 2023 due to changes made to referral criteria. By the fourth quarter of 2023 there were 197 agencies making referrals into the foodbank. As of January 2026, there has been an average of 156 actively referring agencies per quarter, or just shy of a 20% fall seen through a gradual decrease over time.



The dotted line indicates the beginning of the referral pathways project

Changes in individuals registered:

However, this decrease in the number of partner agencies referring does not reflect the number of individuals we have making referrals. Going into the project in 2024 there were 1021 individuals registered, which was quickly reduced to 929 following a reduction in the inactive users. Following this, the initial changes to change partners to information partners where around 25 agencies were taken off resulted in a low point in just over 800 people registered to refer. Over the course of the project, there has been a continual effort to reach out to partners and a gradual rollout of training requirements from June 2024 through to August 2025. Over this period, 226 people have been taken off the referral system after not coming along to any training. In addition, 197 have timed out over this period due to not making referrals in over 12 months, likely reflecting them no longer holding that position.

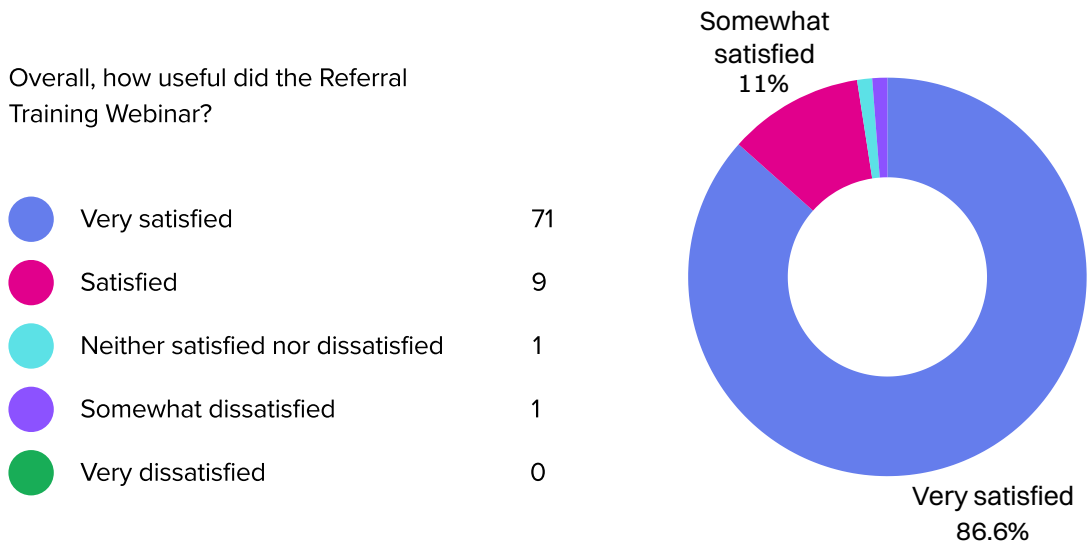
Despite the number of individuals who have been taken off the system or timed out, the result of the increased outreach to referral partners has resulted in a growth in the number of partners registering to refer to the foodbanks. The increase in awareness among support agencies has seen over 443 people register and attend the referral training who were not previously on the system. The result of this is that despite stricter standards and greater requirements, we've seen an increase in the number of individuals registered to make referrals. We now have 957 individuals registered to make referrals with nearly half of these having been added to the system over the last two years. This means there has it's encouraging to see that more people on the system that meet our criteria and are providing quality support have access to foodbank vouchers where they were otherwise unaware.

Unfulfilled Vouchers

It vouchers are issued but not used, this indicates a few possible issues. These may not necessarily represent cases of individuals choosing not to access the food they're owed. The individual issued the referral may be insufficiently aware that they have a voucher or how to redeem it. Or it could be that referrers are unaware that they can see existing vouchers on the system, how long these last for, and how to delete previous vouchers. We can't ever expect complete fulfilment when our own advice service have 10% unfulfillment from people directly contacting the foodbank. However, it was a key goal to reduce the rate which was around 25% for non-EFP organisations going into the project. As of January 2026, it has now fallen to around 18%. While this remains higher than we would like to see, particularly from our largest referral partners, we hope to continue reducing this through using the figure to identify poor practice. It is difficult to measure the quality of practice from referrers, so this has acted as a good proxy measure to inform us of necessary outreach to remind referrers of our expectations.

Informed Referral Partners:

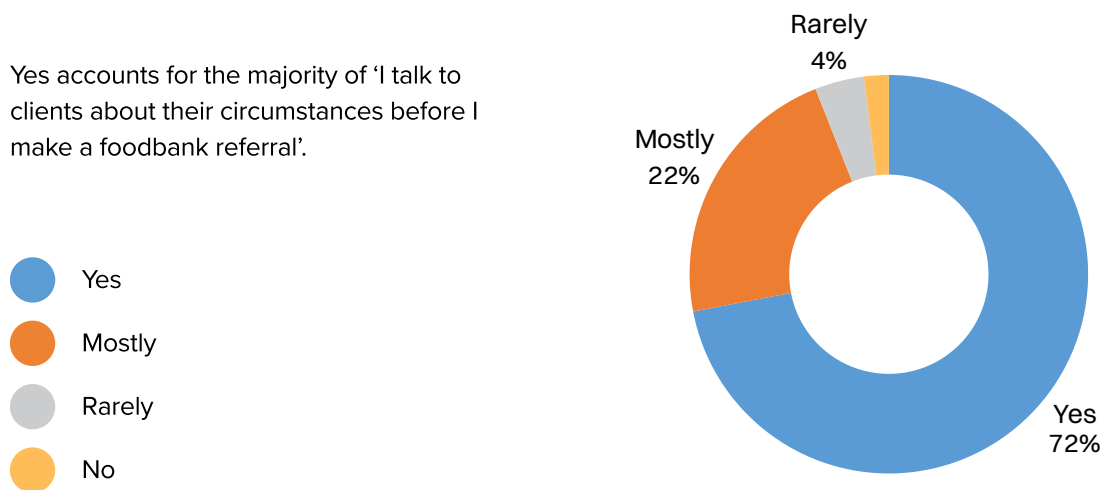
One of the key objectives of the project was to improve awareness of the foodbanks and the function of referrals. As such, we aimed to ensure that everyone making referrals should have come along to a training session. Over the course of the project, every person registered to make referrals was asked to attend either an in-person training or webinar. As of August 2025, all previously registered individuals either completed the training or had their account suspended.



At the same time, all new partners looking to join since June 2024 have attended a webinar or in-person training. This means that we can guarantee that everyone now on the system has a better understanding of the referral system. Throughout this, feedback has been collected regarding the webinars which has been overwhelmingly positive given this was requiring additional work for our partners.

The feedback for these webinars contained a question regarding what they found helpful about the webinar from which the following themes arose:

- Referral Process (28 mentions) - Participants valued clear explanations of the referral steps, walkthroughs, and practical guidance on completing forms.
- Understanding the basics (27 mentions) -People appreciated the overall clarity and comprehensive details about the service, policies, and updates.
- Foodbank Services(21 mentions) -Insights into what foodbanks offer, their goals, and related services (e.g., local larders) were highlighted as useful.
- Signposting and Alternative (13 mentions) - Guidance on signposting to other services, money advice, and supporting independence stood out.
- Trainer & Delivery (11 mentions) - Positive feedback on the trainer’s clarity, engagement, and helpful resources like slides and discussions.
- Voucher Details (6 mentions) - Clarifications on voucher validity, flexibility, and usage across locations were noted as helpful.



Finally, our feedback fortnight is an ongoing survey which asks groups that use our services to provide feedback. This included some questions for referral partners regarding their issuing of vouchers. A key area of focus for the project was to ensure people are aware of and utilising all alternative options before issuing vouchers. As of the last survey in February 2025, almost all partners reporting entirely or mostly talking to clients regarding their circumstances before issuing vouchers as we would wish to see.

Lessons Learned

There were a number of areas where working with referrers informed our understanding of how to structure our referral system and what to prioritise in doing so. The following are some of the key findings with a focus on where outcomes differed from our initial expectations.

Enacting a Stricter Referral Standard

A central part of the project's design was the raising of referral standards to limit the number of partners we had registered to only those who could offer "meaningful support". The assumption was that many would be signposting and not have the capacity to meet our standard of helping clients out of poverty. There was a similar expectation that particular job titles or organisations could be marked as suitable or unsuitable to simplify the registration process. However, this was much less common than initial expectations. Through speaking directly to all partners before changing their status, we discovered a huge range in the type of support offered to people, but that few solely signposted to foodbanks. Having spoken to services that initially appeared less relevant to the above criteria (e.g. schools, employability services, medical centres) we found that many of these either had financial advice services or provided ongoing specialist support to develop strong relationships and understandings their clients. This meant that fewer organisations were removed from the referral system than anticipated.

Back to Basics:

While conversations with referrers showed a depth of knowledge and level support available that exceeded expectations, it was evident there was a lack of foodbank-specific knowledge. While the growing reliance on foodbanks across the UK has increased the overall awareness and understanding of the foodbank concept, there was often little depth in understanding of what it was we provide. Agencies were always appreciative of foodbank services, but it was not uncommon to hear misconceptions such as:

- Not knowing foodbanks were reliant on donations or thinking they are publicly funded
- Thinking there is a voucher limit, most commonly assumed to be three vouchers
- Not understanding the distinction between Trussell and individual foodbanks

This was also reflected in the feedback from webinars, where people often cited these pieces of learning as their key takeaways. When working within the foodbank environment, it can be easy to take for granted a knowledge of the complexities and local variances in how foodbanks are run. It is unfair to expect everyone to know these things without offering clear and accessible guidance.

Interest and Willingness in Engagement:

Throughout the rollout of the resources and training, there was uncertainty as to the willingness of partners to engage with us and fulfil the stricter requirements to continue making referrals. Everyone registered on our system is a vital service facing unprecedented levels of demand, and the individuals making referrals are typically on tight schedules with little capacity for additional workload. Despite this, we experienced a very positive response from partners who were on the whole understanding and often excited to hear more from us and engage with our training offer. While there has been a considerable amount of individuals removed from the system, this has been more than offset by the influx of new individuals registered in this same time frame. The result of this is a system where we can guarantee that everyone making referrals is now informed and aware of our expectations, and understands the importance of centring a cash-first approach in their referral.

Relationships beyond Referral Pathways

What has started as referral-process-specific outreach has set the groundwork for much stronger relationships that go beyond discussing how referrals are made. We have previously gathered evidence through focusing on our experts by experience who have used the foodbanks themselves alongside our Money Advisors who see first hand the struggles faced and barriers to support for our foodbank users. However, this did not properly utilise the wealth of knowledge and experience we have access to from our 1000+ referrers. Since building partnerships and relationships with these agencies, they have been able to offer brilliant, informative contributions to our services and inform our how we may look to address the drivers of foodbank need. Our Community Conversation event held in July 2025 gave us a list of shared priorities across Edinburgh to take to MPs in Westminster, feeding into the collective effort to counter proposals to cut Personal Independent Payments. Our referral forum was incredibly popular, with over 70 people registering to highlight the key issues and potential solutions to growing issues we face. Following this, we have held many more meetings with partners to work together in promoting local change that reflects the needs of support workers and those they are representing. While this was not the focus of the project from the offset, it has proven to be a considerable benefit to enhancing these relationships that has built the foundations for future advocacy work.

Conclusions

This project demonstrated the potential of reforming a referral system to better align with support, but also the benefits experienced by having closer partnerships between referrers and foodbanks more broadly. Initial expectations from when the project commenced were challenged as we learnt and reflected by building relations with referral partners. Through those conversations we learnt it was primarily the lack of understanding of the foodbank process that was limiting referrers, while the capacity and quality of their support exceeded expectations.

Accordingly, changes to improve this understanding have resulted in greater awareness of the foodbanks with an increased number of individual's registered to make referrals across a smaller range of organisations. By not significantly reducing the number of partners, but increasing the requirements on those we do have, we have seen an overall reduction in the number of vouchers issued, but one that can be seen more accurately as a reallocation of support to relevant agencies than a significant cut in avenues to the foodbanks.

A key limitation worth acknowledging when addressing referral pathways is that optimising the process through which people access the foodbanks does not itself directly address the causes of poverty. While directing people to more relevant, cash-first-centred support should help to alleviate this in a more effective way, changing the pathways to the foodbanks in isolation cannot be seen as a solution to addressing poverty. In particular where services are underfunded and overbooked, the pathways to the foodbank are only as strong as the support services within this process. As such, reducing the volume of referrals should not be seen as the focus of the project but as one of several measures of success.

However, people's pathway to the foodbanks offers a significant opportunity to not only issue a food voucher but offer considerably more valuable cash-first support. With the concerning low uptake of crisis and community care grants amongst foodbank users, it is vital that foodbanks working to change this. Managing referrals is one of a foodbank's most powerful levers and in utilising this, our referral project has raised awareness and held our partners accountable in embedding this as part of their practice.

Not only this, but this project has enhanced our understanding of who is referring into us and how we can collectively work to make this support more effective. Not only are partners better aware of our work, but we have more understanding of theirs, allowing a more effective collaborative approach to helping the people we support.

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