

Living off a One Can Food Parcel

by Jo Belshaw, Operations Manager

Introduction

A couple of years ago, one of the One Can Trust Trustees and also a Food Nutritionist, lived off a typical One Can Trust food parcel for 7 days in order to gauge the practicality of its content. Based upon his findings, the contents were tweaked and the list, very similar to the one below, was designed. More recently, I was keen to repeat the experiment with the following objectives:

- ❖ To gauge whether a standard family food parcel would contain enough food for a week
- ❖ To ensure tasty meals can be prepared from the parcel contents
- ❖ To update parcel contents based on the findings of the experiment

The nutritional value of a parcel has been recently reviewed by our Food Nutritionist and hence reviewing nutritional value was not one of my objectives.

Parcel Size

There are 4 people in my family: 2 adults and 2 teenage children. We follow a vegetarian diet and eat good sized portions of food. One Can would provide a family like ours with a medium sized 'FA2' parcel. A standard parcel is designed to typically provide enough food for 15 meals (3 meals a day for 5 days). It is assumed that families receiving such parcels have some food in the cupboard so in total, they have enough for a week. For those families that have no food at all in the cupboard (e.g. families fleeing domestic violence and living in temporary accommodation), One Can provides enhanced parcels that typically contain enough food for 21 meals (3 meals a day for 7 days). Many foodbanks only provide 3 days' worth of food in one parcel and therefore we believe that we are generous with what give. Indeed, many clients report that they receive a lot of food and so I wanted to see whether a regular parcel that we design for 5 days, could in fact last the full 7-day week.

My children's weekday lunches were not taken from the food parcel which is the case for many of the families that One Can supports. For these families, the children are entitled to free school meals and currently the government are providing vouchers for school holidays too. All other meals were prepared only from the food parcel with no supplementation from our food cupboards (although read on for the 'cheats!').

Shopping

Our week's worth of food was ordered online from Sainsbury's and came to £67.93*. For the purpose of One Can's internal stats, we consider the retail value of a standard FA2 parcel to be £63.85. Perhaps the difference can be attributed to my purchase of fresh rather than instant coffee!

*The shopping was purchased in December 2021 and since then, food prices have increased significantly.

My shopping:



Content of Parcels

The table below shows the One Can 'picking list' for an FA2 (medium sized family of up to 2 adults and 2 children) parcel. Our volunteers pick and pack parcels according to such lists (plus any specific dietary and/or allergy requirements). The first column indicates the items in a regular parcel, the 'Jo items' column records what I bought and the 'enhanced parcel' column indicates the items present in larger, enhanced parcels.

CATEGORY	ITEMS	JO ITEMS	ENHANCED PARCEL
CANNED FISH	4	0	5
CANNED HAM / CORNED BEEF	3	0	4
MEAT BALLS/HOT DOGS/PASTA WITH MEAT	2	0	2
MEAT MEALS	3	0	4
MEAT (OR VEGETABLE) PIE	2	2	2
PULSES / BEANS	2	*9 + 1Kg bag of dry chana dal	2
BAKED BEANS	4	4	4
PEAS / SWEETCORN	2	2	2
OTHER VEG	3	3	3
CANNED SOUP	2	2	2
TOMATOES	3	3	3
CANNED FRUIT	2	2	2
PASTA SAUCE	2	2	2
COOK-IN-SAUCE	1	1	1
SPREADS/ JAMS	1	1	1
CANNED POTATOES	2	2	2
PASTA	1.5kg	1.5kg	1.5kg
RICE	500g	500g	1Kg
BISCUITS	2	2	2

CEREAL (one healthy e.g. porridge)	2	2	2
MILK	3	3	4
ADDED EXTRAS (crisps, drinks, chocolate etc.)	4	1 box mince pies	4
BREAD & PASTRIES (as available)	3	3	3
FRUIT & VEG BAG	1	1	1
EGGS	1 dozen	1 dozen	1 dozen
STORE CUPBOARD BAG (week 1: box of tea bags, jar of coffee, oil, bag of sugar, condiment such as mayonnaise or ketchup)	1	1 + box of peppermint tea. 1 packet of fresh coffee	1
RECIPE BAG (WHEN AVAILABLE)	1	1	1

Findings

- ❖ I bought an FA2 parcel (designed for 5 days' worth of food) which lasted longer than 5 days. In fact, it just about stretched to 7 days' worth although we ran out of milk and rice. Fresh coffee ran out too (but a jar of instant coffee would have been more than adequate).
- ❖ Fruit and veg ran out very quickly.
- ❖ Our food was incredibly bland with the exception of our recipe bag meal and a meal where my husband cheated and used salt and spices from our food cupboards. At the time of living off our food parcel, One Can did not provide salt, herbs or spices as standard practice in food parcels.

Discussion and Feedback

- ❖ Our family eats porridge for breakfast and I make the porridge mainly with water and a splash of milk. I suspect that even with the enhanced quota for milk, there would not have been enough if only milk was used for breakfast cereals. Porridge is filling, rice crispies much less so. Purely from the perspective of filling tummies, I would encourage a filling cereal such as porridge or Weetabix being the main cereal added to parcels. The above picking list has been amended to reflect this. Porridge can also be soaked making it ideal for families without cooking facilities.
- ❖ The picture below shows the amount of fruit and veg given out with an FA2 food parcel.



Alongside our standard fruit and veg offered in a food parcel, we do give out other items when available. If the items are slightly unusual (for example, squashes or fresh beetroot) we offer a recipe bag including all the ingredients necessary to make a dish. I added a butternut squash and recipe bag items needed to make the [attached](#) 'warming curry' recipe. It was delicious! The squash was just under a kilo and alongside other ingredients (such as chick peas and kidney beans), it made sufficient amounts to last 2 days. The cost of the ingredients was approximately £5, £2.50 per day for a family of 4. Although the ingredients were cheap, the cost of cooking would need to be considered for many of our clients.



- ❖ For our family that uses a lot of fresh veg for cooking, we would have benefitted from more fresh produce. That said, I only bought a typical basic fresh parcel (as per the picture) plus a recipe bag and very often, our fresh bags are considerably larger as we are able to top up with supermarket surplus.

At One Can, we appreciate that for many reasons, people may choose to not eat fresh fruit and veg, despite the well-known health benefits. With this in mind, we do not want to encourage waste and therefore we have introduced a change in our referral form whereby referrers have to actively select the inclusion of fresh produce in their clients' parcels. As an organisation, we will continue to review the amount of fresh produce that accompanies parcels to ensure wherever possible, the optimal amount is given.

- ❖ The squash made a brilliant addition and added volume to a dish. We also had a bag of dried chana dal with half a bag left over at the end of the week. Chana dal, or yellow split chick peas, is high in fibre, low in fat and a great source of vegan protein – an excellent option for people on a low carbohydrate or diabetic-friendly diet. The bag of chickpeas cost £2.25. We used it twice and half a bag was left over. The chana dal does require soaking and boiling before use so I appreciate there's a cost implication and also impossible to use if people have no cooking facilities. As an alternative, we provide 2 tins of ready-to-use pulses in our parcels and for me, because I bought no meat products, I bought extra tins of beans and pulses. Providing these extras is standard practice for vegetarian parcels.
- ❖ Meat pies come in a variety of flavours and we chose a vegetable balti option. I was hugely disappointed with the dish. We had to use 2 (costing £5) and therefore it was

not cost effective at all. I also broke our tin opener whilst trying to open the pie! It wasn't filling and, in my opinion, contained nothing more than quite a bland gravy containing a few peas and carrots. Perhaps our family is not used to cooking with very much salt either because I found the dish very salty too. Whether we continue to include these pies in our food parcels will be reviewed with our Food Nutritionist. Anecdotally, some clients tell us that they like their tinned meat pies.

- ❖ Not everyone has the confidence or knowledge to cook with lentils and pulses. The benefits of including some basic recipes with our initial store cupboard bag to help families make the most of the items provided in their parcels, will be further discussed with our Food Nutritionist. Such recipes would be in addition to the ad hoc recipe bags that we provide.
- ❖ Our Food Nutritionist lived off a typical parcel for a single person for a week. A single person's parcel would include 1 meat meal and so requires no coordination. However, a medium sized family would receive 3 tins of meat meals so it would be helpful if at least 2 of the meat meals were, where possible, the same. This would prevent cooking lots of different dishes. This will be internally reviewed.
- ❖ Pulses and beans are great but do need seasoning. At the time of living off the parcel, One Can did not provide salt or spices and herbs as standard practice. My husband cheated one evening and raided our cupboard for such flavourings but for many families, buying herbs and spices is not an option and therefore where possible, we will start providing such items in the monthly 'store cupboard' bags. Salt, pepper, garlic powder, madras curry powder and mixed herbs to be included. Larger packets can be split (or decanted) into smaller, appropriately labelled bags.
- ❖ I did not buy any ham or fish for our food parcel because we follow a vegetarian diet. Such items might typically be used as sandwich fillers. Without these items, lunch was very limited since One Can provides only one spread per week (typically jam or peanut butter). Peanut butter provides a great source of protein (and varieties without added sugar are even more healthy) but with the ban of nuts in schools (and rightly so), going forwards, family parcels should not contain peanut butter on week 1 when this may be the only choice that they have.
- ❖ Cheats. There were a couple of cheats in our parcel; I bought peppermint tea. Herbal teas are often donated and we can always provide these if requested on the referral form. One Can does not normally provide fresh coffee in a food parcel because we can't assume clients have cafeterias / coffee machines or coffee grinders. My children were a bit limited in terms of drinks. One of my children drinks peppermint tea, the other less so and missed not having squash or juice. If squash or juice is donated to One Can, it's given as a priority to families.

Conclusion

I was curious to see whether a standard parcel was adequate for a whole week rather than 5 days. It was, but only just and we don't want our clients struggling to put a meal together at the end of the week. I propose therefore leaving the parcels as they stand – a standard parcel will typically be enough for a week with the recipient having access to some food in their own cupboard. An enhanced parcel is typically enough for a recipient, with no access to any other food, for a week.

As a family, we actually made very few sacrifices. My children would probably disagree with that comment but 2 packets of chocolate biscuits should be more than enough for the family!

With some minor tweaks (addition of salt, spices and herbs), I believe One Can parcels provide enough food to prepare delicious meals.

The benefit of eating healthily is well known. The research of Professor Felice Jacka (author of the book, Brain Changer) revealed that women whose diets were generally higher in vegetables, fruit, unprocessed red meats (beef and lamb) fish and whole grains were less likely to have clinically significant depressive or anxiety disorders. On the other hand, those with a more 'western'-type dietary pattern, higher in processed and unhealthy foods such as meat pies, processed meats, pizza, chips and hamburgers, white bread, sugar and flavoured milk drinks, had more depressive symptoms. Whilst it's not specifically our job to change what people eat, we should do our best to provide as healthy parcels as possible. I understand that a couple of years ago, fresh fruit and veg were not even provided with food parcels and so the organisation has come a long way since then.

We are working with a wonderful chef, Xenia Murray, to deliver cookery classes. They are intended for families who possibly can't afford to buy cook books or attend courses to improve their cookery knowledge. Please get in touch if you would like to come along (office@onecantrust.org.uk).

Other recipes, written by Xenia, can be seen as part of the 'Grow to Give' campaign. You can access the recipes and videos by clicking the [attached link](#).

I'd be very happy to help answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for reading.

Jo Belshaw

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