

Evaluating the advice services provided by food banks.

Actionable insights for practice

This briefing is relevant to food banks and others providing advice and support services, charities, and community organisations.

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Contents

Key messages	3
How to design effective services	4
How to deliver advice in a way that works for people facing destitution	5
How to track progress and evaluate impact in this area?	6
Summary of the evaluation findings and design	7
About the project	7

Key messages

- Food bank advice services are effective in reaching people facing destitution. They achieve good short to medium term outcomes for the people who use them, including significant financial impacts through additional social security benefits, reduced debts or arrears, and decreased expenditure.
- The food bank advice services are largely reaching people who are either not being reached by or are underserved by other services. This may be due to gaps in local funding or provision, or because funding and design constraints are preventing other services from reaching people.
- The evaluation highlights key learning on: how to deliver advice services to people at risk of facing destitution, and otherwise marginalised groups; and why these services are valuable. These insights can help services to better reach people and to meet their needs before they need to turn to a food bank.
- Evidence has shown that effective advice services should:
 - Deliver multi-faceted (versatile and diverse), connected support. Generalist support is a vital part of provision, in combination with access to more specialist support where needed.
 - Provide continuity of support, where the adviser provides both advice and support to action it, on an ongoing basis.
 - Meet people where they are, face-to-face, in community settings.

How to design effective services

- Trussell set broad parameters for their advice services which means food banks can deliver advice and support within these parameters that is tailored to meet individual and local needs. Models of advice services provision are therefore as diverse as food banks themselves. Nonetheless there are some common aspects of delivery that are key to delivering an effective service.
- The location of advice services is important. Sessions were mainly delivered face to face from food bank distribution points, although some services were delivered from community centres or other shared spaces. Providing support in a non-traditional advice setting enhances success, because it means advisers can reach people or groups with unmet needs who might not otherwise seek support – in a setting where people feel comfortable and safe (and therefore more receptive to the offer of support). Together with face-to-face contact, meeting people where they are is important for building relational depth that allows people to engage with advice, and to be open about their situation.
- Food bank colleagues – both staff and volunteers – played a crucial role in finding out which people might benefit from the advice services, through talking to them when they received their parcels, and helping to build trusted relationships with them. Fostering trust is key to engaging people in the first place, and for maintaining that engagement.
- Alongside training, good relationships between food bank and adviser colleagues meant that food bank staff knew the types of support that the advice services offered and felt confident in signposting people to them. In some cases, food banks were ‘triaging’ everyone who visited a food bank for the first time. A small number also allowed inward referral agencies to refer people directly to the advice services (rather than to the food bank for food-based support alongside advice).
- Continuity of support – in other words, people’s ability to get ongoing support from the same adviser over time – was a feature that distinguished food bank advice services from other advice services. However, this often went beyond providing prolonged support, with advisers sometimes taking on a role more akin to that of a support worker. This type of support – where the adviser provides both advice and support to action it – may also build people’s capabilities to self-resolve at least some of their problems in future, which can prevent them from cycling back into local services.
- Regardless of the model of provision, people using the advice services tended to see them as part of the food bank itself and the advisers as food bank staff (even where advisers were employed by a third-party provider such as Citizens Advice). This is critical to success, as any potential for people to perceive services as separate or distinct from each other risks disengagement.




- The case studies showed that advice delivered by a third-party adviser (who was an embedded part of the food bank team), was a particularly effective model. This was because there was a built-in connection to a larger advice network to facilitate smoother referrals to other services, while also reducing the perception of these wider services as separate from food bank services. This is achievable through other delivery models (e.g. in-house provision) with the right resources and strong referral partnerships.
- Formal and informal partnerships are a key part of how food bank and advice services operate successfully within their local contexts. Partnership working is important for managing capacity issues locally and for inward referrals.
- Established inward and outward referral pathways were key to achieving good outcomes for people who used the advice services. Advisers benefited from established routes to refer their clients onwards to debt advice, housing specialists, family support, mental health and other support services. Again, co-location with other services is not only a benefit to individuals, but also to colleagues because it improves partnership and referrals and creates a sense of shared responsibility and working together to support people.
- For partner organisations, food banks were a needed additional source of help, which was perceived to be quick and easy for people to access and relieved pressure on their own services. However, there were some concerns about other organisations over-relying on food bank advice services, due to pressure on their own services.
- The design of services should be driven by food banks and other advice and support services finding the right workable partnerships and assessing what is relevant for the people in their area: considering what they both already do well, and what will work best for them given their particular circumstances and constraints.

How to deliver advice in a way that works for people facing destitution

- The natural link between the food bank environment and the advice services was particularly suited to meeting the needs of people facing destitution. Many people who need to use food banks may not have reached out for support with the issues that mean they do not have enough money to live on.
- At the same time, many of the people who use food banks have diverse and interrelated circumstances, including multiple physical and mental health conditions and adverse life events, which are linked to their financial hardship and need for advice, but also make seeking and using advice difficult.
- Multi-faceted (versatile and diverse), connected support is key to achieving positive outcomes. It is important not to treat issues in a siloed way, because they are typically interrelated.

Generalist advice and support is a vital part of provision in situ at the food bank, in combination with access to more specialist support where needed, and overall, reflects the most effective model of service delivery. Unlocking access to the right kind of support is one of the most important roles fulfilled by the advice services, whether that specialist support is delivered as part of food bank advice services or by supporting people to access other local services.

- While most food banks offered a mix of drop-in sessions and pre-booked appointments, in general, advisers preferred to keep the services free for drop-in sessions where possible. This was key to meeting the needs of people who used the services, as some people could struggle to meet appointment times.
- Having a space where people could access ongoing help with a range of support needs, rather than having to seek out different types of support at different organisations – and where they felt safe and welcomed – was valued highly by people facing destitution.
- Similarly, having friendly, welcoming, non-judgemental and supportive staff is important for people with anxiety and mental health problems.

 The people	 The set up	 The support
Non-judgemental, kind, welcoming, reassuring, knowing someone is there for you.	Informal, in person, welcoming, not restricted by time pressure.	Clear, simple advice, step by step, walking them through the process, actually able to help them.

- Again, continuity and depth of support is important for people with diverse and multifaceted issues. This may include ongoing emotional support as well as support to action advice from the same adviser or group of advisers.
- There was a lot of support for a ‘community centre’ model, reflecting the food bank ethos of rooting support in the community, including co-location with various other support services. Holding wider community activities in the same location, such as mother and toddler groups, or a café, further helps to reduce the stigma of seeking financial support and encourages people into services.

How to track progress and evaluate impact in this area

- Keep consistent records of all financial gains made: increased social security benefits entitlement, cash grants or vouchers, reduced or written off debt repayments.

- Analyse changing patterns of food parcel usage by people who have used the advice services.
- Where possible, data sharing with referral agencies.

Summary of the evaluation findings and design

The food bank advice services appear to be working well and are delivering good short- to medium-term outcomes for individuals, food banks and advice services providers – with additional benefits for other organisations and local economies. People using the advice services have more money in their pocket through additional social security benefits, reduced debts or arrears, and decreased expenditure. Many also have improved financial and personal wellbeing. These outcomes are being achieved despite significant challenges for food banks and advice services, including funding constraints, local pressures and the diverse and multifaceted issues that many people using the service face.

Despite, services alleviating financial hardship or preventing a household's existing situation from spiralling further the wider context of high rents and prices for essentials, insufficient incomes from social security, and low earnings, may mean that many people helped may find themselves struggling again at some point, possibly to the point of needing emergency food parcels. It is, therefore, not always possible to fully mitigate people needing emergency food despite accessing support through the advice services. What is more, changing circumstances and life events can also mean that people may need to turn to food banks for emergency food again in the future. More needs to be done to address the root causes of hunger and hardship.

About the project

This project evaluated advice services offered through food banks across the UK with financial and other support from Trussell. The evaluation was undertaken on behalf of Trussell between September 2023 to April 2024:

- To understand how the food bank advice services are delivered, who uses the services, when and why, how it has helped them, why some people do not use them, and what other support people may have had.
- To explore how people's experiences differ across different models of advice provision, for different types of people with different types of need.

Our approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods:

- Case studies with 16 food banks involving an initial fact-find activity and interviews with colleagues from the food bank, the advice services, and other local organisations.
- Interviews with 42 people who had used food banks from eight case study food banks, and follow-up interviews with 28 of these people three to four months after we first spoke with them.

- A survey of food bank colleagues and advice service advisers completed online by 131 food bank leads and 80 advisers.
- A survey of people who had used one of the 28 food banks completed online or on paper: comprised of 466 people who had used food bank advice services and 424 people who had not used the service.

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