

Evaluating the advice services provided by food banks.

Actionable insights for funders

This briefing is relevant for funders of advice services at national and local levels.

04/10/2024

Contents

Key messages	3
Why advice services are valuable	4
How to design effective services	6
What needs to change	7
Summary of the evaluation findings and design	8
About the project	8

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 inform the funding and design of services to better reach people and meet needs further upstream.
- 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.
- Funders of advice services should:
 - Address the causes of unmet need by funding gaps in advice services, with a particular focus on holistic, person-centred and connective services that can prevent severe hardship.

- Prioritise people most at risk before they need to use a food bank, and ensure everyone can access the right advice and support when and where they need it.
- Provide advice in outreach settings. Increased collaboration and integration within the sector can help to ensure there is 'no wrong door' for people seeking help, but some outreach is required to guide more people toward a door in the first place.
- Focus primarily on holistic and person-centred outcomes not just on the number of people seen. Providing continuity of support and supporting people's ability to self-resolve, suggests a broader understanding of positive outcomes for advice.
- Ensure the effective integration of support. Strong partnerships and well-connected services locally are needed to provide the most effective support, particularly for some groups (e.g. homeless people). Local government should ensure the effective integration of support by convening actors across money and debt advice, crisis support, community groups, and setting up place-based strategies to tackle destitution.

Why advice services are valuable

- The advice services are improving the material financial situations of those who use them. The estimated financial impacts of the service are large:
 - Financial gains (through income maximisation) – 38,685 people with financial gains received an average of £1.7k between April 2023 and March 2024 (£ 66.5 million in financial gains overall).
 - Debts managed – 10,326 people with debts managed had an average of £4.6k managed between April 2023 and March 2024 (£47.34 million overall).
 - Debts written off – 1,669 people with debts written off had an average of £7.5k written off between April 2023 and March 2024 (£12.56 million overall).

- Looking across all 66,770 people who accessed advice services between April 2023 and March 2024, this equates to an average financial gain of around £1,000, average debt managed of around £700 and average debt written off of around £188 per person.
- The financial impacts people typically experience are significant and contribute to very real differences in their financial lives. As a result, many were less worried about money, felt better about how they were managing their money, and reported a reduced need for emergency food parcels.
- Positive outcomes to individuals were also having a consequent impact on the wider community, and were therefore a net benefit to local areas (e.g. by reducing pressure on local services, improving efficiency across support services, reducing the risk of homelessness and arrears, and other wellbeing benefits that can positively impact the economy).
- The advice services were largely reaching people who existing services were not reaching, unable to reach or under-serving. This may be due to gaps in local funding or provision, or because funding and design constraints are preventing other existing services from reaching people.
- The advice services have become a critical part of the existing local landscape of advice and support, expanding capacity and meeting a tangible need while also demonstrating the need for investment in similar services which meet these needs further upstream in order to reduce the need for food-based support in the first place.
- Formal and informal partnerships with other organisations are an important part of how food bank and advice services operate, particularly for managing capacity locally and creating effective inward and outward referral pathways. For other organisations, the advice service was helping to relieve pressure on their own (often under-funded and under-resourced) services, meaning that some people were not waiting as long to access support. At the same time, the food bank advice services help other specialised services to access the groups who they struggle to reach or engage.
- The advice services also have the potential to decrease pressure on public sector staff and budgets (e.g. those in the DWP or working for a local authority), who process applications for social security benefits, or for local or discretionary support.
- The relationship with housing associations highlighted the capacity for advice services to alleviate situations related to housing. Being able to signpost or refer people to housing advice to address a housing issue first was seen as critical (if this was not available as part of the advice services). In turn, the support the advice services can provide benefits local housing providers through reduced rent arrears, and the local council through homelessness prevention and resolution.

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 for people at risk of destitution.
- The location of advice services is important. Providing support in a non-traditional advice setting enhances success, because it means advisers can meet people where they are; reaching people or groups with unmet needs who would 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, this is important for building relational depth that allows people to engage with advice, and to be open about their situation. Fostering trust is important for engaging people in the first place, and for maintaining that engagement.
- 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.
- 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, because some people could struggle to meet appointment times.
- 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.
- Continuity of support – in other words, people's ability to get ongoing support from the same advisers 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 the future, which can prevent them from cycling back into local services.

- 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 a highly effective model of service delivery. Unlocking access to the right kind of support, at the right time, 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.
- Many people using the advice services experienced multiple challenges including physical and mental health conditions and traumatic life events, and needed support with these. Overall, the design of food bank advice services appears to be well suited to meeting these needs.
- 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.

What needs to change

Policy makers and funders across the UK should:

- Address the funding gaps in advice services in their areas, with a particular focus on services that can prevent severe hardship. They should ensure funding supports effective and targeted advice services as described above, providing holistic, person-centred and connected support, meeting people where they are.
- Services should identify and prioritise people at high risk of going without essentials and provide help before they reach the point of needing a food bank, and ensure everyone can access the right advice and support when they need it. Food bank advice services are not displacing services already available in communities, and they largely appear to be reaching people with an unmet need who are not seeking or accessing advice and support elsewhere. This is largely because of the type and depth of advice being offered, and how it's provided. The community setting of the food bank offers an opportunity to build a trusted relationship with people, to the point where they are willing to accept an offer of support. Community settings and co-location with other services also help services to reach different demographic groups, including people who would not otherwise seek advice.
- Advice in outreach settings should become part of the broader advice service landscape. While increased collaboration and integration within the sector can help to ensure that there is 'no wrong door' for people seeking help, it is clear that some outreach is required to guide more people toward a door in the first place.

- Funding of services should be focused on person-centred and holistic outcomes rather than focusing purely on the number of people seen. This is vital when you consider the diverse and interrelated nature of support needs and the critical role continuity of support plays in helping people develop the ability to self-resolve. This suggests that food bank services and service advisers have a broader understanding of positive outcomes for advice.

Local government should fund and deliver money advice, and social security benefits advice that prioritises people facing destitution. Strong partnerships and well-connected services locally are needed to provide the most effective support ensuring they are reaching people at the right time – ideally before a food-based response is needed. The relationship between advice services and local authorities is important, particularly for issues around homelessness. They should ensure the effective integration of support locally by convening actors across money and debt advice, crisis support, community groups, and setting up place-based strategies to tackle destitution. Services should be delivered by organisations with local knowledge and understanding of the specific needs and experiences of their communities.

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.

Unit 9, Ashfield Trading Estate,
Ashfield Road, Salisbury SP2 7HL

enquiries@trussell.org.uk

trussell.org.uk

Trussell is the operating name of The Trussell Trust a registered charity in England & Wales (1110522) and Scotland (SC044246).
Registered Limited Company in England & Wales (5434524).