

Evaluating the advice services provided by food banks.

Actionable insights for policy makers

This briefing is relevant for advice sector policy makers at all levels, including those who fund it, and those involved in poverty reduction policy.

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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 from the evaluation suggests that policy makers should:
 - **Address the causes of unmet need by funding gaps in advice services**, with a particular focus on holistic 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 on person-centred and holistic outcomes** not purely based on the number of people seen. This is vital when you consider the multiple and interrelated nature of support needs and the critical role continuity of support plays in helping people develop the ability to self-resolve where possible. This suggests that food bank services and service advisers have 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.
- **Tackle income insufficiency.** The UK Government should ensure that people's incomes from social security and work are sufficient to cover the cost of essentials and consider widely supported recommendations for achieving this, including establishing an Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit.
- **Reform social security decision-making processes and make social security support more accessible**, so that people receive the benefits they are eligible for when they first apply (getting it right first time). Similarly, appealing benefits decisions should not be a complicated or drawn-out process (putting it right quickly and easily). Overall, the social security system is not meeting the accessibility needs of many applicants. More should be done to ensure everyone is aware of the social security support they are eligible for and supported to apply for it.

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, or people who had not been successfully helped by other services. 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 location of advice services is important. Providing support in a non-traditional advice setting enhances success, because it means advisers can reach 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.

- People's ability to get ongoing support from 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 future, which can prevent them from cycling back into local services.
- To achieve 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 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. People facing complicated circumstances often need wider support from other local services too, but without initial support from the advice services to address their financial issues in the round, they are more likely to cycle back into local services. This is one of the ways in which the food bank advice services reduce pressure on other local services, while at the same time helping 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 (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.
- The advice services have become a critical part of the existing local landscape of advice and support. 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.

What needs to change

Policy makers 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, 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 are largely reaching people with an unmet need who are not seeking or accessing advice and support elsewhere. This is 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 trust 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 be a key 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. Examples of outreach included services being delivered in community centres, schools and GP surgeries.
- **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 emergency food 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.
- **The UK Government should ensure that people's incomes from social security and work are sufficient** to cover the cost of essentials and consider widely supported recommendations for achieving this, including establishing an Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit. The main

drivers of food bank need are outside the control of food banks or advice services, and this evaluation adds to an already substantial evidence base underpinning calls for change to improve social security and paid work so that they provide sufficient protection from hardship.

- **Reform social security decision-making processes and make social security support more accessible**, so that people receive the benefits they are entitled to when they first apply (getting it right first time). Similarly, appealing benefits decisions should not be a complicated or drawn out process (putting it right quickly and easily). The advice services were not only making people aware of the benefits they were eligible for, but also helping them to complete the application forms for benefits, and to appeal benefits decisions. This support was hard to access elsewhere, and was needed because processes are not straightforward, and application forms are not accessible and inclusive for everyone – including people with mental health problems or learning difficulties, and people who are digitally excluded or who have low levels of digital literacy. Listening to people's needs would ensure that forms are designed in a way that works for applicants. Everyone should be aware of social security support they are eligible for and supported to apply through the widespread availability of quality accessible independent advice and support.

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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