Local Insight Report

Hull Foodbank and Citizens Advice Hull & East Riding

Tackling Destitution Together

April 2025 - March 2026



Introduction

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This local insight report details lessons learned from the Tackling Destitution Together project. This project is part of a collaboration between Trussell, Citizens Advice, and local Citizens Advice offices and food banks in the Trussell community. It brings partners together to test early intervention and preventative models of advice delivery that identify and support people at risk of destitution before they experience crisis over a 12-month period.

Specifically, the aims of this project were to:
1. Prevent destitution
2. Help people exit it quickly
3. Support people stuck in long-term destitution

In doing so, this project responds to a growing concern that the level of hunger and hardship people are facing is deepening, with an increase in the proportion of households reporting 'very low' food security.

People needing foodbank and charitable support are often experiencing multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage rather than isolated financial crises. This suggests that preventative approaches that focus on addressing the interconnected challenges of income, welfare, debt and health are needed rather than addressing hunger alone.

We understand that it is through collaborative partnership and collective action at local, regional and national levels that we can influence change across the systems and services supporting people and communities. The core hypothesis was that trusted frontline organisations, supported by effective partnerships, infrastructure and referral pathways across the wider system, could identify risk earlier, resolve some issues themselves, and connect people to advice before crisis escalates.

Importantly, while the focus has been on reaching populations disproportionally affected by hunger and hardship earlier with the right level of support, a key aspect of this project has been testing new ways of working and developing collaborations across national and community organisations.

This report looks at unique ways in which Hull Foodbank and Citizens Advice Hull & East Riding have attempted to tackle destitution together in their community. It provides a summary of key outcomes, learnings, challenges and recommendations.

Background

The first phase of this project involved discovery research conducted by Citizens Advice and Trussell that explored who experiences destitution locally, why it happens, where current support succeeds or fails and how advice and interventions could prevent or reduce it earlier.

What is destitution?

Destitution is defined as being unable to afford the basic material necessities needed to stay warm, dry, clean and fed and affects ~13.8 million people in the UK (JRF, 2023). Research also found 14.1 million people were food insecure in 2024 (Trussell, 2025). The income threshold for single adults to avoid destitution (excluding housing) is £120 a week for a single adult and £205 for a couple. Universal Credit (UC) is below this threshold (Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell, 2023).

Importantly, destitution is systemic and multi-factor, not individual failure. It's often the result of a combination of social security failures, complications with mental or physical health, disabilities and low or unstable income (i.e. as a result of Universal Credit or insecure jobs). Other factors are life shocks or debt, (bereavement, abuse, homelessness, job loss or illness) and isolation or digital exclusion.

Who experiences destitution?

The following high-risk groups were identified to be at most risk of destitution during discovery research (JRF, 2023):

- People with disabilities and long-term health conditions;
- People from black and Asian communities; People from lone parent households;
- People with complex needs, for example experiencing addiction or homelessness;
- Migrants;
- Single adults

Advice is reactive, not preventative

Advice is shown to be highly effective when people access it (Trussell, 2024). However, almost half of the people reaching food banks have no meaningful advice beforehand (Trussell, 2025). Discovery research by Citizens Advice identified a number of factors:

- Local support services are not always holistic or well connected.
- Needs are complex and compounded by the time people reach crisis point.
- Pressures on the advice sector can lead to a focus on efficiency over effectiveness.
- Demand for advice services continues to increase.

The core problem

- Destitution is driven by structural system failures, especially social security
- People often fall into crisis before they access help

The key gap

- Advice often comes far too late
- Many of the most high-risk groups are not reached at all

The opportunity

- Shift from crisis response to early intervention
- Target high-risk groups earlier with tailored interventions and advice
- Strengthening and aligning local (fragmented, crisis-driven) systems

Summary

152

Clients supported through advice delivery

9

Training sessions held

238

Frontline staff trained

51

Lived experience participants engaged

80

Partners engaged

37

New partnerships established

Over

£266,542

In financial gains*

Over

£4,000

In debt written off

Hull and East Riding Citizens Advice and Hull Foodbank worked together to test how earlier intervention, strengthened community capability and improved access to advice could prevent people from experiencing destitution, help people recover more quickly from crises and reduce the likelihood of repeat hardship. The pilot focused specifically on people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, a group identified through local evidence as being at heightened risk of poverty and destitution.

Over the course of the pilot, advisers supported 152 clients with issues like benefits support, food insecurity, housing problems, and debt and fuel poverty. The project generated £266,542 in achieved and expected income gains, alongside £4,000 in debt written off*.

Alongside direct advice provision, the pilot sought to build longer-term community resilience by equipping frontline workers and trusted organisations with the skills, knowledge and tools needed to identify hardship and intervene earlier. Through its Advice First Aid programme, the project trained 238 staff across a wide range of organisations including foodbanks, health services, mental health providers, probation services and community organisations. The project also developed practical resources including the Advice First Aid Kit (which has a recorded average of 100 new visitors and clicks a month to access the advice support), QR-code tools and a Problem Notifier App designed to make advice easier to access and use.

Evidence gathered throughout delivery suggests that the pilot helped strengthen local partnerships, improved confidence among frontline workers and generated learning about how preventative approaches can be embedded within trusted community settings. The project also produced valuable lived experience insights that continue to inform local discussions about food insecurity, health inequalities and community resilience.

Overall, these developments represent early-stage system change and are expected to increase over time as relationships embed and confidence grows.

*Note these gains come from people receiving support they are already entitled to and that are unlocked as a result of receiving advice (not from an increase in public spending).

A closer look

...at what has been achieved over time

Building advice capacity across the local system

A key feature of Hull's pilot was its focus on building capability within trusted local organisations, in recognition that many frontline staff regularly encounter people experiencing financial hardship, but do not always feel equipped to discuss issues such as benefits, debt, housing insecurity or fuel poverty.

Through Advice First Aid, participants developed a greater understanding of common challenges associated with destitution and learned practical approaches to supporting people to access appropriate help. Rather than attempting to create new referral pathways into advice alone, the project focused on equipping workers who already had trusted relationships with residents to recognise early signs of hardship, understand available support and feel confident taking action before problems escalated.

Over the course of the project, 238 frontline staff participated in Advice First Aid training, delivered to organisations including food banks, mental health services, health providers, probation services and community organisations. Rather than focusing solely on referrals, the training aimed to increase confidence, knowledge and practical problem-solving skills among staff already supporting people experiencing hardship.

Feedback demonstrated the practical value of this approach. Participants reported greater confidence navigating complex advice issues and supporting individuals facing financial hardship. Several highlighted how training had reduced the time required to identify appropriate support and enabled them to have more effective conversations with clients about poverty, debt, benefits and housing concerns.

The pilot also developed an important partnership with the Probation Service. Following sustained relationship-building, over 80 probation officers received training and the programme became embedded within future staff development plans. Information shared by Hull Foodbank highlighted the Probation Service as a major source of food bank referrals, helping the project identify an opportunity for earlier intervention and support. Building confidence and knowledge of both current and future probation officers to address underlying problems rather than referring people to foodbanks alone.

Creating practical tools that fit real-world constraints

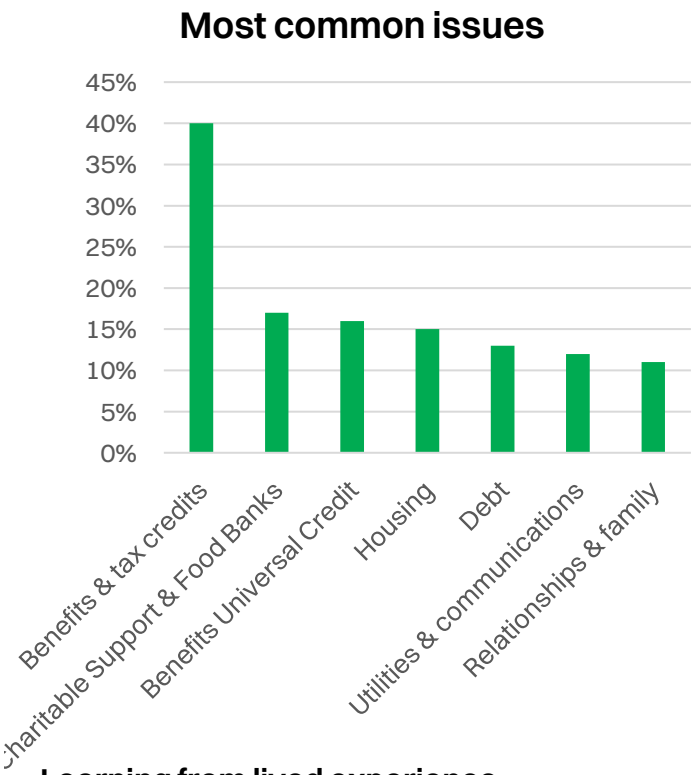
Alongside the training programme, Hull developed a suite of practical support tools including QR-code resources, an online Advice First Aid Kit and a Problem Notifier App. These resources were designed to simplify access to advice information for both frontline workers and residents. They emerged through continuous testing and learning, which led to a growing understanding that accessibility and visibility were often more important than simply providing large volumes of information because it enabled both staff and residents to find support quickly when it was needed. The Advice Aid Kit has a recorded average of 100 new visitors and clicks a month, with an average of 5 specific further questions per month on particular cases, highlighting the need for an open door of communication post training to be maintained and nurtured as a collaborative process.

Direct support to people at risk of destitution

One adviser worked directly with 152 people to enable access to immediate support for people already experiencing significant financial hardship while also creating opportunities to address longer-term causes of vulnerability.



A closer look at the type of support provided during the pilot shows that most support was overwhelmingly focused on benefits support. This was followed by other charitable and foodbank support, which may be needed while underlying issues are being addressed, such as housing problems, debt and fuel poverty.



Learning from lived experience

People with lived experience of poverty, financial hardship and food insecurity helped the team understand more about the practical challenges people faced when trying to navigate support services. Participants frequently described difficulties finding accurate information, understanding where to seek help and identifying the most appropriate organisation to approach for support.

Hull adopted a practical and iterative approach to engaging people with lived experience throughout the pilot. Rather than relying on a single consultation exercise, feedback was gathered through ongoing engagement with people accessing advice services and community support organisations. This approach enabled the project team to test ideas, refine resources and better understand the barriers people faced when seeking help.

These insights reinforced the project's focus on improving accessibility and reducing complexity within local advice pathways. It also provided an important check on professional assumptions and helped ensure that interventions remained focused on the practical realities of navigating poverty and hardship.

Lived experience input directly influenced the development of project resources. Feedback helped shape the design of QR-code materials, the Advice First Aid Kit and other tools intended to improve access to information and support. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of being able to access relevant support quickly, particularly during periods of stress or crisis.

The project also used lived experience insight to strengthen training content. Real-life experiences helped illustrate the barriers people encounter when seeking support and gave frontline workers a greater understanding of the realities of financial hardship.

Overcoming challenges

The project in Hull encountered a number of challenges throughout delivery, many of which reflected the realities of trying to achieve systems change within a relatively short funding period.

Breaking through Institutional barriers

One of the most significant challenges involved engaging strategically important organisations. An example of this was work with the Probation Service, identified early in the project as a major referral route into food banks. Establishing the partnership required several months of relationship-building, reflecting organisational processes, security requirements and wider workforce pressures. However, sustained commitment from both the project team and probation colleagues resulted in training for over 80 probation officers and the programme being embedded within future workforce development plans.

Moving from awareness to action

Another challenge involved sustaining engagement with frontline workers following training. Early experience suggested that providing information alone was insufficient to change practice. Resources were frequently saved but rarely revisited. In response, Hull refined its approach, developing practical tools, QR-code resources and the Advice First Aid Kit to make support easier to access and use in real-world situations. This iterative approach demonstrated the importance of adapting interventions in response to emerging learning.

Measuring what matters

The pilot also highlighted the challenge of balancing preventative activity with traditional performance measures. Community outreach and relationship-based work often produced lower client volumes than centralised advice services, requiring considerable time to build-awareness and trust within communities. However, project staff reflected that these activities frequently generated stronger preventative outcomes and created opportunities to reach people who would not otherwise engage with Citizens Advice.

Enabling early co-production

Finally, the team reflected that undertaking lived experience work earlier in the project could have strengthened delivery further. Although the insights gathered proved highly valuable, staff felt that earlier engagement may have shaped intervention design, outreach locations and service development sooner. This learning is likely to influence future programme design and local research activity.

The project also found that anticipated forms of support could unintentionally create barriers for people with disabilities, leading to a more flexible, user-led approach to engagement, supported by staff with lived and professional experience of disability-sector work.

> **[When discussing the resources we shared after the training] I got an answer in half the time the other members searched for theirs, and that will be a huge difference-maker for our members that we refer to foodbanks. The biggest challenge for us is keeping our young people engaged when we signpost them to somewhere else. When you can't control that experience for them, if they have a negative experience, we can lose them. Sometimes they will come to us about it but then they feel powerless to solve their own problem. CAB have been brilliant in coming to us so are young people feel better about that process.**
>
> **Training participant**

A case study

A client attending a community advice session sought support after being diagnosed with throat cancer and initially being given a life expectancy of six months. During this period, the client understandably focused on treatment and day-to-day survival, leaving energy bills unpaid and allowing significant arrears to build up. Following successful treatment, the client entered remission but was left with a permanent tracheostomy, creating substantial communication difficulties and making it difficult to contact organisations or resolve problems independently over the telephone.

The client's financial situation had become increasingly precarious. The accumulation of energy debt created ongoing anxiety and there were growing concerns about the risk of enforcement action or disconnection. This was particularly significant because the client relied on electricity to power a CPAP machine used to support their health, meaning any interruption to supply could have serious implications for their wellbeing and safety.

Recognising both the financial and health-related risks, the adviser acted quickly to contact the energy supplier, explain the client's circumstances and secure a pause to debt recovery activity. The client was referred for specialist debt and energy advice, received support to access fuel vouchers and underwent a review of benefit entitlement to maximise available income. The adviser also helped ensure the client was added to the Priority Services Register, providing additional protections and support as a vulnerable energy consumer.

As a result of the intervention, the client was able to establish a sustainable repayment arrangement, reduce immediate financial pressure and secure additional protections against future energy supply issues. The support helped stabilise the client's situation at a point when managing complex administrative processes independently would have been particularly challenging.



Note: To protect anonymity and confidentiality, this image is of a model and is not intended to represent the individual described in the case study.

Bigger picture

What can we learn about attempting system change more broadly?

Hull's pilot generated several important insights about preventing destitution and creating sustainable systems change.

Building confidence, not just knowledge

Perhaps the strongest learning was that information alone rarely changes behaviour. Throughout the project, the team found that frontline workers were often motivated to help but lacked confidence in navigating complex advice systems. Increasing awareness was important, but building confidence and making support easy to use proved equally critical. As one project lead reflected, online resources were the easy part; the real challenge was creating the confidence needed to act.

Designing support around people

This learning led to the development of a broader philosophy centred on making support simple, visible and accessible. The Advice First Aid Kit, QR-code resources and practical training all reflected this principle. Rather than expecting users to navigate complex systems independently, the project focused on reducing friction and making help available at the moment it was needed.

Systems change takes time

The pilot also demonstrated that systems change often develops more slowly than project timelines. Building effective partnerships with major statutory services required time, persistence and mutual investment. The partnership developed with the Probation Service highlighted the important role of individuals within larger organisations who are prepared to invest time and effort in developing new collaborations, often while balancing competing priorities and organisational constraints.

Although factors such as security clearances and workforce pressures created challenges for all parties, the commitment shown by key individuals helped sustain momentum and ultimately led to significant outcomes and a foundation for ongoing collaboration beyond the funded period.

The power of trusted relationships

Finally, Hull's experience reinforced the value of trusted local intermediaries. Many residents facing hardship first disclose problems to community workers, food bank volunteers, support staff or health professionals rather than seeking formal advice services directly. Equipping these trusted individuals with knowledge, confidence and practical tools creates new opportunities to intervene earlier and prevent problems from escalating into crisis.

The Hull pilot showed that successful early intervention depends not only on identifying effective solutions, but also on creating the conditions that allow them to become embedded within organisations, communities and local systems.

In Hull, this meant investing in relationship-building, developing frontline practice, creating practical tools that could be integrated into day-to-day work, and securing buy-in from key decision-makers.

The pilot showed that lasting change is more likely when new approaches become part of existing processes, professional development programmes and trusted community networks, rather than remaining standalone projects.



What’s next?

Although the funded pilot has concluded, many elements of the work are expected to continue. Several activities have already been incorporated into wider organisational plans, including the continued delivery of Advice First Aid training, support for food aid providers and ongoing work with local partnerships focused on food insecurity and destitution prevention. Relationships developed through the project are also being used to support new funding opportunities and wider systems-change activity.

One of the most significant areas of legacy relates to workforce development. Training resources have been embedded within local probation services and public health nursing programmes, creating opportunities for future cohorts of practitioners to develop a stronger understanding of poverty, hardship and preventative support.

Learning from the pilot has already informed wider local initiatives. Project staff described how lived experience findings, partnership relationships and evidence gathered through the pilot have contributed to discussions linked to Hull's Crisis and Resilience Fund programme and broader efforts to strengthen community resilience.

Looking ahead, Hull's experience suggests that tackling destitution requires both immediate support and long-term investment in community capability. By strengthening the confidence of trusted frontline workers, simplifying access to advice and building relationships across local systems, the pilot has laid foundations that partners hope will continue to reduce hardship and support people before problems reach crisis point.



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citizens advice

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Ending hunger together

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