

Bristol City Council Advice Grant funding approach, 2026-2030

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Introduction

Bristol City Council (BCC) currently invests £560,000 per annum in advice services.

This funding approach outlines BCC’s grant investment strategy for the advice sector, to deliver high-quality advice services and strengthening the resilience of Bristol’s citizens and communities.

Advice services are essential to communities experiencing the greatest inequity, helping citizens to resolve problems and prevent crises. These services address financial, legal, and social challenges, enabling individuals to maintain, wellbeing & health, housing, employment and fostering healthier, more resilient, communities.¹

Bristol has a mature network of localised and city-wide advice agencies which are an important part of the city infrastructure, providing support and services to thousands of people each year. They are at the heart of the one city, many communities response to poverty and cost-of-living.

Research done by Advice UK² highlights the value of investing in advice as unresolved issues relating to housing, welfare benefits, and debt often lead to poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and deteriorating mental and physical health, resulting in costly interventions by public services.

Our approach to advice funding

The council's investment will support the delivery of the *Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Advice Strategy* for Bristol from 2024 onwards by prioritising:

- 1) Increased equity of access to good-quality advice, rooted in local communities
- 2) Improved collaboration and partnerships with community organisations with existing links to citizens
- 3) Improved pathways and referrals into advice services connecting people to the right advice at the right time.

¹ [Advice Saves Lives report \(adviceuk.org.uk\)](https://adviceuk.org.uk/advice-saves-lives-report/)

² [Advice Saves Lives report \(adviceuk.org.uk\)](https://adviceuk.org.uk/advice-saves-lives-report/)

Underpinning principles

Five core community development principles guide this funding approach:

- Equity & inclusion – Ensuring fair access to services for all
- Place-based – Locally embedded support tailored to community needs
- Asset-based – Leveraging existing community strengths and resources
- Citizen-led – Engaging residents in shaping services
- Relational – Building strong, trust-based partnerships

Our priorities

The advice grant will contribute to a joined up easy to navigate advice offer for Bristol, by embedding these five principals and focusing on the following priorities:

1) A good-quality, accessible and equitable advice offer

- Targeted support based on evidence and data about who is taking up services and who needs access to services
- Positive, proactive steps to reach communities who face additional barriers to accessing services
- Advice services that are rooted in local communities

2) Increased Capacity of the Advice Network

- Strategic resource allocation to ensure specialist provision reaches those in need.
- Collaboration with community organizations to manage demand through early intervention, peer support, and self-help.

3) Improved Referral Pathways

- Strengthened working relationships across the VCSE ecosystem and advice sector.
- A more seamless, user-friendly experience for citizens accessing advice services.

Applicants will need to demonstrate how activities will:

- Be shaped and influenced by citizen need, responding to changing priorities.
- Be inclusive and reflective of the diversity of the city.
- Provide clear, well-communicated service offer.
- Facilitate smooth referrals between partner organizations.
- Leverage additional resources (funding, expertise, opportunities).

Provision

The grant funding will contribute to the delivery of a holistic advice service free at the point of access. Focusing on the provision of five main types of advice:

- Housing and homelessness
- Debt
- Welfare rights
- Employment rights
- Immigration

Experience and quality standards

Applicants must hold recognized advice quality standard³ to ensure service reliability and effectiveness. If multiple organisations receive funding, BCC will require a collaborative approach to service delivery.

All recipients will have to show they can meet Bristol City Council's Baseline Standards.

Grant funding model

BCC will adopt a lead consortium approach:

- A single lead organisation will coordinate the grant, holding the agreement with BCC and distributing funds to partners.
- The lead partner will oversee performance reporting.
- Consortium members will provide specialist services, each with clear roles and outcomes.
- A steering committee will oversee implementation and adjust strategies as needed.

Monitoring & impact assessment

- Applicants must outline how they will monitor and evaluate the grant's impact on the city. Given the evolving nature of priorities, grantees must submit an annual work plan to BCC.
- Provide formal monitoring reports every six months.

³ Advice services are quality assured through the Advice Quality Standard [Advice Quality Standard - Advice Services Alliance](#)

Collaboration & partnership

BCC is committed to fostering a trusting and respectful partnership with advice organisations. By working together, we can improve outcomes for communities experiencing the greatest inequity.

Grant value & duration

- Annual funding: £560,000 per year.
- Grant period: 1st April 2026 – 31st March 2030 (four-year funding approach)

Timetable

Activity	Date
Current grant extension period	April 2024- March 2026
Committee decision	May 2025
Grant process	June – October 2025
Recommendations made	October 2025
Final grant decision	November 2025
Grant awarded	December 2025
New grant funding agreement starts	1 st April 2026

Background and strategic context

Investing in advice services generates significant economic and social benefits. Nationally, Citizens Advice estimates that for every £1 invested, clients benefit by £14.

Locally, (in terms of direct benefit to the Bristol economy) the Bristol Advice Partnership (BAP) estimate that in 2023/24 their organisations collectively secured an additional £14.2m⁴ for their clients, in new benefit payments, backdated awards and other compensatory payments; money that is often spent in the local economy. For every £1 funders invest in Bristol advice services:

- Local government and public services save £2.05, for example through health and homelessness services, and out-of-work benefits.
- The wider economy benefits from £14.69 through increased productivity, wellbeing and participation.

⁴ [Publications - Bristol Law Centre](#)

- Service users are on average £11.63 better off, usually due to higher income, benefits or written-off debt.

Current grant holders

The Bristol Advice Partnership (BAP) deliver holistic advice, casework, and legal support.

The Partnership is comprised of:

- Citizens Advice Bristol (lead partner)
- Bristol Law Centre
- St Pauls Advice Centre
- Talking Money
- WECIL (West of England Centre for Inclusive Living)
- North Bristol Advice Centre
- South Bristol Advice Services

The partners each bring their own specialisms and targeted service models to the partnership and work together to ensure city wide access to free legal advice provision.

The current grant arrangements were put in place in 2019, initially for a four-year period after extensive work was done to assess the needs of advice in the city and design a new model of provision. The new model was working towards a 'whole system' model of integrated, referrer/citizen friendly system with:

- Centralised and shared elements of advice service and delivery.
- A shared set of outcomes to describe the combined impact of the services.
- Exploration of up-skilling a wider network of informal, 'first line' providers to triage service.
- Record the user need accurately and provide a basic level of support as part of a three-tier model approach.
- Exploration of options for information sharing across a more integrated system.
- Support the step-change among external BCC funded services into a coherent, clearly articulated set of services that can contribute to a wider system review.

Progress has been made over the grant period (see below) but there is still work to do and this funding approach builds on the extensive work previously done.

A key achievement of the current grant extension was the production of a new advice need assessment. The Partnership have used this to lead the development of an advice strategy for the city to shape the development of advice provision in the city and attract investment in advice services.

Current grant performance

Between April 2024 and March 2025 BAP partners:

- Helped a total of 7,697 local people with 18,359 issues.
- Assisted citizens in writing off debt to the value of nearly £19 million.
- Made financial gains in welfare benefits, grants etc. totalled over £12 million.
- Supported 390 clients facing eviction and provided advice to 802 clients struggling with housing debt, including cases related to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction.
- Advised 972 people with issues related to fuel debts,
- Issued 1,147 food vouchers to those in need.
- Demographic information shows a good reach across geographical and equalities communities see figure 1, 2 and 3 below
- Responded proactively the cost-of-living crisis in partnership with BCC and other agencies as part of the One City approach, supporting Welcoming spaces and working with community organisations to improve citizens' access to advice.
- Mapped the provision of advice services across Bristol, North Somerset & South Gloucestershire and that clearly shows what each member agency is currently offering to clients, where, when and how and the current capacity of individual agencies to manage new enquiries.
- Set up a 'sharing capacity' WhatsApp group to better use advice resources and get citizens to the right advice at the right time.
- Completed a new needs assessment of advice needs in the city.
- Developed a strategy to shape development of advice provision.

BAP demographic information

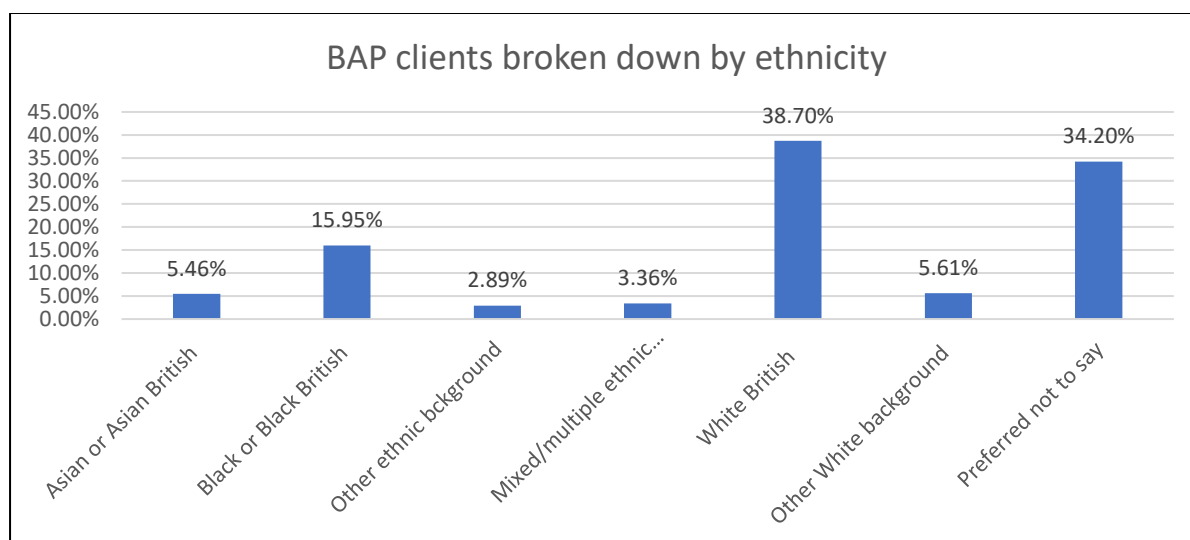


Figure one: Ethnicity of BAP clients - Distribution of clients by ethnic background, showing highest representation among White British clients, followed by Black or Black British and those who preferred not to disclose.

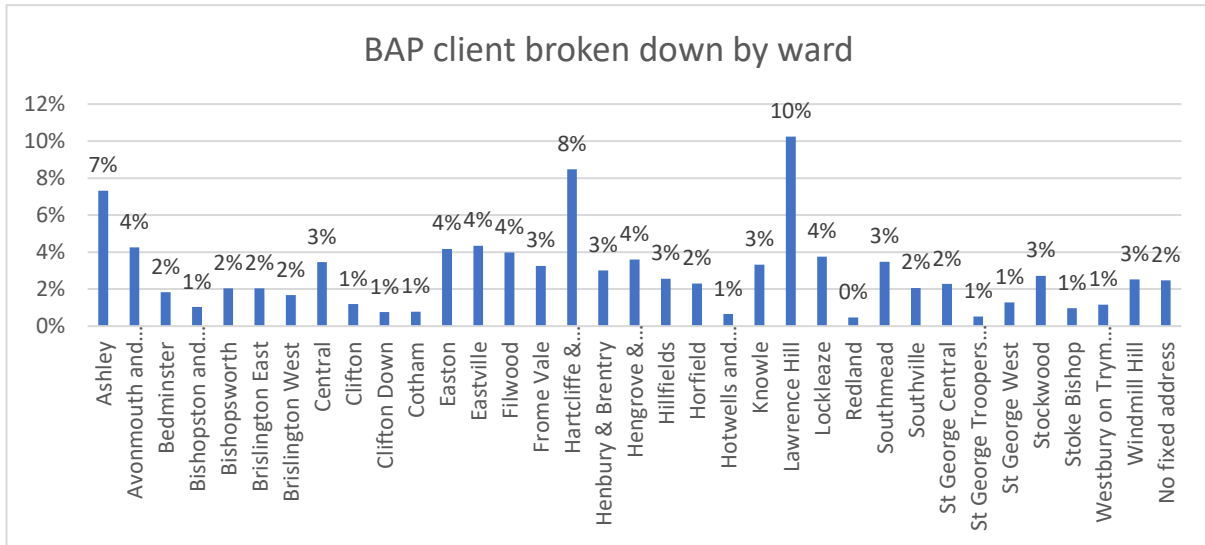


Figure two: Geographic reach of BAP services - Percentage of clients served across Bristol wards, with highest engagement in Lawrence Hill, Hartcliffe & Withywood, and Ashley.

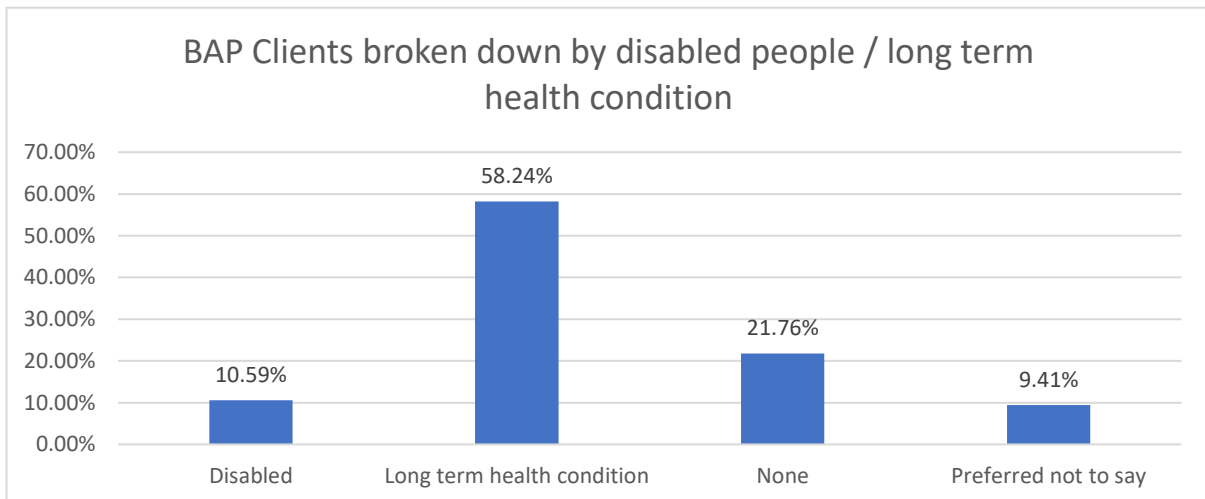


Figure three: Health and disability status of clients - Breakdown of clients by disability and long-term health conditions, highlighting that over half report a long-term health condition.

Learning from current grant

The partnership works well, successfully collaborating on funding bids and a joined-up response to cost-of-living crisis. There is more work to do on joining up approach, including referral and signposting pathways that are easy for citizens to understand.

As part of the current grant arrangement, BAP delivered an advice needs assessment working with the wider sector. This was used to develop an advice strategy for the city.

2024 advice needs assessment

The advice needs assessment (see Appendix F) includes the following findings:

- **13.4%** of residents are in fuel poverty.
- **1 in 8 households** face food inequality.
- **25%** (85,028) of eligible residents claim Universal Credit.
- **7.8%** (26,156) claim Personal Independence Payments.
- **10.4%** find it difficult to manage financially.
- Council Tax arrears total **£51.8 million** (May 2024).
- **48%** of BCC tenants are in rent arrears; **12%** are significantly overdue.
- Bristol has the highest homelessness rate outside London, with temporary accommodation needs tripling since 2019 (1,506 people in 2024).
- 8,444 people claim Attendance Allowance (Aug 23).

Bristol advice provision

The needs assessment illustrated a mixed market of advice provision in the city from community-based advice provision to national charities such as citizens advice and BCC in house advice services WRAMAS (Welfare Rights And Money Advice Service) - see Appendix F for a detailed breakdown of advice agencies and there services).

Of the main advice agencies, only Bristol Law Centre and St Pauls Advice Centre has an open-door policy. Others provide access through initial telephone enquiry or through referral pathways. Often client appointments are made at the main offices of agencies.

Unlike VCSE Advice organisations in the city, the BCC advice service WRAMAS works largely with partner agencies and referrals come from adult social care and NHS teams. Their clients typically need home visits and can't access other support services. WRAMAS don't offer a publicly accessible debt advice service (this is only available for clients in homelessness pathways or being supported by adult social care).

Covid and cost of living illustrated the importance of working together in a complex eco-system of support that contributes to the delivery of advice in the city.

The advice network – ACFA

The majority of advice services are members of The Advice Network - ACFA, an umbrella organisation representing social welfare legal advice agencies and partners and collaborators. The organisation operates across Bristol, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset and Bath and North East Somerset. It provides opportunities for agencies to meet and has ambitions to play a strategic role in co-ordinating advice provision in the city.

Capacity issues

Routes to advice services are provided by internet, phone and face to face. Face to face work has continued to expand after its retraction during Covid19, recognising that for many people this is the only way to support their needs. However, all agencies are working at full capacity. This has meant they are having to prioritise those at risk of losing their housing, are homeless, have dependent children, have mental ill health or physical ill health. There is a particular capacity issue with housing and immigration in the city where demand for services is particularly high.

Advice funders

There is a complex picture of funding for the advice sector in the city. Funding is fragmented and often short term, coming from a wide variety of sources.

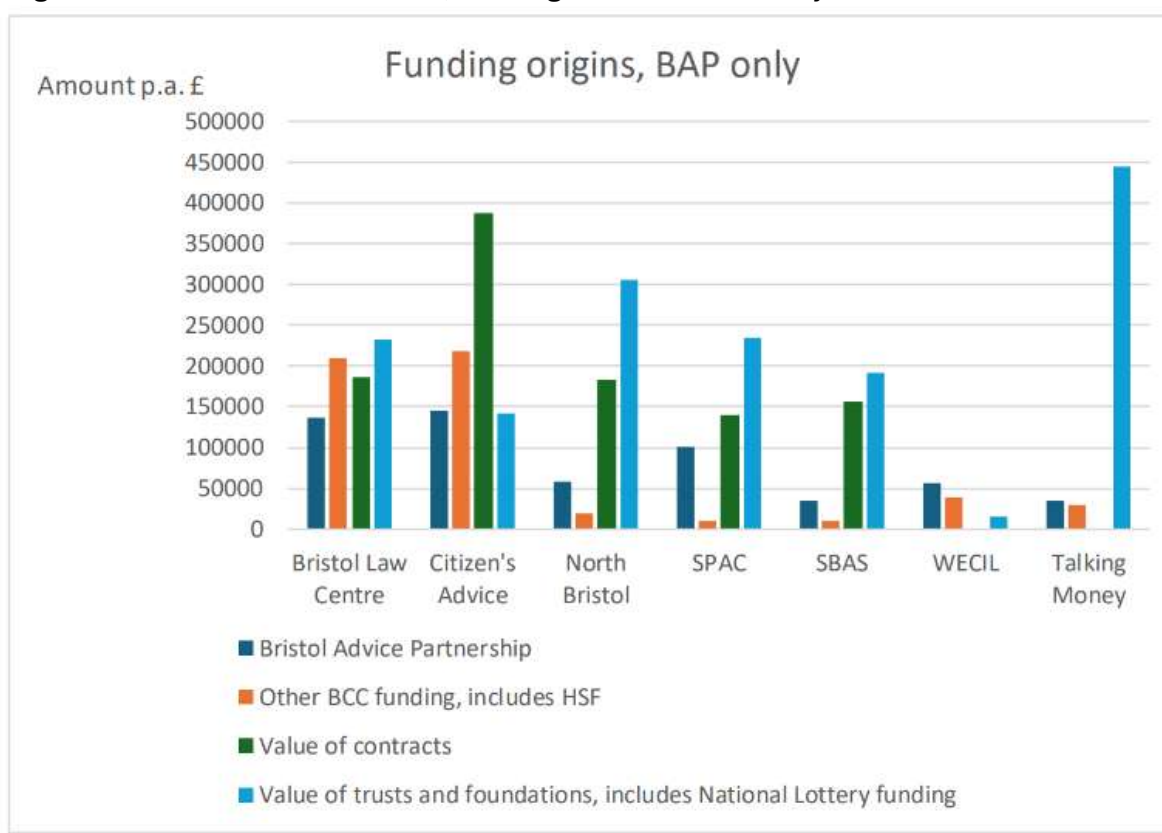


Figure 4: Origins of funding for Bristol's advice sector (BAP only) - A Visual breakdown of funding sources supporting advice services in Bristol, including Bristol City Council's grant, the Household Support Fund, and contributions from trusts, foundations, and other public sector bodies.

Bristol City Council funding

BCC's advice grant is used to leverage other funding for the city. In 2023-2024, this amounted to £3,154,815.

A further £808,000 was invested in the sector by BCC through the Household Support Fund 24/25. The funding was awarded to 14 advice organisations throughout the city to provide information, support, and guidance, to tackle root causes of poverty, as opposed to immediate need. This will also enable advice and support to be targeted to pensioners, especially those that have lost out as a result to changes to the universal Winter Fuel Allowance.

Other advice funders

To maintain sustainable services, advice services have shifted the model of funding to be flexible and to work with trusts and foundations to secure additional funding. However, funding is often fragmented and short-term and puts significant pressure on over stretched organisations.

Geographical advice provision

The needs assessment found that advice services are unevenly distributed across Bristol. While citywide services exist, most are physically based in inner-city wards, relying on telephone inquiries and referrals. This creates gaps in provision, particularly in South, and East Bristol.

Only Bristol Law Centre and St Pauls Advice Centre operate an open-door policy, improving outreach and accessibility remains a priority.

Whilst the assessment identified challenges facing the city, it also identified several opportunities to improve advice provision:

- **Better alignment of resources** where people in need already seek support.
- **Stronger collaboration** with support service providers.
- **Analysis of systemic failures** to reduce demand for crisis-driven advice.
- **Enhanced understanding of legal advice services** to enable earlier interventions.

This needs assessment was used to design and shape the VCSE advice strategy.

VCSE advice strategy for Bristol: 2024 onwards

BCC's advice grant will support the delivery of the VCSE Advice Strategy which is summarised as follows:

Strategic aim

Enable people to access free, quality legal advice in the way they need, at the time they need it so they can get on with their lives.

Four focus areas to achieve this:

A. Partnerships

Building holistic, connected, and collaborative partnerships across advice providers to maximize impact. Partnerships should prioritise:

- Co-location of services for efficiency.
- Preventative advice to reduce client distress.
- Accessibility, including outreach to disadvantaged communities.

B. People-centred approaches

Engaging clients in shaping advice services through feedback and data analysis to address inequalities. Services must be:

- Physically accessible.
- Inclusive, offering translation, phone, and face-to-face options.
- Agile and responsive to community needs.

C. Specialist advice

Focusing on housing, welfare benefits, debt, and employment. Efforts should include:

- Improving service branding and referral pathways.
- Upskilling partner agencies for effective signposting.
- Sharing resources and best practices across advice networks.

D. System change

Addressing systemic triggers of advice demand by improving early intervention and reducing crisis-driven advice needs.

Strategic context and alignment

Advice services are key partners in helping BCC to deliver its strategic objectives for the city, which is reflected in the funding approach.

The BCC Corporate Strategy (2022-2027) emphasises equity, resilience, and inclusion. Advice services directly support these priorities by providing:

- Early intervention and preventative support.
- Financial and legal guidance to improve residents' stability.
- Strategic alignment with Bristol's **One City Plan**, which envisions a **fair, sustainable, and inclusive** future.

Several important strategies sit under the One City Plan, including the Bristol Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2025 (2023 update), One City Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy, the One City Climate Strategy and the Bristol Fuel Poverty Action Plan. All of which identify the role that advice services play in tackling inequality and building resilience as strategically important for the city to thrive.

Homelessness and rough sleeping strategy 2024

Advice services play a pivotal role in supporting the city's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, contributing to:

- Prevention: Early intervention to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness.
- Partnership Working: A well-connected, trained, and resilient support network.
- Recovery Support: Assisting individuals in rebuilding their lives post-homelessness.

One city, many communities approach

Work done to support citizens during the Covid19 pandemic and then later in response to the cost-of-living crisis led the city to develop a 'one city many communities' approach. This approach builds on investment, work and relationships established over decades and acknowledges that Bristol's resilience and ability to respond to crises comes from the strength of its communities and partners working together. Advice services are crucial partners in this approach. These organisations serve as key access points, ensuring citizens receive timely, high-quality advice, tackling poverty, and building community resilience.

National context

Nationally high inflation, paired with the increasing costs of energy, housing, food and other essential goods and services, along with stagnant wages have led to a cost-of-living crisis. As a result, Citizens Advice nationally have seen record number of people who need food bank referrals, who can't afford to turn on their heating or who have been made homeless⁵.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation – UK poverty report 2025 shows that there are increasing levels of deep poverty in the UK leading to destitution – where people cannot afford to meet their most basic physical needs.⁶

The report shows that some groups are disproportionately affected by poverty:

- Families with children
- Black and Minority ethnic groups
- Disabled people
- Informal carers
- People in workless households
- Social and private renters
- People claiming income-related benefits

Benchmarking

Authority	Population	What they fund	Amount of funding
Manchester City Council	569k	City-wide Advice services consisting of three organisations - Citizens Advice Manchester - Shelter - Cheetham Hill Advice Centre Funds welfare benefit advice, debt management and housing/homelessness	£960,000 per annum
Sheffield	556k	Citizens Advice Sheffield	£841,536 per annum
Nottingham	328.51k	Citywide advice and Advice provision in neighbourhoods (Advice Nottingham Consortium led by Citizens advice)	£406,000 per annum

⁵ [Citizens Advice 2021-2022 Impact Report.pdf - Google Drive](#)

⁶ [UK Poverty 2025: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

Birmingham	1.16 million	City wide and 4 geographical contracts (North, South, East, West and Central) 3 providers	£521,352 per annum
Bath and North East Somerset Council	195.62k	Bath and District Citizens Advice	£300,000 per annum
Leeds City Council	789.1k	Leeds Advice consortium- Citizens Advice Leeds	£1.5 million per annum
Leicestershire County Council	722.16k	City wide advice service	£488,712 per annum

Table 1: Benchmarking advice funding across UK local authorities - This table compares annual advice funding levels across seven UK cities, including population size and types of services funded. Leeds has the highest spend at £1.5 million, followed by Manchester and Sheffield. The table highlights variation in investment and service models across regions.

Advice first aid

To meet increasing demand on capacity, Citizens Advice have developed an ‘Advice First Aid’ training course. The programme aims to share knowledge and skills to increase the ability of volunteers and front-line staff workers to help identify and support people who need advice. The programme of training aims to support people in non-advice roles to:

- Gather information and spot advice issues
- Use online tools and information resources
- Provide information and signposting
- Know when and how to refer for advice
- Find relevant local and national services Meet other local organisations and share information
- Topics include benefits, debt, housing, cost of living help and immigration signposting.

The advice first aid course has been delivered in authorities all over the country with evaluation showing that it:

- Increased the knowledge and confidence of participants.
- Strengthened referral routes and relationships.
- Enabled community groups to provide extra support. ⁷

Conclusion

By funding a collaborative, citizen-focused advice sector, BCC aims to enhance resilience, reduce inequity, and ensure every Bristol resident can access the support

⁷ Advising Londoners Partnership – Learning and evaluation [Cost-of-Living Crisis Prevention Advice Project Learning & Evaluation Year ONE REPORT, October 2023](#)

they need at the right time. This investment will strengthen Bristol's communities and create a more equitable, thriving city for all.