

SCHOOLS ADVISER PILOT PROJECT

Advising and Advocating
for children, young
people and their families
in our community

PRESENTED TO

The Trussell Trust
Morecambe Bay Foodbank



PRESENTED BY

Joanna Young
Jeni Meadows
Karen Gilberston



Our schools adviser, Jeni (right), with other team members from Citizens Advice North Lancashire

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SCHOOL MATTERS

Our Schools Adviser project came about because our charity works very closely with Morecambe Bay Foodbank, who also run a School Uniform Project. We have seen an increase in referrals to the foodbank over recent years from families, and the Uniform Project has seen a huge rise in demand as the Cost of Living Crisis has hit families.

Schools are on the front line of the cost of living crisis but don't always have the advice knowledge or the time to support families in the way they need it. We thought that by partnering with our Foodbank and with schools, we could offer an adviser to help families who might not otherwise know about Citizens Advice or use our service. Funding has come from the Trussell Trust Pathfinder Programme of which Morecambe Bay Foodbank is a part.

Our aim is to help people avoid destitution and food bank use by ensuring that incomes are maximised, debts are minimised and advice and help are provided where other problems are affecting family wellbeing, so that people can find a way forward to solve the problems they are facing.

Our pilot project has completed one year and we are excited by how impactful this project has been. We are now looking to secure further funding to extend the work across Lancaster District.

Joanna Young, CEO

OUR SCHOOLS PILOT AT A GLANCE

£90,000

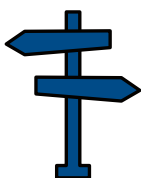
Funding for 2 years
from the Trussell Trust
Pathfinder Project in
partnership with
Morecambe Bay
Foodbank



We are working with 9 schools
in Lancaster District; two secondary
and seven primary



We take referrals from school staff,
parents, carers and the foodbank by
phone, email, text and Whatsapp



Our adviser is fully trained in all areas
of social welfare law and works with
families so they can find solutions to
their problems

OUR SCHOOLS

We started our project with nine pilot schools who were:

- Bowerham Community Primary and Nursery School in Lancaster
- Rylands Primary School in Lancaster
- Castle View Primary School in Lancaster
- Skerton St Luke's Primary School in Lancaster
- Sandylands Primary School in Morecambe
- Westgate Primary School in Morecambe
- Poulton-le-Sands Primary School in Morecambe
- Bay Leadership Academy Secondary School in Morecambe
- Our Lady's Catholic College Secondary School in Lancaster

In year 2 we will add four more schools:

- St Patrick's Primary School in Heysham
- The Chadwick Centre in Lancaster
- The Cove Education Centre
- Carnforth Community Primary School

Schools were selected on their enthusiasm for the project, their free school meal rates and a mix of locations and types of school including religious and non religious, rural and urban. We have included the most deprived wards in the District.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Primary schools are constantly in contact with parents, usually seeing them twice each day at drop off and pick up. Schools usually have good relationships with their families, and know when they are struggling, but apart from referring people to the foodbank, they are not always sure about how to help.

Our project allows referrals to come in to our adviser, who is trained in all aspects of social welfare law, in a number of different ways:

- Schools can refer directly to us with a parent's permission and we can come into school to meet a parent, do a home visit, they can come to our office, or we can call or email them
- Schools have shared Jeni's details via school newsletters and school social media channels with her email and mobile number so parents and carers can make contact directly
- Business cards with Jeni's details on them are distributed at all pilot schools. We have found that many parents like to use Whatsapp for initial contact which has become a really useful tool

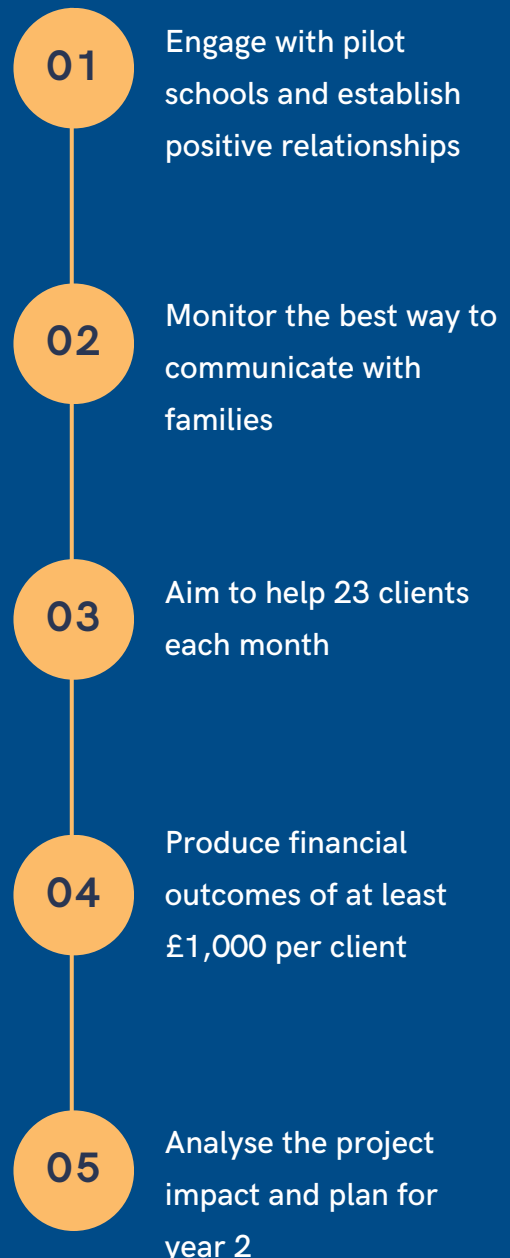


WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Between May 2023 and the end of March 2024 we have seen the following themes within the clients we helped:

- 2 issues with Child Benefit
- 25 issues with Disability Living Allowance
- 5 issues with Carers Allowance
- 2 issues with Employment and Support Allowance
- 20 issues with Personal Independence Payments
- 17 applications to the Household Support Fund
- 1 problem with Council Tax Reductions
- 9 issues around passported benefits including six problems with registering for free school meals
- 1 issue with Healthy Start Vouchers
- 3 people wanted help with general benefit entitlement
- 25 problems with Universal Credit
- 13 Foodbank referrals were needed
- 13 referrals to other charitable support were needed (food clubs, Cadent, Under one Roof)
- 2 issues about consumer problems
- 28 debt issues
- 11 problems with Education
- 5 Employment issues
- 13 issues about financial services and tax
- 5 problems with discrimination and hate crime
- 14 issues with Health and Community Care
- 43 issues with Housing
- 12 legal problems
- 42 issues around relationships and family problems
- 2 problems with travel and transport
- 4 issues with utilities and communications

Our Project Aims



WHO HAVE WE HELPED AND WHAT HAS IT ACHIEVED?

We've formed good working relationships with nine schools who now understand more about our service and how we can help

We've helped **91 Clients** / Families

Over the first year they had **318 different problems**

5 families were **prevented from becoming homeless**

87% of clients are female

1/3 of clients have experienced Domestic Abuse

56% of clients are in their 30s (vast majority are working age)

Exactly half of clients have a **long term health condition or disability**

88% of clients are White British - reflecting our local demographics

The average financial outcome has been **£2,337 per client**

Total financial outcomes of **£212,631** in year 1 - money that goes directly back into our local community

Jeni has delivered Advice First Aid training to some school staff

CASE STUDIES

"A young mother of three was referred to me by the school her daughter attends, initially for a foodbank parcel and for help because there had been a relationship breakdown and her partner had been the main earner.

It turned out that her ex-partner had very recently been sent to prison for domestic violence against the young woman. She had several mental and physical health complications that meant she became confused easily, and all the household finances had been managed by him. She had very little in her name and no formal support. Her mother and oldest daughter came to the appointment and helped answer a lot of questions. We completed an application for Universal Credit, and the Household Support Fund to help her pay for essentials in the meantime."



CASE STUDIES

"A Client requested advice regarding how to separate from her partner. No Domestic Abuse was involved, they just don't like each other very much anymore. The client was almost entirely reliant on her partner's wage, and the house the family lived in was only in his name. She knew that she would have to apply for Universal Credit when she moved out, but she did not know how to, or how much she could expect to receive from it. She was not confident that she would be able to raise her children if she moved out, and was prepared to stay with her partner indefinitely in order to provide for them, even though she knew it would make her miserable to do so.

I was able to give her a good idea (albeit an estimate) of how much Universal Credit she might expect to receive alongside her self-employed wage, and how much it would likely cost her to rent and run a 2-bedroom property in the area. The client was very happy to leave the appointment with some figures she could use to make a plan, and an understanding of what benefits she would be able to claim, and when to apply for them."

"A client called requesting a food bank parcel, but a conversation revealed that a Household Support Fund (HSF) award would be more suitable for him. He needed support over Christmas as his local food club was due to close for three weeks and he was worried about affording food. His family of three was really helped by an award from HSF."

CASE STUDIES

"A Client's mother passed away leaving no clear instructions as to who should be responsible for her three children. The client's biological father was no longer involved, and his mother's new partner of seven years chose to remove himself from the situation, resulting in three young people (aged 15, 16 and 21) living in the house on their own. My client (the 21-year-old) has significant mental health difficulties including autism that means he struggles to undertake organisational activities and responsibilities that others might find normal or easy. Emotions were running very high on both sides of the family, resulting in the stepfather threatening to evict the young people (he jointly owned the house with my client's mother) and the father's family were unable or unwilling to find alternative accommodation for them. The families were continuing to argue, to the point that they could not even be in the same room as each other without violence breaking out, and they could not come to an agreement to house the young people temporarily while suitable alternative provision was secured. I was asked by the school the youngest child attends to mediate between the two sides of the family. I was able to successfully negotiate an agreement whereby the young people could remain in the house for six months, giving their father time to complete building work that would allow him to accommodate them long-term. I could not repair relations between the two sides, but I believe that my involvement prevented the three young people from becoming homeless."

CASE STUDIES

"Client had been living in a two-bedroom flat with her four children for the last 6 years. She had been in Priority Band C for the social housing register throughout this time, and had never been able to secure a 3-bedroom property because there were always too many other people in the queue ahead of her.

The flat was significantly too small for the family and the children could never get any privacy, which was having significant detrimental effects on their mental health. The two youngest children were sleeping on beds that were too small for them because there wasn't enough space to put single beds in for them.

I supported the client to contact Lancaster City Council and make the case that her housing situation is completely unsuitable for the family. She was immediately placed in Priority Band B on the housing register and should now find it easier to secure new accommodation."



Jeni, centre, with the Citizens Advice North Lancashire team

CASE STUDIES

"This client first telephoned me to discuss her dismissal from her job. She believed that it was unfair, and wanted my opinion.

From the information she provided, it was clear that her dismissal had indeed been unfair. The employer had treated her differently to other employees by raising accusations of things that all company employees regularly do. At the client's disciplinary hearing, no concrete evidence of her transgressions was provided, and her employer accused her of Gross Misconduct based on another employee's word against hers. The client was not given the opportunity to raise the difficulties she was having at home, nor was she given a chance to change her behaviour. She was simply dismissed without notice.

The client initially wanted to challenge the dismissal and clear her name, because she was concerned she would not get a job again if the dismissal remained on her record. I supported her with contacting ACAS, who issued an Early Conciliation Certificate after her employer refused to discuss the matter further.

However the client was visibly uncomfortable with taking this issue to the Tribunal, so instead we spent some time discussing information regarding job references. Following this advice, the client decided that she would prefer to just move on from the issue, and felt much better about the fact that the dismissal would not prevent her from ever working again. When we finished working together, she felt comfortable with taking some time off work to focus on improving her mental health, and had arranged a Capability for Work Assessment with her Work Coach."

CASE STUDIES

"The client is legal guardian to her three grandsons. She asked me how to change their surnames, as the boys were getting to an age where they were starting to question why their names were different to hers. I showed her how to find this information online and helped her to print off the necessary forms. This really helped improve the boys' wellbeing and reduced their exposure to reminders of previous traumatic events."

"Client was referred by her daughter's school for debt advice. A family court had ordered her to find new housing because she (and her daughter) was still living with her abusive ex-partner's mother.

However, the ex-partner in question had never paid the rent for the tenancy they had shared for two years. As her name was also attached to this debt, she was in over £4,000 of rent arrears, and no social housing would rent to her. She did not want to pursue private rental options that would not investigate her credit history, because she believed that these would not be reputable landlords.

This client wanted to know how much of this debt was her responsibility, and whether or not there was any way she could secure social housing without repaying the arrears. She did not want to pay them, because her ex-partner had been in control of all their money and she had had no say in whether the rent was paid or not.

I was able to answer all of her questions and help her understand her rights and responsibilities regarding the shared debts. This client ultimately moved in with her parents in a different District. I believe she is much happier there and her daughter enjoys the new school."

CASE STUDIES

"A client asked me how increasing her hours at work would impact on her Universal Credit monthly payments. I helped the client to locate and understand the guidance about this on our website. The client was able to make an informed decision that would benefit her, both now and in the future."

"A client had made extensive anti-social behaviour reports against a neighbour for two years and did not feel that the City Council were taking appropriate action. I supported the client to understand the Council's policy on ASB. She then felt equipped to make her case to them in a better way."

"A client called me soon after having an argument with her landlady on her doorstep. The landlady had arrived unannounced with a property surveyor to conduct a valuation. The client had denied her entry, and wanted to know if she had been right to do so. I was able to advise the client on her rights as a tenant, and to give her the resources to find out more in the future."

"A client requested help contacting a court in a different county to request the results of a DNA test conducted ten years ago. This court was undergoing refurbishment and it was not clear how to contact them. I supported the client to do this and he was able to get the test results and use them to gain visitation rights to his son."

CASE STUDIES

"Client has learning difficulties and never learned to read or write. His son's school connected us because he wants to get qualifications to be able to work in catering, but needs help to approach a suitable training organisation. I introduced him to a local adult learning centre and he is now working towards the qualifications he wants."

"Client wanted to apply for a passport for her son, but was worried that her ex-partner would make this difficult for her. She asked for advice on how to approach this. I was able to help her understand which parts of travelling abroad require the other parent's consent, and which don't, and which court orders to apply for if the other parent is uncooperative. The client was able to take her son on holiday last summer."

"Client was referred to me by the HSF (household support fund) team for further support with an Under One Roof application. He was due to move house in order to be closer to his mother to help him care for his son, who had complex additional needs, and could not afford new white goods for the house and HSF could not supply everything. We completed the application and father and son moved successfully."

CASE STUDIES

"Client had moved to the area from Iran just before the school Summer Holidays, and was struggling to enrol his children in a nearby school. He asked advice because he was worried he would have to spend a lot of time on the bus every day to get his children to school, which would jeopardise his work. I supported him with contacting the Pupil Access Team, and the children were enrolled into an appropriate school in time for September."

"Client had become homeless very suddenly and moved into temporary accommodation with her son. She was struggling to afford food while she was there, and was worried that Social Services were going to take her son because they had lost their home so suddenly. I informed her of how Children's Social Care operates, and was able to reassure her that they weren't going to take her son away from her. I also supported her with a HSF application to cover food, and bus fare to get her son to school so he didn't have to change schools during this turbulent time. The client has now been re-housed permanently and faced minimal disruption to her son's life."

CASE STUDIES

"Client requested advice on how to make sure her son was enrolled in a primary school she was able to get him to. Her ex-partner had put in a primary school application for a school convenient to him, but which she would not be able to get to due to lack of public transport options where she lives. I signposted the client to the Pupil Access Team, who were able to support her with this tricky situation."

"Client discovered she was in one month's rent arrears to the local authority, and did not understand why, as she had been given conflicting information when she signed her tenancy three months prior. I supported the client with understanding how the arrears had been generated, and applied for a Discretionary Housing Payment from the Council (DHP) to clear them. The DHP was successful and the client no longer has any risk to her tenancy."

OUR ADVISER



Jeni Meadows is our Schools Adviser for this pilot project. She has undergone the full Citizens Advice training, specialist housing training and full debt training. She has awareness, knowledge and skill in all areas of social welfare law, and of local services across the community. This allows Jeni to work with families and give them full advice and support on a big variety of issues. As a member of our wider Community Team she is able to work in partnership with specialist colleagues where issues are particularly complex.

FEEDBACK FROM SCHOOLS

"Jeni has joined in discussions at less formal events, such as coffee mornings, to not only get her face known around school and familiarise herself with parents, but to also respond to their current needs."

"Jeni is a flexible adviser who from the start has attempted to understand our families' needs in order to adapt her way of working to suit them, e.g taking a less formal approach, providing alternative methods of contact such as Whatsapp and understanding barriers to working such as language."

"Jeni has understood that our families can be fearful of services. She has been patient, kind and non-judgmental and has differentiated her approach to suit our individual families."

"Jeni has been pro-active, and a good communicator. As in she has contacted me if she is on leave and when service has resumed so that I/we as a school can notify parents."

FEEDBACK FROM SCHOOLS

"Jeni has attended school events such as SEND coffee mornings, parents evenings, well-being events. Jeni has understood that our school community responds better when they feel comfortable to make that contact and has applied no pressure. She has adopted a provide the information, sit back and wait approach, after careful observation."

"Jeni has also contacted parents (on request) who are not particularly pro-active in making and accessing appointments."

"Jeni is an absolute asset to our school. Barriers to accessing services such as distance, wait times and the unknown, have been reduced by Jeni, her presence in our school and the invaluable service she provides."



INNOVATION AND AWARDS

Our pilot project has been recognised by the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice as innovative.



The Pilot Project is part of the 'Pathfinder' Programme at the Trussell Trust which grants funding to innovative Food Banks who are happy to try new things to prevent destitution



We were nominated for the Outstanding Impact Award at the national Citizens Advice staff and volunteer conference in 2024 for the Schools Adviser Project - we reached the final three, which was a huge achievement as it was amid fierce competition!



Jeni has presented information about the Pilot Project to the Trussell Trust Pathfinder Gathering Conference in 2024, showcasing innovative projects that aim to reduce destitution



WHAT'S NEXT?



We think that working with education providers is a good way to support families. We are looking at how we can expand this work to cover more schools, including our local College for 16-18s



We have applied for funding to extend our project out to children and family workers across the community so we can help parents of children aged 0-4 whose use of the Foodbank is rising



It costs around £48,000 per year to provide an adviser to schools; we are looking at applying for further grants so we can roll this project out across all schools in our District



We are hoping to develop a funding model whereby we will ask schools to contribute a small proportion of their Pupil Premium Grant budget as part of our schools project. We are also hoping to provide training to school staff in 'Advice First Aid' so we can support schools to identify emergencies



It's our aim to help our community to feel better. Our advice allows people to address the practical problems that can make them feel unwell, depressed, anxious or stressed. By reducing crisis and deprivation we hope to allow families to avoid situations that create Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ABOUT CITIZENS ADVICE NORTH LANCASHIRE

Citizens Advice North Lancashire is a local independent charity that helps people, whoever they are, to solve the problems they are facing.

We provide advice, support and advocacy to residents across North Lancashire and last year we helped over 7,500 who had over 28,000 different problems to find a way forward, generating over £14.9m for our clients - money that goes directly back into our local economy.

We challenge unfairness, discrimination and poor practice and we help people to feel better. The main areas of our work are financial crisis, debt, benefits, housing, employment and family problems. Our specialist team of 33 staff and over 50 volunteers is here to help anyone who needs it, free and confidentially.

Our offices are located at:

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