

Advice Works – Automatic Offer of Advice to Those Claiming Free School Meals/School Clothing Grants



How-to Guide

This guide offers more detailed information and advice for those who may be interested in adopting or adapting the initiative in their local area.

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Advice Works – Automatic Offer of Advice to Those Claiming Free School Meals/School Clothing Grants



Title	Advice Works – Automatic Offer of Advice to Those Claiming Free School Meals/School Clothing Grants
Organisation	Renfrewshire Council
Category	Emerging Local Practice
Poverty Impact	Prevention, Mitigation, Reduction, Awareness
Introduction to the Project	
<p>Advice Works is Renfrewshire Council’s advice service. It is a free, confidential, and independent service that provides money, debt, and benefits advice. The Advice Works team offers advice on financial budgeting and supports service users when handling creditors, bankruptcy, mortgage and rent arrears. Low-income individuals and families can receive support when applying for benefits or entitlements, or if they want to challenge a benefit decision or a Universal Credit sanction. This project offers advice and a comprehensive service to all families who apply for Free School Meals (FSM) and School Clothing Grants (SCG).</p>	

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Initial Idea

Who had the initial idea?	
Renfrewshire Council	
How did the idea for the project come about?	
<p>The idea came about following discussions on information the Council had on household composition and the financial situation of low-income families. This information was used to provide additional advice to low-income families to help improve their financial situation. Renfrewshire’s Customer Service Unit staff had improved the process for free school meals and clothing grants by offering applications online. Three questions were added to the application form to offer advice automatically as part of the application process. Instead of cold-calling people, they decided to reach out to these service users as part of a process they would have to go through anyway to claim FSM/SCG.</p>	
Were plans informed by any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice from elsewhere?	
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>The wording from a Renfrewshire Council Community Care Grant form was used. The Council used three questions on benefits, budgeting, and money advice and worked with their digital team to inform and encourage people to come forward for advice.</p>	
Was anyone else involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Advice Works and Customer Service Staff within Renfrewshire Council were involved in developing the initial idea.</p>	

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Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?			
No			✓
Yes			
No, but there is a Fairer Renfrewshire Panel made up of people with lived experience of poverty who provide feedback.			
Was funding required to support the development of the initial idea of the project?			
No	✓	Yes	
Please provide details of the funding that was used to support the development of the initial idea of the project.			
Which organisation provided funding?			
How much was required?			
What was the specific source of funding?			
Were specific resources – other than funding - needed when developing the initial idea of the project?			
No		Yes	✓
Please provide details of the resources that were required when developing the initial idea of the project. <i>If not needed, please add N/A</i>			
Staff/Volunteer Time	The Fairer Renfrewshire panel and Renfrewshire Council, Advice Works and Customer Service staff were all involved in the initial stages of the project.		
Facilities / Workspace	Office space.		
Equipment	Computers, internet, telephone.		
Local Knowledge	Information from the data held by the Council.		
Food and Drink	N/A		

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Did any barriers have to be overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?	
<i>No</i>	✓
Yes	
Did anything in particular enable development of the initial idea of the project?	
<i>No</i>	
Yes	✓
Data Renfrewshire Council held on demand for FSM/SCG was helpful when developing the initial idea.	
How long did it take between having the initial idea and starting the project?	
Unspecified.	
Who made the decision to introduce the project?	
Renfrewshire Council staff (Advice Works) and the Fairer Renfrewshire panel provided feedback.	

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Early Development – Pilot Project or Feasibility Study

Was there a pilot project or feasibility study?	
No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Yes, a pilot project	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, a feasibility study	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Accessing the Service and Engaging with Service Users

Is there a referral process?		
	No	
	Yes	✓
<p>As part of the online process for applying for FSM or SCG in 2023, applicants were given some information about the Advice Works service and were asked the following three questions:</p> <p>Would you like an advice worker to check you are getting all the benefits that you are entitled to?</p> <p>Do you find it difficult to pay your debts?</p> <p>Do you think you would find some advice on money management helpful?</p> <p>Clients who responded yes to any of these questions were then contacted by Advice Works.</p>		
Is referral the only way that potential clients are made aware of the project?		
	Yes	N/A
	No	N/A
Other than referral, how do potential clients come to know about the project?		
All those applying were asked the questions as part of the application process.		
What is the most common way through which users typically access the service?		
Not specified.		

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Do you take steps to keep in touch / reach out to service users?	
No	
Yes	✓

The preferred method of contact is telephone. There is also an option for a video call, although that is less popular. If someone requires face-to-face contact, then this is possible too. Contact is maintained from the start of the case to the end, including follow-up calls and multiple contacts throughout the service, possibly with different members of staff as the case progresses. They also contact service users a few weeks after they have submitted the application to check what the outcome was and to see if it entitles the person to anything else.

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Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty

Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?	
No	✓
Yes	
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project or project governance?	
No	
Yes	✓
The Fairer Renfrewshire lived experience panel that works alongside Diane provided feedback.	
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project? <i>If so, please describe below.</i>	
No	✓
Yes	

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Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working

Who is responsible for managing the project?	
The Senior Service Delivery Manager (Customer and Digital Operations) who is part of the Fairer Renfrewshire Officers Group. As the manager with responsibility for the Council’s advice service, they understand the Council’s priority to tackle Child Poverty.	
Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?	
Yes	✓
No	
The Senior Service Delivery Manager has responsibility for Customer, Business and Advice services.	
What proportion of the manager’s overall workload is given over to this project?	
Most of it	
About half of it	
Just a small proportion of it	✓
Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group?	
No	
Yes	✓
Advice Works is part of Renfrewshire’s Advice Partnership and are an integral part of Renfrewshire Council’s efforts to tackle child poverty.	

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Are any other governance arrangements in place to review strategy and performance?	
No	
Yes	✓
The service will review strategy based on outcomes.	

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Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements

In your opinion, is the project aligned with national and/or local anti-poverty strategies and priorities (e.g., local authority or health board priorities)?		
	Don't know	
	No	
	Yes	✓
The project is part of Renfrewshire Council's strategy to tackle poverty and inequality in the area.		
In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?		
	Don't know	
	No	
	Yes	
Not specified.		
Is the project part of any other strategy?		
	Don't know	
	No	✓
	Yes	
Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?		
	No	✓
	Yes	

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Funding

Has external funding been secured to support the work?	
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please provide details of the external funding that was used secured to support this work?	
Which organisation provided funding?	There is a budget which is provided by Fairer Renfrewshire.
What was the specific funding stream/source/scheme?	Unspecified.
How much funding was secured?	A small part of this £140,000 budget is allocated to Advice Works and pays for the income advisors who support the low-income families. They work to make low-income families a priority across the Council.
For how long has funding been secured?	Unspecified.
Is future funding from the same external source a possibility?	
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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Is future funding from the same external source based on pre-agreed outcomes or outputs being delivered from this work?	
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unspecified.	
Has a specific sum been secured from the host organisation to support this work?	
No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
What are the future - longer-term - prospects for this work if existing funding sources were no longer available?	
Unspecified.	

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Staffing and Resources

Do existing staff from the host organisation contribute toward the work of this project as part of their broader work for the organisation?			
			No
			Yes
Advice Works staff and Renfrewshire Council staff contribute to the project.			
Are existing staff from the host organisation paid extra (for example, taking on extra hours) to contribute toward the work of this project?			
			No
			Yes
Not specified.			
Have additional paid staff been employed to contribute toward the work of this project?			
			No
			Yes
Not specified.			
Are volunteers involved in delivering the project?			
			No
			Yes
Are specific resources – other than staff/volunteer time and money - needed to support the delivery of the project?			
		No	Yes
			✓

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Please provide details of the resources that are required to deliver the project?	
Facilities / Workspace	Office space.
Equipment	Computers, phones, internet, current council IT systems and software.
Local Knowledge	Local areas to cover.
Food and Drink	N/A
Are any of the resources needed to deliver the project provided in-kind, rather than budgeted from project funds?	
No	✓
Yes	
Renfrewshire Council provide these resources.	
Were new IT systems, additional software, or upgrades to existing software (databases, Apps) required to deliver this project? .	
No	✓
Yes	
Was additional training – for staff or volunteers - required to deliver this project?	
No	✓
Yes	

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Monitoring and Evaluation

Is there baseline data to describe what things were like before the start of the project?		
	No	
	Yes	✓
Data was collected by Renfrewshire Council Customer Services. They gathered data on service users who may be experiencing hardship or need FSM/SCG.		
Is the difference that the project is making measured or monitored by the host organisation?		
	Yes	✓
	No	
Who within the host organisation is responsible for monitoring the impact of the project?		
Data is reported quarterly to Fairer Renfrewshire team by Advice Works.		
How often is the impact of the project monitored or measured by the host organisation?		
Quarterly.		
What methods, techniques or strategies are used by the host organisation to measure the impact of the project?		
Advice Works case management system records service users and outcomes.		

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What information is collected by the host organisation about the project?				
Number of users	Yes	✓	No	
Profile of users	Yes	✓	No	
Experience of users	Yes	✓	No	
Outcomes for users	Yes	✓	No	
Anything else	Yes		No	✓
Has the data that has been collected by the host organisation been used to adapt the way the project works?				
			No	
			Yes	✓
<p>The initial year of the project demonstrated a need for advice to be offered at this time of year and in this way for parents, however we recognised that some parents felt they had to tick the boxes saying they were interested in support, rather than because they wanted to engage. The offer of advice at application for FSM/SCG has now become ‘business as usual’ for the Council, however the questions have been altered to try to capture families who genuinely want to engage.</p>				
Has an external organisation been employed to formally evaluate the project?				
			No	✓
			Yes	

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Is there an intention to undertake your own formal evaluation in the future to estimate the impact of the project?	
Don't know / no current plans	
No	✓
Yes	

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Impact

To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?	
Fully met	✓
Making progress toward meeting Aims	
Not making progress	
The project aims have been achieved as targeted low-income families have received practical help regarding school meals, benefits check, and advice on debts. Service users have gained an overall £110,000.	
What difference has the project made?	
524 parents engaging with advice services, 77 receiving a financial gain, with a total financial gain of £110,000.	
Have conditions or demand changed since the project was introduced?	
No	
Yes	✓
1,283 service users indicated they wanted advice initially. The Advice Works team had to plan the contact with these clients.	
Has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?	
Yes	✓
No	
Contacting the service users who indicated they wanted advice was carefully planned over time, so Advice Works were able to meet this demand.	

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Has the project changed through time?		
		No
		Yes
What changed	In the 2024 FSM/SCG application process, the questions and process were changed so potential service users could opt in for advice rather than feel obliged to.	
Why has it changed	The questions were changed as it was recognised that some people felt obliged to tick the boxes to say they would like support in order to get FSM/SCG, although this wasn't the case.	
Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?		
		No
		Yes
In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?		
		No
		Yes
It is helping tackle poverty within Child Poverty Priority and low-income families by increasing income from benefits for families, ensuring they get the benefits they are entitled to and supporting with debt and other financial worries.		

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Learning from Experience

What is working well?	
The increase in the number of service users.	
What, if anything, is working less well?	
Everything is working well.	
What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?	
Refine application questions. This streamlines the process and makes it easier for potential service users to apply.	
Are there plans to develop or expand the project in the future?	
	No
	Yes ✓
They are planning to simplify the questions that service users complete for self-referral.	
How easily do you think this project could be replicated in another setting?	
Very easily.	

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