

Understanding Migrant Destitution in England

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Key Points

- COMPAS' [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) study estimates that **around 16,000 destitute people with NRPF** were supported by English local authorities in 2021/22, including around 9,000 children, 4,800 families and 2,400 vulnerable adults at an estimated cost of around £86m.
- Local authorities are essentially providing a 'parallel welfare safety net' (Price & Spencer, 2015) for vulnerable people excluded from the accessing mainstream benefits due to their immigration status, however **this parallel welfare system does not receive any central government support and is increasingly dysfunctional**, unable to provide adequate support for the increasing numbers of people facing destitution.
- Whilst NRPF is sometimes seen as a niche policy question, **the growing numbers of people subject to the NRPF visa condition have more than doubled** from 1.48 million people in 2020 to 3.3 million people in 2023. With growing levels of destitution across the UK, **we cannot hope to tackle wider strategic priorities including tackling rough sleeping and ending child poverty without considering how vulnerable people are impacted by the NRPF policy.**
- There are **wide calls from local government, cross-party parliamentary committees and people with lived experience for a significant reform of the NRPF policy**, including a call to end the use of the NRPF condition. In the meantime, there needs to be significant improvements to fix a patchy and dysfunctional local safety net, including providing central government funding to social care departments, developing local leadership to tackle migrant deprivation and the importance of listening to and including migrant voices when designing services, building on the learning of the Windrush Lessons Learned review.

Background

- 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) is a UK immigration condition prohibiting access to the welfare safety net, including benefits and housing assistance. **Around 3.3 million people in the UK held visas with the NRPF condition in 2023** ([House of Commons Library, 2024](#)), over double the number of people in 2020 ([Migration Observatory, 2023](#)). In addition to this number, people with an irregular immigration status, estimated to be between 594,000 – 745,000 people ([Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024](#)), also have NRPF by default.
- The NRPF policy impacts both people with legal status, including European nationals with pre-settled status, student visa holders, health and care worker visa holders, [families on the 10-year route to settlement](#) and people with an irregular status including European nationals who missed the EU Settlement Scheme deadline, visa overstayers and undocumented people.
- For certain groups of vulnerable people facing destitution, **local authorities have a legal duty to provide accommodation and/or subsistence, effectively providing a de facto 'parallel welfare safety net'** (Price & Spencer, 2015).

This research was funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust.

Research findings

- COMPAS' [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) study indicates that local authorities across England reported supporting almost 10,000 destitute vulnerable people in 2021/22 at a reported cost of almost £50m. **Over 90% of the total number of people supported by local authorities were in England, with over 50% of the total number of people supported by Greater London local authorities.**

Region	Total number of referrals 2021/22	Total number of people supported 2021/22	Total number of cases supported 2021/22	Total number of children supported 2021/22	Total number of families supported 2021/22	Total number of vulnerable adults supported 2021/22	Total annual expenditure 2021/22
East Midlands	399	509	179	330	145	34	£1,696,286
East of England	358	540	293	306	170	65	£1,913,769
Greater London	3,132	5,608	2,560	3,048	1,738	836	£32,538,326
North East	109	76	34	41	22	12	£525,139
North West	510	381	154	235	108	40	£1,676,224
South East	340	692	270	431	264	29	£3,789,069
South West	155	442	182	246	130	67	£1,432,146
West Midlands	480	671	311	402	235	38	£2,506,703
Yorkshire & the Humber	336	783	340	443	203	134	£2,874,776
Total	5,819	9,702	4,323	5,482	3,015	1,255	£48,952,438

- The **data reported by local authorities is likely to be a significant underestimate as many local authorities were unable to supply accurate data.** Over 60% of the local authorities responding to the survey were able to provide only patchy and limited data or no data at all. Many local authorities could only provide data primarily focused on family cases, not vulnerable adults. There were also significant gaps in data recorded in the South West, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber.
- As a result, **the study estimates that if all local authorities recorded data, around 16,000 people received support from English local authorities in 2021/22, including around 9,000 children, 4,800 families and 2,400 vulnerable adults at an estimated cost of around £86m. However, we know that these numbers are only the tip of the iceberg as many people are too fearful to present in case of potential repercussions on their immigration status and others face robust gatekeeping from local authorities remaining locked out of all welfare safety nets.**
- The findings indicate that the **numbers of families receiving local authority support population in England and Wales has risen by over 150% since 2012/13, while estimated costs for local authorities supporting families have increased by almost 230%.**
- The pandemic saw a wider visibility for understanding and tackling migrant destitution, with public health being prioritised over migration governance. **Some pockets of good practice emerged as some local authorities have sought to tailor their approach to provide early intervention models, alternative housing, increase subsistence payments as well as commissioning immigration legal advice to support residents with regularising their status to be able to access mainstream benefits:**
 - In Hackney, the [NOREAM \(No Recourse Early Action model\)](#) pilot programme was delivered by social workers, in partnership with an integrated housing and immigration adviser in 2021. The NOREAM pilot provided an early intervention service to support families with NRPF before they become destitute, through one-off unconditional cash grants of around £500 per child to support them when dealing with financial and food insecurity. These small-scale grants enabled parents and carers in paying rent arrears to secure new housing, children's clothes and paying off their debts where needed.

- The [West Midlands Better Pathways NRPF Practice Charter](#), led by Brushstrokes Community Project and co-developed with local authorities, children's trusts, local charities and people with lived experience was designed to support West Midlands frontline practitioners in the statutory and voluntary sector working with people with NRPF. The charter outlines co-created commitments to guide people with NRPF towards pathways to better outcomes and highlights local examples of best practice.
- In Greater Manchester, preventing and relieving homelessness is a mayoral priority. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) housing strategy takes a more inclusive approach to addressing homelessness to ensure that innovative practices do not exclude people due to their immigration status. The 'A Bed Every Night' (ABEN) model is jointly funded across health and social care, the Police and Crime Commissioner, the GMCA and the Mayor's Charity, among others. The service provides emergency accommodation and support to enable people to access move-on accommodation. Whilst the service is not focused on people with NRPF, a number of beds are kept aside for people who are not eligible for mainstream benefits. The city has developed an additional service – the [Greater Manchester Restricted Eligibility Support Service](#) to support individuals with additional barriers due to their immigration status to be able to move on from ABEN and prevent them from ending back on the streets.
- **Despite new approaches being piloted, the reliability and provision of social care support is still patchy and inconsistent across England with local authorities operating on overstretched social care budgets and not receiving any funding from central government for this provision.** With no statutory guidance for social care teams in England on assessing and supporting vulnerable people with NRPF, many councils are uncertain of their legal duties and fail to provide adequate information, accommodation and support for the increasing numbers of people facing destitution.
- **People with lived experience highlighted what a humiliating, distressing and intrusive process it can be trying to get the support that they are legally entitled to** – including families fleeing domestic violence and adults with terminal illnesses who have lived in the UK for decades. In many areas, **third sector organisations continue to play a vital role in supporting vulnerable people to challenge local authority gatekeeping and provide interim basic emergency support where possible.**
- Whilst local authority support can offer a lifeline to people facing destitution, there is **a significant discrepancy in the subsistence rates local authorities provide. As a result, vulnerable people face a postcode lottery of support** and at best, receive significantly below the level they would receive on Universal Credit and in some areas, even below asylum support rates, despite recent case law and guidance from the NRPF Network.
- **With robust social care eligibility criteria, many people are unable to ever access social care, refuges or places of safety, despite presenting with vulnerabilities and at risk of harm.** Whilst some people may be able to access limited short-term support through charities, many may find themselves dependent on exploitative support networks, stuck in abusive relationships or facing street homelessness:

Implications for policy and practice

There are wide calls from [local government](#), [cross-party parliamentary committees](#) and people with lived experience for a significant reform of the NRPF policy, including a call to end the use of the NRPF condition. In the meantime, there needs to be significant improvements to fix a patchy and dysfunctional local safety net and tackle rising destitution.

1. Improving governance structures for tackling destitution

- Drawing on Scotland's [Ending Destitution Together strategy](#), central government should develop a cross-government UK-wide strategy to tackle migrant destitution, including developing statutory guidance in England, in partnership with local government, the voluntary and community sector and people with lived experience.
- Senior leadership within local government should recognise that failing to tackle migrant destitution prevents being able to address wider strategic priorities including ending child poverty and rough sleeping.
- Senior leadership within local government should ensure there is a joined-up ending migrant destitution strategy, covering policy and provision across children's social care, adult social care and housing, particularly in two-tier local authorities and that wider council strategies including housing, child poverty, public health, VAWG include addressing the needs of people with NRPF and tackling migrant destitution.

2. Providing clear and transparent information and advice so that people know their rights

- Local authorities should address the lack of clear and publicly available information on support available by providing, at a minimum, a publicly accessible page on their website with information about referral processes, access to immigration advice and local community support.

- In the absence of central government reinstating legal aid for immigration matters, local government should fund or commission legal aid advice for residents at risk of destitution, setting up safe spaces with clear firewalls for legal advice on routes to regularisation and access to services in partnership with third-sector organisations.
 - Central government should ensure there is clearer and more publicly available information on the process of applying to lift the NRPF condition, including a more explicit right to appeal refusals.
- 3. Empowering local government to, at a minimum, meet its legal responsibilities and ultimately develop preventative approaches to tackling poverty and exclusion**
- If local authorities are expected to provide a safety net for vulnerable people, they need to be adequately resourced by central government.
 - In the absence of statutory guidance for England, local authorities should embed [NRPF Network guidance](#) endorsed by the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and use the [support for migrant families web tool](#) to establish available options for families.
 - Local government should ensure there is a consistent, standardised and sensitive assessment and case management process, treating people with respect and dignity.
 - Local authorities should develop localised subsistence policies with clear minimum acceptable rates, building in the flexibility to adapt to individuals' needs, drawing on recent case law and guidance and ensure their homelessness strategy specifically assesses housing need related to immigration status, including people affected by NRPF.
 - Local government should take an earlier preventative approach by proactively reaching out to migrant communities at risk of falling into deep poverty, including information on Home Office fee waivers, change of conditions applications, free school meals and access to childcare.
- 4. Widening entitlement to public funds to support the most vulnerable**
- Central government should remove all discretionary welfare funds from the list of public funds to allow local government to provide discretionary emergency support to all residents in need, regardless of their immigration status.
 - Central government should grant mainstream access to those benefits and passported benefits especially intended to support vulnerable people and children to ensure they are open to all children and vulnerable people, regardless of their or their parents' immigration status.

5. Listening and learning from the voices of people with lived experience of NRPF

Both central and local government should apply principles within decision-making and frontline services that promote "fairness, openness and effective care, and embed the idea that people will always be treated with respect and dignity" as recommended in the Windrush Lessons Learned Review and actively involve people with lived experience in co-producing and designing local strategy, policy and practice.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT DESTITUTION IN THE UK

[Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) is a UK-wide research and knowledge exchange project (2022–2025), funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, exploring the effects of UK immigration policy on migrant destitution in the UK, highlighting the scale and changing face of migrant destitution and the key role of local authorities in providing support. The study involved a mixed methods approach including a survey sent to all UK local authorities, secondary data analysis of administrative data and deep dive qualitative research in seven case study sites, interviewing key local authority staff, local stakeholders and partners as well as with people with lived experience.

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