

# Understanding Migrant Destitution in Wales

March 2025

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## Key Points

- COMPAS' [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) study estimates that around 1,800 destitute people with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) were supported by Welsh local authorities in 2021/22, including around 1,000 children, 500 families and 340 vulnerable adults at an estimated cost of around £10m. In comparison to England and Scotland, **data quality on this topic is particularly poor in Wales** and therefore this is very likely to be a significant underestimate.
- Local authorities provide 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.
- 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 reducing homelessness, ending child poverty and tackling domestic violence and abuse 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 destitution, 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

- Compared to Scotland and England, there are significant gaps in local authority data collection on NRPF cases in Wales, with **64% of Welsh local authorities unable to provide any data**. Local authorities across the UK also struggle with data collection due to IT system challenges and gaps in data sharing. However, evidence in Wales highlighted that data was not recorded in some cases due to local authorities' limited awareness of their duties towards vulnerable people with NRPF, including important misunderstandings of their legal responsibilities:

*"In the likelihood of a need by NRPF client groups we (the local authority) would be unable to provide support based on our statutory obligations (for instance housing) – so can you provide me with an example whereby any local authority would provide support to a client group who have NRPF."* (Local Authority, Wales)

- Unlike in England, the Welsh Government provides [statutory guidance](#) for local authorities on assessing and supporting vulnerable people with NRPF and **recommends local authorities systematically record data on NRPF cases**. However, **less than a third of Welsh local authorities could provide any data on NRPF cases, and the data provided was often so incomplete** that it was only possible to establish the total number of people and children supported and not the total number of cases or families supported, as we could for other UK nations. A local authority explained that whilst they were aware of the guidance recommendation to collect data, it was not mandatory, and therefore, they had not prioritised doing so.
- Five out of the 22 Welsh local authorities reported supporting 97 destitute vulnerable people in 2021/22 at a reported cost of £417,485. Due to the limitations in **data recording, the data reported by local authorities is a significant underestimate of the level of need and provision for vulnerable people in Wales**. As a result, using the Welsh data provided and data from comparable English local authorities, **the study estimates that if all Welsh local authorities recorded data, around 1,800 people are likely to have received support from Welsh local authorities in 2021/22, including around 1,000 children, 500 families and 340 vulnerable adults at an estimated cost of around £10m**:

2021/22	Total no. referrals	Total no. people supported	Total no. cases supported	Total no. children supported	Total no. families supported	Total no. vulnerable adults supported	Total annual expenditure
Reported by 5 local authorities for 2021/22	274	97	Unknown	87	Unknown	8	£417,485
Estimate for all Welsh local authorities for 2021/22, based on data imputation	n/a	c.1,800	Unknown	c.1,000	c.500	c.340	c.£10m

Source: Freedom of Information Requests to all Welsh local authorities, 2022–2023; COMPAS analysis using data imputation. For further details on the imputation methodology, please see <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publication/understanding-migrant-destitution-in-the-uk-research-findings>

- However, these estimates are still only the tip of the iceberg of the level of need**, as people may be 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.
- Using these estimates and data collected in 2012/13, the findings indicate that the **number 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 across the UK as some local authorities have sought to tailor their approach to provide [early intervention models](#), [alternative housing](#), [increase subsistence payments](#) and [commission immigration legal advice](#) to support residents with regularising their status to be able to access mainstream benefits**:
  - Unlike the rest of the UK, Wales have been able to use their devolved powers to open up part of the discretionary welfare fund (Emergency Assistance Payment) to people with NRPF. However, there is limited evidence of how Welsh local authorities have used the fund to support vulnerable people with NRPF.

- We heard evidence of a Welsh local authority setting up a cross-council hardship group bringing together multi-disciplinary professionals from social care, health, housing and community engagement teams to try to work collaboratively on resolving NRPF cases.
- **However, the reliability and provision of social care support is still patchy and inconsistent across Wales with local authorities operating on overstretched social care budgets and not receiving any funding from central government for this provision.** Despite being provided with statutory guidance 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. Evidence from Welsh local authorities highlighted **disjointed practice around assessments**, with third sector organisations routinely struggling to get social care teams to properly assess and follow up on safeguarding referrals. This was echoed by local authority staff who acknowledged that in their own local authorities, there was **confusion amongst staff on duties towards households with NRPF, limited referral pathways and a lack of protocol, leading to tensions around which team should be subsequently responsible.**
- **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.**
- While local authority support can offer a lifeline to destitute individuals, there is a **significant discrepancy in the subsistence rates provided by local authorities. Vulnerable people face a postcode lottery of support** and, at best, receive significantly less than they would through Universal Credit; in some areas, they receive even less than the asylum support rate. This is despite Welsh statutory guidance clarifying that social services should ensure that, under their financial support policies, no one receives less than the Home Office asylum support rate. However, in our Welsh local authority case study, we could not find evidence of any set rates or local policies addressing this issue.
- **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.
- Since the publication of our [report](#) in May 2024, the **bi-monthly Wales NRPF Forum has launched**, chaired by the Welsh Strategic Migration Partnership, bringing together the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities to support their response to NRPF. **The Welsh Government are currently exploring whether it could pay subscription costs to [NRPF Connect](#), a case management system, to enable local authorities to pilot improved data collection and case resolution for households with NRPF.** In addition, **partnership models, spearheaded by third sector organisations as well as schools have emerged in Wales including:**
  - The [NRPF Coalition Wales](#), a collaboration of third sector and grassroots organisations, facilitated by the Bevan Foundation, to share information, promote good practice, and develop effective joint working.
  - Funded by the Welsh Government Child Poverty – Innovation and Supporting Communities grant, the Bevan Foundation's [project](#), brings together the No Recourse to Public Funds Coalition Wales, Blaenau Gwent, Wrexham and Vale of Glamorgan local authorities, and people with lived experience of NRPF to improve engagement between charities, local authorities and community groups and co-produce practical resources.
  - Maindee Primary School in Newport has identified a rise in the number of families with NRPF facing poverty and destitution over the past 18 months, with over 50% of families seen during home visits affected by the NRPF policy and experiencing financial hardship. With funding from [Homewards](#), the school is developing their family support checklist to identify families in unsuitable accommodation or facing financial insecurity. Through the Homewards project, the school has partnered with [Tai Pawb](#), offering weekly sessions for families on tenants' rights in the private rented sector. The school also runs an on-site 'pay-as-you-feel' food shop for families as part of the [Big Bocs Bwyd Project](#).

## 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](#), the Welsh Government should develop a national strategy to tackle migrant destitution, in partnership with local government, the voluntary and community sector and people with lived experience.
- The Welsh Government should ensure that addressing the impact of the NRPF policy is weaved into the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales.
- Senior leadership within both the Welsh government and 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, the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association should draw on the learning from the [Scottish partnership model between COSLA and the International Organisation for Migration](#), providing nationwide immigration advice to vulnerable people, referred by local authorities.
- In the interim, local government should consider funding or commissioning legal aid advice for residents at risk of destitution, setting up safe spaces with clear firewalls, in partnership with third-sector organisations. for legal advice on routes to regularisation, and access to services.
- 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.
- The Welsh Government should review the statutory guidance for local authorities to ensure it provides clearer and more detailed steps on implementing policy into practice, including ensuring that minimum acceptable subsistence rates meet children and vulnerable people's welfare needs, referencing recent [case law](#) and [NRPF Network guidance](#).
- The Welsh Government should ensure that local authority staff receive ongoing training, advice and support with collecting data on NRPF cases and embedding statutory guidance into local policy and practice.
- In addition to following the [Welsh NRPF Statutory Guidance](#), local authorities should embed [NRPF Network guidance](#) 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 Individual Assistance Payments, 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

- Building on the example of the Emergency Assistance Payment, central government should remove all discretionary welfare funds, including the Individual Assistance Payment (IAP), from the list of public funds to allow devolved administrations and 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.
- Drawing on the UK's Government decision to extend free school meals in England to all families with NRPF whose household income was below a minimum threshold, the Welsh Government should also extend eligibility for free school meals to all children, regardless of 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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