Issues affecting emergency financial support providers and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic, Evidence Note 8

Providers of emergency financial support and assistance are at the frontline of responding to Covid-19. This briefing highlights some of the key challenges and issues that frontline organisations, such as councils, charities and other agencies are facing during this time.

The issues presented in this evidence note have been gathered from the responses to an online issue collection form for emergency financial support providers and reflect key emerging themes. They relate to both the challenges faced by providers in delivering their services and the challenges facing service users.

This evidence note is the latest in a series that was first published during the first national lockdown in 2020.[1] As lockdowns continue across England and Wales, these notes will highlight newly emerging themes, in addition to highlighting any continuing issues that were common during the first lockdown.

This evidence note highlights the continued issues associated with digital exclusion and draws comparisons between the common issues reported during the first lockdown and the most recent lockdown. The responses from service providers show that some groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately affected by digital exclusion. Other vulnerable client groups without internet access experiencing isolation or struggling to access services continues to be a problem.

We will continue to collect and analyse responses through the Covid-19 pandemic. We encourage multiple responses as new and additional issues arise, so that we can capture as much evidence as possible as the situation changes. Please help us by completing the evidence collection form and sharing across your networks.

In July 2020 we published an evidence note outlining emergency service providers' concerns about digital exclusion and its negative impact. Since then it has become even more important to be digitally included. An extended lockdown period from January 2021 has meant many services have had to turn back to online only provision and national guidance to stay at home and restrictions on contact with people from different households have led to a reliance on technology to keep connected to others.

Since school closures in January, most children have been unable to attend school and have therefore been dependent on technology to access live lessons and online resources. As the staggered return to school begins from the 8th March, digital access will still be important for children who have not yet returned to school, or to complete online pieces of work, as it is likely that some forms of online school work may continue.

Against this backdrop we explore the main themes identified in the responses from emergency support providers.

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[1] This briefing is based on 35 responses to the evidence collection form received between April 2020 and February 2021.

Theme 1: Isolation of vulnerable groups

A number of responses focused specifically on the experience of asylum seekers and refugees, groups identified as particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion. For example, two organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees commented:

> *"At a time when everyone is isolated, it is very challenging to ensure that we can reach all of the most disadvantaged members of [our] new communities and also ensure that the children are engaging is schoolwork. Many clients have no internet access or IT equipment."*

> *"They live in homes where there is no Wi-Fi. This has caused a lot of isolation and digital exclusion."*

Like other digitally excluded groups, asylum seekers and refugees experienced social isolation and an inability to access information and services. Organisations did, however, identify a number of issues specific to these groups. First, they noted that individuals were unable to access online English lessons. Whilst some organisations had tried to offer support through the provision of smartphones and data packages, it was insufficient to allow people to participate in online lessons.

Second, it was noted that asylum seekers were unable to work due to Home Office policies and therefore would never be able to afford to purchase technology or broadband/data packages until they received settled status.

Organisations supporting these communities identified the provision of computers and internet access in asylum accommodation as a pressing need.

> *"We have realised more is needed that just a gadget and a top up. A good Wi-Fi flowing is key to resolving these problems. I don't understand why all the houses provided to asylum seekers haven't been fitted with fast Wi-Fi even a year since we realised our lives have changed forever. Wi-Fi now is a basic need and anyone without it are excluded."*

In addition to the issues presented above affecting refugees and asylum seekers, digital exclusion has also affected other groups, leaving them isolated during the pandemic.

Isolation as a consequence of digital exclusion was a common problem during the first lockdown, with many respondents reporting concerns around marginalised and vulnerable client groups without internet access and how this was impacting their lives, including the effects on mental health and well-being.

An organisation supporting unpaid carers reported that many of their clients are not online which was particularly difficult for this group who are often in difficult situations and rely on support services.

More recently, an organisation that supports people with disabilities reported that some of their clients cannot access digital offers of services and many informal support networks have 'dried up' which has left people unsupported.

Theme 2: Service delivery

The issue of accessing services has generally been reported across two broad themes - one relates to the issues experienced by services adapting to remote working during the pandemic, and the other is in relation to clients being unable to access services due to insufficient access to tech and data. During the first lockdown, we heard how many services were not set-up for remote working and were finding it difficult to provide support:

> *"[There are] multiple issues concerning the people who are contacting us for support, and having to work remotely due to the social isolation conditions, makes it difficult to address the various issues which they are experiencing".*

Many small organisations simply did not have the resources to adapt their way of working to offer online support and had limited staff capacity to enable the organisation to adapt. Similarly, another respondent also highlighted this as an issue:

> *"We have, like many others, closed our doors to our beneficiaries without notice and with no means of providing support or reaching out. We offered face to face support to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society… we need resources urgently for our volunteers to work from home to reach out to people and assess their needs and how they are coping."*

This concern has been less common recently, as services have had more time to adapt to remote and digital ways of working, with one advice centre reporting that they have been able to effectively adapt to an online service and remain open during the most recent lockdown. Despite this, they report that many clients are still not being reached:

> *"[The area] is incredibly rural and there are a lot of vulnerable clients with no access to the internet or a phone, and so those who relied on our drop in service are really being left without support."*

Theme 3: Accessing Services

The issue of clients struggling to access support was, and remains, a prevalent issue. Many responses from the current lockdown indicate that some clients are still struggling with access to devices or the internet and consequently, are unable to access online services.

During the first national lockdown, we heard from an organisation that supports new arrivals to the UK that many of their clients did not have access to the internet or mobile phone credit and could not contact the service. The same organisation recently reported that they are still concerned about reaching the communities they support as many clients do not have access to IT equipment or the internet.

Furthermore, the fact that many public spaces are closed has created more difficulties for those who would previously have relied on accessing the internet from a public place such as a library. This was reported as an issue both in the first lockdown, and more recently, suggesting this continues to be a common problem.

A preference for face-to-face services and the option to communicate in-person was also specifically highlighted by an organisation that supports refugees and asylum seekers:

"Many participants, who pre-crisis would have come to see us if they have problems, do not have internet access and have no telephone credit, therefore cannot contact us. People without English language skills are unable to resolve their issues on mainstream telephone of internet platforms."

As lockdown is eased, it will be important to recognise that some clients prefer face-to-face support even where digital access is possible and different options for how to engage with services will also be important.

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