

Issues affecting emergency financial support providers and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic, Evidence Note 4

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.

The issues presented have been gathered from responses to an online form for emergency financial support providers. They relate to the challenges faced by providers in delivering their services and the difficulties facing service users.

This fourth evidence note highlights the obstacles organisations encounter whilst attempting to meet their clients' needs in full at a time when the usual mechanisms to provide support are disrupted and demand is high.

We will continue to collect and analyse responses through the 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.](#)

Theme 1: Access to welfare rights advice

A number of responses identified the lack of welfare rights advice available to people experiencing financial crisis, particularly in relation to claiming benefits. The pandemic has resulted in a spike in demand for advice at a time when it has become difficult to provide. Organisations have faced the challenges of working remotely, often with fewer staff, and in some instances have had to close.

One organisation in the South West explained the difficulties they were facing:

"We know five organisations who would usually support people to deal with the benefits system in the city have either furloughed or stopped services so that the public is no longer able to access this support."

Whilst some services were offering welfare rights advice remotely, the absence of face-to-face support (identified previously in [Evidence Note 2](#) as a challenge for services) was particularly difficult for those with complex personal circumstance which required specialist welfare rights advice.

"For those clients who have complex situations, including sanction, suspension, reduction in benefit, it has been impossible for them to explain their situation and challenge a decision. Normally they would speak face-to-face to a member of the Complex Needs Team at the Job Centre. This isn't possible at present."

We are experiencing people contacting us to report queries on their benefit payments which is difficult to resolve if we need to speak on their behalf or to make a written entry asking for clarification on the UC journal. Because we are not together with the beneficiary and if they do not have the technology to share a call to UC, to try to resolve the issue. I guess this problem is a mix of the client's lack of technology, data and seemingly insurmountable difficulties in getting a speedy and understandable response from the DWP to the client and the fact that we are currently unable to meet up with the client and get the job done together."

Another organisation which focused on representing people at tribunals expressed specific concerns about access to support to challenge benefit decisions:

“We have seen a drop in numbers of appeals being listed. We are concerned that the usual routes people use to help them to lodge appeals are not there. We also believe there are a lot of people stuck in the system because the court process has been problematic and paperwork is stuck.”

Theme 2: Access to other forms of specialist advice and support

In [Evidence Note 2](#) we explored the challenges faced by organisations due to the lockdown and the social distancing requirements introduced in response to the pandemic. Services were often forced to close down or provide a reduced service, typically remotely. A number of responses felt that this meant that their clients' needs were not being addressed in full. For example, a food bank] reported that whilst they were continuing to provide food and other essential items, they could not provide the 'bolt-on' services which provided their clients with specialist debt and legal advice and professional mental health support. Similarly, an organisation supporting homeless people stated that whilst soup kitchens were open and providing meals, the underlying issues clients would usually get support for were not being addressed:

“While we and other services are closed there is little support available so people are not addressing their issues [...]. We need to be open to enable support to be given.”

One organisation which provided specialist support to vulnerable women noted the difficulties of doing so remotely:

“Our limiting factor is not being set up to work remotely and not having enough staff time/ funding for staff time. It's difficult to just bring new people on board too as we work with vulnerable women and have spent a long time building trust and relationships with them prior to COVID.”

Respondents highlighted concerns regarding clients whose needs might have escalated during this period without access to specialist support.

Theme 3: Referrals and signposting

Supporting clients experiencing crisis typically relies on organisations working together to meet the full range of needs. The challenge of conducting effective referrals or signposting their client to other services in the current circumstances was highlighted in a number of responses. Altered operating models, limited staffing capacity and the closure of some services altogether had hampered referral and signposting processes for many organisations.

One organisation based in the North of England commented that frontline staff in their area did not have capacity to cope with the volume of clients needing support to access grants or other resources.

“When people have immediate needs like furniture organisations helping individuals don't understand the plethora of funding available to access on behalf of individuals. [...] when I've discussed this in more detail with people working on the front line [...] they say they haven't got time to make the applications on the individual's behalf as it can take days to get the necessary paperwork/ information to complete this.”

Several respondents noted that steering people toward other organisations had ceased entirely during lockdown. For example, a foodbank based in the Midlands observed that 'signposting is no longer possible'. However, they did observe that referrals *into* the foodbank were working more effectively.

"We have switched to a system whereby clients can obtain electronic vouchers from referral agencies. That in turn means that our foodbank is in closer touch with referral agencies and can therefore liaise with referral agencies about support that clients require e.g. debt advice, budgeting."

Responses demonstrated the reliance of effective signposting and referrals on having sufficient staffing capacity, and role technology can play in allowing organisations to make referrals on behalf of their clients.

With thanks to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation who have helped analyse the data collected from the emergency financial support providers evidence collection form. Any views expressed or recommendations derived do not necessarily represent the position of the organisation.

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