

Issues affecting emergency financial support providers and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic, Evidence Note 6

Providers of emergency financial support and assistance are at the frontline of responding to Covid19. 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 have been gathered from the responses to an online issue collection form for emergency financial support providers and reflect three key emerging themes. They relate to both the challenges faced by providers in delivering their services and the challenges facing service users.

This sixth evidence note revisits digital exclusion in more detail. This is an issue that has been a consistent feature in the responses to the evidence collection form and was first highlighted in [evidence note 1](#).

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

The concerns raised around digital exclusion broadly relate to two sets of issues. Either households not having Wifi, data or broadband and also families not having devices such as laptops, phones and tablets – all of which has prevented families throughout the pandemic from being online.

This has made it difficult for families to contact support services, friends and family, created problems for children accessing learning resources, but also made applying for benefits or getting advice very difficult – especially due to long telephone waiting times, or phone numbers only being available via websites. [In evidence note 4](#), we highlighted some of these issues associated with clients accessing support at a time when the usual mechanisms for providing support are not available.

Theme 1 - Isolation and loneliness during lockdown

This was a common issue at the start of lockdown. Respondents reported that many clients did not have access to tech or internet access, so could not access the services that they previously accessed face to face. As a result, services were concerned that they could no longer reach vulnerable client groups. Key issues were a lack of devices (laptops, phones and computers) or a lack of resources to connect to the internet (access to WiFi, data or phone credit). An organisation that support refugees and asylum seekers reported that:

“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.”

A Housing Association raised similar concerns:

“Some customers live in such extreme poverty, they may not have access to phones/internet. Access to Wi-Fi hot spots has become limited as a result of lockdown. Other customers may be dealing with issues such as mental health or drug and alcohol conditions which will present further barriers to accessing services over the phone.”

As well as the difficulties in services actually reaching people, there were concerns that being isolated in this way would lead to loneliness among client groups.

One organisation that supports vulnerable adults stated:

“My concern is how we contact those who are 'hard to reach'. Loneliness and isolation were already a problem but now they are likely to be much worse.”

This was raised not just as a concern for services reaching clients, but also for vulnerable people to stay in touch with friends and family throughout lockdown. One respondent reported that their service provided mobile top-ups to clients so they could keep in touch with support services and families.

Other solutions included providing free broadband or devices to households who could not afford it. As mentioned in [evidence note 1](#) the government introduced some schemes to support vulnerable groups of children and young people with access to tech but many of those who needed support may not have been reached.

Theme 2 - Difficulties accessing the social security system

Another key theme in relation to digital exclusion has been individuals experiencing difficulties accessing the social security system. At the start of the evidence collection, there were a number of issues reported around how those without internet access faced difficulties applying for universal credit. Some of these initial problems, such as people experiencing long wait times on the phone lines were fixed by DWP offering a call back service.

However, the digital by default nature of Universal Credit, along with the lack of face-to-face support, has continued to cause problems, particularly for claimants who have complex cases, might need additional information or may have limited English language skills.

A mental health service reported that:

“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.”

Another service that supports people through crisis told us:

“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.”

We also heard from a community law service that often represents clients at tribunals that a move away from face-to-face proceedings was leading to drops in the number of appeals being listed as *“the usual routes people use to help them to lodge appeals are not there”*. This has been accompanied by digital issues affecting remote hearings which the respondent told us affected vulnerable individuals:

“There have been some issues with remote hearings. There needs to be a consistent approach from Her Majesties Courts and Tribunals Service in relation to remote courts hearings... This includes ensuring that challenges with technology are resolved in order that they do not negatively impact already vulnerable clients and that those who are setting up these hearings know what the client’s needs are.”

Theme 3 - Children’s home learning

A small number of responses mentioned how digital exclusion may prevent children from completing school work at home. The issue was reported in relation to a lack of devices at home, when multiple members of the household might require access to a single device, making it difficult for children to complete school work, at the same time parents might need to work or access support.

An organisation that supports new arrivals to the UK reported early on in lockdown that:

“Many children do not have the necessary technology to engage in school programmes and will fall behind their peers. It is a time when already vulnerable people will feel isolated and alone.”

Which groups are affected?

In the responses received, concerns around digital exclusion were often raised in relation to refugees and asylum seekers. It was reported that many of those individuals supported by services do not have access to phones or internet. Some responses mentioned the need to provide top-ups for individuals who did have phones so they could keep in contact.

A few responses mentioned BAME client groups. One respondent reported a drop in BAME clients as a consequence of switching service provision away from face-to-face and were looking at ways to address it. They suggested more IT training, cheaper ways to buy laptops, language lessons and incentives to attend sessions might all be of help clients.

Another organisation that supports vulnerable women reported that the organisation had re-organised itself to respond to the crisis and support those most in need – *“such as mums on their own with babies/children; families with a disabled child and, in general, BAME vulnerable people.”* They stated that they had provided a range of material support, including tablets to support those facing digital exclusion.

Digital exclusion was also reported by an organisation that supports unpaid carers. The response mentioned that many of their clients are not online and do not have phones.

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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