

## **Issues affecting emergency financial support providers and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic, Evidence Note 5**

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 fifth evidence note highlights the challenges faced by organisations as they begin to think about the future and the problems they expect to face in terms of sustainability and recovery planning.

***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.](#)***

### **Theme 1 – Funding**

Many responses reported issues around funding and resources. Respondents were concerned that funding would end after the initial government interventions and that this would create issues around sustainability, particularly as demand for services is likely to continue at an increased rate. They expressed a need for long-term funding to be available to meet this demand.

One organisation told us that:

*“Grant funders should ensure that money is not all given out now as we believe the demand for support is going to be huge once lockdown is lifted.”*

Responses also discussed a need for access to financial support that would fund core operational costs that would enable services to continue operating. One organisation that supports people experiencing homelessness said:

*“Issues regarding funding in the long term as most funding is covid specific but this means less available to apply for core running costs. Need to operate post covid not just now and there are still overheads to pay”*

A law advice centre told us that funding core costs would allow them to employ more staff to meet their increased workloads. Similarly, a local authority highlighted how funding was required in its area to employ more debt advice staff as there was a huge gap in provision created by the pandemic:

*“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. We are aware there is a need for an extra 2.0 FTE debt advice workers in the city as a result of Covid-19.”*

The respondent also highlighted that the financial impact of the pandemic will be long lasting and voluntary organisations, as well as local authorities, will require sufficient funding to deal with the impacts.

As these examples highlight, sustained funding is needed over the coming months to meet long lasting need created by the pandemic. Organisations have seen their capacity stretched and require support with core funding if they are to continue operating and provide much needed support and advice.

We heard how in many cases, the government and local authorities do have grants and financial aid available to local organisations, but smaller organisations reported struggling to access these due to being lesser known organisations or because staff and volunteer capacity is too limited:

*“Many funders are doing a great job of making emergency funds available however, there is no guarantee of receiving these on application as we're finding. We are competing against bigger and better-resourced organisations who have more staff/volunteers to spread the increased workload.”*

Similarly, an organisation that supports individuals experiencing poverty and abuse reported:

*“There has been a lot of financial grants for food and emergency support which we have managed to obtain to support our beneficiaries at this time which is great but we have struggled to access the grants that were available via local government and reduction in trading income is a huge concern.”*

## **Theme 2 – Staffing and Volunteering**

In regards to their staff and volunteers, respondents highlighted issues around a dramatically altered work environment, concerns of whether staffing could meet increased demand and issues around recruiting new staff.

Numerous respondents expressed the difficulties of staff and volunteers having to adapt to a new way of working and respondents highlighted that adaptations to working environments are likely to be necessary for adequate and effective recovery planning.

One response delivering support to vulnerable migrant families stated:

*“[O]ur limiting factor is not being set up to work remotely and not having enough staff time / funding for staff time.”*

Another earlier response called for more resources to assist staff in the transition to working from home:

*“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.”*

We also heard of other examples where responses conveyed the new challenges created for staff in present working circumstances:

*“Staff are having to provide more therapeutic support. Calls are therefore longer and clients can't cope with having to wait longer than a day if they are needing a call back.”*

As discussed in [Evidence Note 3](#), responses from providers (foodbanks in particular) expressed fears over the long-term sustainability of volunteers assisting with service delivery. There were concerns around volunteer demographics – particularly in relation to volunteers being students or over 70 and issues that might arise if these usually relied upon groups are unable to volunteer. In the same note, one Foodbank stated the potential need for the council to step in provide staffing support.

A recent response also raised concerns over the impact of the increased workload on staff and volunteers, particularly when supporting individuals in accessing funds. This is something we highlighted in [Evidence Note 4](#) in relation to organisations struggling to cope with the increased volume of clients requiring support to access grants.

*“They are struggling with limited staff/volunteers and lots of the funds they administer require administration behind them [...] I'm concerned about staff/volunteer burnout.”*

On the issue of recruitment, one organisation working with vulnerable migrant women stated:

*“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.”*

### **Theme 3 – Guidance**

Emergency financial support providers are trying to plan for the future and respondents raised concerns around when and how they can reopen some services in the short term, and how their operating structure will have to adapt further into the medium to long term. However, responses showed how this vital step in the recovery process is being hindered by a lack of clear guidance from the government.

In some cases where guidance had been released, it had been quickly redacted without replacement, as described by a day centre which provides meals and casework support to people experiencing homelessness:

*“On 25th March got email stating day centres are dangerous and should close. Then guidance was withdrawn for day centres and hasn't been replaced. “*

The respondent then goes on to say how the guidance itself seemed contradictory to what is already in place for other kinds of services:

*“Public health said day centres were dangerous even if operated outside as soup kitchens do. So what is the difference, why can they [soup kitchens] provide food on the streets and day centres can't.”*

Often, in areas where guidance has been released, respondents reported that the guidance and information shared is unclear and leaves services feeling uncertain or not confident to reopen:

*“Issue with those that refuse to be accommodated all we can do is encourage. What if they become symptomatic? Guidelines for compliant people is clear but not for non-compliant. A framework for non-compliant people needs to be given. “*

This complaint is echoed by a response from a school, which stated:

*“There is just far, far too much information being sent by the DFE, the Local Authority and the diocese for school leaders to read and remember.”*

As shown above, not only is there a lack of guidance, but an issue with attaining consistent communication with government departments. This issue was reflected in responses from organisations trying to ensure their clients can access Universal Credit entitlements. Uncertainty can lead to further delays in organisations helping their clients to access the system:

*“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.”*

*“I have seen limited communication, clear advice could have been given on who can and can't claim Universal Credit. Many people who have never navigated the welfare system are confused and frustrated by it”*

It is an uncertain time for emergency financial support providers as they attempt to plan for the future during a time of increased demand and stretched resources. Clear guidance and support from the government and other agencies would help organisations to plan and adapt their services – but this also needs to be supported by long-term funding and staffing that can be sustained to meet the prolonged impacts of the pandemic.

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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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