Issues affecting emergency financial support providers and service users during the Covid-19 pandemic, Evidence Note 9

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 focuses on issues and barriers that professionals have highlighted as particularly affecting migrant communities, refugees, asylum seekers, EU migrants or individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) throughout the pandemic. It's clear that many of the issues cited are those that existed before the pandemic but they have been made worse over the last year.

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.

Theme 1: Internet access and digital exclusion[2]

A number of responses highlighted that the accommodation provided to asylum-seekers was rarely fitted with a WiFi connection, or that if it was the speed of the internet was rarely adequate to meet the individual's needs. This is particularly concerning as people are likely to be going through the asylum process and needing to video call their solicitor instead of meeting face to face, due to lockdown. As part of their claim, they may be needing to upload and send additional evidence, which can use up a significant amount of data.   One organisation supporting asylum-seekers commented that;

> *"I [don't] understand why all the houses provided to asylum seekers haven't been fitted with fast wifi even a year since we realised our lives have changed forever. Wifi now is a basic need and anyone without it are excluded."*

When asked what they would like to see from national or local decision-makers, several respondents working with migrants and asylum-seekers in various regions replied that they would like them to *"Provide internet access to Asylum seekers"* and *"Ensure that asylum houses have free internet connection and a computer".* One respondent highlighted how the lack of internet access affected asylum-seeking children;

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[1] This briefing is based on 27 responses to the evidence collection form received between April 2020 and April 2021.

[2] For further information on digital exclusion, see Briefing Note 6 and Briefing Note 8.

> *"Internet provision in all asylum housing [would] [e]nsure ALL children can access their schoolwork and get the data and support they need."*

Many organisations highlighted that the lack of WiFi access or data increased the isolation of migrant communities, and hindered them from accessing support. One organisation providing advice, support and advocacy for migrants in the east of England explained that;

> *"Many [of our] 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."*

It was also highlighted how the lack of digital access amongst migrant communities made it difficult for support agencies to reach those in need;

> *"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 in schoolwork. Many clients have no internet access or IT equipment."*

Theme 2: Language barriers to accessing support

For people with a limited English vocabulary, or who don't speak English at all, accessing support can prove difficult even in normal circumstances. During the pandemic, the lack of face to face services has increased this barrier to support. Several organisations expressed concern over those clients who feel more comfortable accessing services face to face;

> *"All our services are now on phone or email. We know we are missing some clients who only feel comfortable using f2f services, particularly those with poor English language skills who find it easier to make the first approach in person, where sign language allows us to identify the particular language needed and whether they need an appointment or simply sign posting."*

> *"Many of those we work with English is not the first language and […] [therefore] drop-in and outreach provisions of support are needed."*

Several respondents expressed concern that their organisations were struggling to reach clients who they knew had language barriers and weren't accessing their remote offer of support;

> *"People without English language skills are unable to resolve their issues on mainstream telephone of internet platforms. We cannot be sure that we are reaching everyone although we telephone the most vulnerable participant regularly"*

> *"Trying to reach clients with language [barriers] and lack of IT skills in [our area] via teams, Phone, email or Voodoo SMS [online bulk SMS service] has been very hard we have seen a drop in our BAME clients and we are looking for way to address this."*

Theme 3: Immigration status

Many respondents expressed concern that restrictions to immigration statuses meant that some people were prevented from working to earn an income, meaning that they didn't have the means to purchase necessary household items or the digital equipment necessary to access support. Several responded highlighted this in their responses;

"People seeking sanctuary are not allowed to work, thus they can't afford the gadgets need to keep in touch with what is going on and what they want to learn. They live in homes where there is no wifi. This has caused a lot of isolation and digital exclusion."

"Asylum-seekers, refugees and some overseas students [are] struggling to pay for essentials."

Respondents also highlighted how the pandemic had created barriers for people to regularise and maintain their immigration status;

"The Home Office is charging vulnerable people to change immigration appointments if the person does not want to risk travelling on public transport at this time. It is unfair to risk their health at a time when we are all asked to stay indoors."

"Asylum-seekers and refugees needing mobile top-ups so that they can keep in touch with their solicitors and families."

Due to many legal firms working remotely this has created barriers in supporting young people and caused delays on their immigration status.

A support worker based in Wales commented that the pandemic was making it difficult for individuals who had been granted leave to remain to understand how to secure accommodation;

"I have come across some people saying that they have been granted leave to remain and on contacting the housing options, there is no response, for example, one man asked me to find help with homeless charity because he has come to a dead end with housing. The homeless charity [charity name] has not been providing hosting services over the Covid time, and thus I'm worried for this man, where can he go when his eviction notice runs out this week?"

This was also highlighted by a respondent based in the north of England who commented that they had not received adequate information from the Home Office in relation to accommodation for individuals that have received a negative decision;

"No information from home office on negative decisions for leave to remain and those people become at risk of destitution."

Respondents asked that migrants should be granted leave to remain, or that they should be able to work while awaiting decision on their immigration status;

"Grant an organised and earned scheme for all migrants in the UK without leave to remain to grant amnesty to allow them to remain and live and work in the UK with dignity."

"Allow this client group to work while waiting for their status."

Theme 4: Individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

Many respondents expressed concern over how the pandemic was affecting individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). It was highlighted that the means of income for individuals with NRPF was abruptly put to a halt when lockdown caused many to lose their source of income. Having NRPF as a condition on one's immigration status meant that you

are unable to access benefits and welfare support from the Government. Many organisations responded that they were struggling to offer emergency support;

> *"People with NRPF are largely unaccounted for in this crisis. […] Albanian families who are living in hard to reach communities and whose incomes have relied upon unconventional work patterns (car wash etc) have had their financial stream stopped and it is very difficult to support such families, often with a few children, some very young."*

A London based health care agency commented that they were struggling to provide *"ongoing support to clients with NRPFs once discharged from Hospital",* explaining that they are having to "*threaten current trust with Safeguarding and reporting them [to] CQC [Care Quality Commission] for them to provide B&B and £35.00 allowance".*

In terms of children of families with NRPF, respondents commented that these children had been unfairly excluded from support, and were particularly vulnerable to poverty and destitution;

> *"The children most vulnerable to destitution are those from families denied the safety net of welfare support because they have no recourse to public funds as a condition on their immigration status. When these children's parents or carers cannot make ends meet they can experience an extreme level of poverty which manifests in homelessness, overcrowding and/or hunger."*

Migrant communities, refugees, asylum seekers, EU migrants or individuals with NRPF have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic just like everyone else. However, there are some issues caused by the pandemic that that have created specific barriers for these groups;

- The move from face to face services to remote support has shown how vital digital access is, and that specifically asylum-seekers are particularly vulnerable to being digitally excluded and thereby excluded from support services.

- The pandemic has also affected notions of what constitute 'necessary items', recognising that digital equipment and WiFi or data are essential to enable individual to access support services. For some migrants, mobile phones and data top-ups have been crucial to enable them to manage their immigration statuses in the UK.

- Regardless of digital access, many individuals with a limited English vocabulary, or who don't speak English at all, have found that accessing support remotely has been made increasingly difficult due to the language barrier. Face to face support allows additional communication tools to be used, which are lost when communicating remotely.

- For many who have NRPF, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on their lives, causing homelessness, poverty and destitution. Voluntary and statutory support agencies have both been limited in their ability to support individuals with NRPF.

With thanks to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Turn2Us 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 these organisations.

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