**ADVICE SERVICES ALLIANCE**

**A QUICK APPRAISAL OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ADVICE SECTOR**

**31/03/20**

**Overview**

This report is based on an initial analysis of an on-line survey of advice services undertaken by the Advice Services Alliance over the past 10 days to assess the impact of the Corona Virus on the frontline advice delivery. We have undertaken other work on the impact if Covis-19 with our members and with stakeholders, which is not included in this report.

**Results of the survey**

Reponses were received from 88 frontline advice services from across England and Wales, including local and national advice providers. The majority of respondents work in independent advice organisations (34) or Citizens Advice (33). Others include Age UK (10), Law Centre (3), Local Authorities welfare rights services (4), student unions (4) and Mind (2). There was one response from each of Carers association, a law department legal clinic, Macmillan, Mencap and Shelter. The majority of responses were received at the end of last week (25th-27th March 2020). Whilst this should not be seen as a representative sample of advice organisations, the sample has attracted responses from across the range of typical advice giving organisations.

The survey asked a series of open ended questions regarding the three main concerns for advice organisations now, in a month’s time and in three months. The analysis was carried out by categorising the responses under different headings. Further analysis is possible for example for whether different types of advice organisations responded differently to each other.

The concerns expressed by advice services across all time periods fell into three broad categories;; **impact on staff and impact on the organisation volunteers; impact on clients**. The relationship between these issues and the relative importance given to them shifts over time, as would be expected when services move from crisis to maintenance. In summary, the immediate concerns focus on maintaining services or shifting service delivery channels and looking after the advice teams, the later concerns are more focused on client’s ongoing needs, maintaining quality services and impact on funding.

In the report below, the bullet points indicate the direct quotes taken from the survey.

**The main issues COVID-19 is causing for advice organisations now**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common concern expressed related to the i**mmediate closure of advice services**, particularly face-to-face services for vulnerable client groups.

Many responses related practical problems resulting from the immediate and complete closure face to face services:

* Having to run a service at home, using remote technology, no access to paperwork and resources from the office and the cost of setting up homeworkers (38)
* Uncertainty regarding financial position and concerns about funding and relationships with funders if not delivering
* Difficulties contacting other services and government departments:

Many issues identified related to the staff and volunteers, and the **challenge of being a responsible employer** whilst also maintaining some type of service:

* Fall in number of volunteer advisers:
* Staff and trustees in vulnerable group and so having to self-isolate:
* Uncertainty for staff, stress and low morale of staff and not having answers to staff questions
* Having to put staff on furlough and what this will mean
* Difficulties keeping team connected:

Others identified the **impact of advice channel shift** on their service offer:

* Being unable to help clients with online applications and accounts:
* Difficulties communicating with digitally excluded clients:
* Language barriers relying on phone advice/ no access to translators:
* No home visits:

Regarding clients, many services identified the impact of COVID-19 **exacerbating the situation of their existing clients,** with some expressing concern that this will push many into further exclusion:

* Clients don’t have financial support and/or access to food:
* Clients being told to self-isolate:
* Families of clients unable to support them:

Service also recognised that they are experiencing an increase in **new demand from both new and existing clients** created by the government response to Coronavirus

* Rise in phone calls, very high demand with COVID-19 related concerns:
* Unable to offer certainty to clients as unclear on policies
* Client’s don’t have access to resources to apply for/ maintain benefits:

**The main issues anticipated for a months' time and three months’ time**

We asked advice services to think about what issues they expected to encounter in a month’s time. Many organisations are very concerned about the impact on existing client’s and the ability of the services to meet client’s needs, in other words how they would **fulfil their role as advice givers during the crisis**;

* Client’s situations worsening.
* Increased poverty, homelessness, unable to access basic food and services,
* Lack of access to get benefits,
* Increasing debt:
* Backlogs of clients and referrals:

But they also expressed concern regarding the **health and well-being of staff and volunteers**, particularly at a time when demand is increasing:

* Staff sickness, mental health, isolation, motivation:
* Income unable to cover costs:
* Increased demand for benefits advice, issues with the system changes people being unable to properly apply:
* Financial impact on workers and beneficiaries:
* Other services are full to their capacity:

When asked to look further into the future, the view of advice services regarding issues that will occur later (3 months-time) reflect a **more pessimistic outlook**, for services, for clients and for staff and volunteers. Many saw client’s personal situation getting worse, more poverty, homelessness, unable to access basic food and services, lack of access to benefits, and increased level of debt. In addition, the responses reflected an **inability for the government to cope** with the new demand and that this would also put advice organisations under pressure (backlog of clients and referrals and a high demand on services).

**What organisations need**

The overwhelming response to the question of what organisations need is **short term funding, resources or financial help** to get through the current crisis. The tone of such responses is one of urgency and exasperation that social welfare advice appears to be overlooked and under resourced even before the crisis. Flexibility from funders (sometimes linked with quality assurance measures) was also regularly mentioned.

* The survival of the sector is at stake if we cannot get a cash injection to replace lost income over this period
* We require a package of support to be put in place immediately. Going forward our services should receive statutory funding as we are essential not only in times of crisis. Fast action.
* We will also at some point have to convince our funders that what we are doing has equal value even if our statistics look different.
* Sharing of resources and good practice could be a cost effective way to address some of these challenges, however, as most of the sector the fundamental issue is access to core funding to allow organisations the flexibility they need to adapt and respond to the needs.
* Increased costs for telephone calls so grants etc
* Funding to support changes but to also plan longer term
* more funding to employ more staff and / or increase hours worked by part time staff
* extra debt advice funding
* Increased funding to cope with the onslaught of advocacy, advice, welfare support that will be needed when the crisis is over
* Access to grants to pump prime the organisation in the event of funding disruption
* Emergency funding streams to enable: swift recruitment of a couple of housing case workers; enhanced training for legal staff in areas where we have not previously advised (benefits); to support better tech/remote working

Some expressed doubts about how safe it is to **read the future** in the current situation and therefore how difficult it is to predict what the sector needs;

* We are at crisis management mode right now and it’s difficult to foresee the future
* I don't think we can possibly understand how things are going to progress and the difficulties we will encounter.
* The Covid-19 crisis is showing us all just how precarious the welfare state now is, and how much charities like ours are relied upon for basic support.

Some of the respondents expressed frustration that social welfare advice is not a priority for government when the sector is trying to support people affected by the lock down. Within this, there is a sense that the **sector leadership needs to work with government** to find solutions;

* Social welfare advice sits within most statutory priorities and should be fully resourced and appreciated Social welfare advice needs to be statutory priority
* We need a meaningful - concerted effort to support the sector in this period
* Charities appear to be the forgotten sector in this global crisis and yet Government are expecting us to respond and fill in many of the gaps that are required in order to provide emergency provision to communities.

**Tech support and capacity support** also feature as an early ask, including training of people to be able to build capacity for anticipated peak in demand. It is clear that different services are in very different places with their tech; some mention how they have remote working and the move to home based advice has been smooth whilst others do not have access to telephones to facilitate home working.

* Tech - tablets, and training would go a long way to help our isolated clients
* Our advice service acts as a lifeline for isolated service users and we are doing our utmost to provide advice over the phone as many service users are not IT literate. Facilitating access to free simple tablets and training for our service users would go a long way in enabling remote advice in crisis situations.

One comment specifically mentions IT in relation to access to HMCTS remote systems as a useful tool for supporting clients:

* access to Benefit tribunal hearings HMCTS need to invest in technology to enable conference calls

Sharing of **good practice and partnership** working feature as ways of meeting some of the gaps in services, action that does not require huge resources

* Effective collaboration - referrals, sharing of practice
* Liaison with other services locally
* Formal setting up of peer support groups for advice workers

There were a number of **asks of government** which ranged from clear government advice and guidance through to relaxing the current limitations on operating remotely such as electronic signatures:

* A clear unambiguous message from central and local government
* DWP to adapt systems e.g. allow online or emailed claims for all benefits, allow implicit consent for UC claims, enable their telephony staff to work from home so that the can still manage high call volumes
* Direct lines to DWP processing team
* More electronic means and substitutes i.e. electronic signatures, being able to make claims for clients where we can’t now
* Ongoing ban on evictions and effective enforcement of this

Whilst many organisations have lost staff through illness or self-isolation, advice services are recognising the need to **bring in new volunteers** to help cope with peaks in demand as well as providing support and training for existing staff in the new rights that have been introduced.

* Training resources to keep/get advisers up to date
* Maximise opportunities to increase volunteering after the crisis
* Additional volunteers recruited to help with demand on services
* Staff training in remote working and use of online platforms for meetings

**Other points worth noting**

As the survey covers a range of organisations who help people manage their problems and gain access to their rights, it also highlights important differences in the experiences of different clients groups and of the different areas of advice offered. A truism maybe but **advice giving organisations are not all the same** with the same concerns. Debt advice services provide quite a different range of help including some areas that are regulated as opposed to a service just specialising in welfare benefit.

For example, the impact of current situation on people who are **refugees** or who have no access to public funds is clearly more acute than for other groups

* Our clients are refugees, many of whom suffer from PTSD and mental health issues. They are normally fairly isolated but Corona isolation will cause their problems, that we just about manage to keep under control, to really escalate with potentially devastating consequences

Likewise, the organisations offering advice to families and to **women and girls living with threat of violence** is made hugely more complex by the lockdown and several respondents mention family breakdown, domestic violence and social disruption.

* We need to focus on existing clients and the emerging new groups of people needing help. I fear lock down and the effects of vivid 19 and the "new" benefit system will exacerbate existing disadvantage and create a new group of poor people.

Several responses made particular comments with **praise for staff** and the flexibility of the teams to adapt to new circumstances

* Our staff are being amazing and are being flexible in their working. Still providing a quality service despite the challenges.

The commitment to providing advice to clients which shines through this survey, even in the most difficult of circumstances, is awe-inspiring.

**Lindsey Poole and Rachel Russell**

**Advice Services Alliance**

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