

The impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

The voluntary sector in criminal justice is essential to supporting people in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) through the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond and are key to the government's plans for recovery from this crisis. However the pandemic has created significant challenges for the sector in safeguarding staff and service users, redesigning services, and financial stability which need to be addressed if the sector are to continue delivering their essential services.

Clinks has been running regular surveys to understand and respond to the impact Covid-19 is having on voluntary organisations in this sector. In last month's survey we saw that demand for the sector's services was increasing as the needs of the people in the criminal justice system worsen. However many organisations were still operating reduced services due to the restrictions in place faced about returning to in-person services. Organisations were cautiously optimistic about their long-term sustainability but with concern about an economic recession in the future and the impact this will have on the availability of funding.

With guidelines changing as lockdown eases as various paces across wider society and the prison estate – and in some cases is reinstated - we ran another survey to monitor the impact of this on the voluntary sector and explore our previous findings in more depth. 112 organisations responded to the survey. The briefing below provides the key findings from their responses.

The people organisations support

- **Organisations continue to report concern that the needs of the people they work to support have become greater during this time**, with 68% strongly agreeing and a further 29% agreeing this to be the case.
- **The mental health needs of people in contact with the CJS are becoming more acute**
Organisations continue to raise the mental health impact of the current situation on people in the CJS, the increased isolation and heightened anxiety that it is causing them and their families. Some organisations also noted worsening physical health.

“The strain and anxiety caused by not being able to see member(s) of the family in prison has been harder week by week; we know this from calls to the mobile family support helpline we set up during lockdown.” – survey respondent

“Increased physical and MH difficulties. More anxiety relating to release and lack of preparation support available.” – survey respondent

- **Organisations also continue to report that more people in the CJS and their families are at crisis point as their basic needs go unmet and pandemic exacerbates poverty.** There is an increase in need for basic essentials such as food as people struggle to access benefits, accommodation and employment. It was also noted that people continue to be released homeless and that access to services has become harder which is compounded the issues people are facing.

“We have also been sign-posting family members to external agencies e.g. food banks, debt advice indicating an increased level of need.” – survey respondent

“We have seen an increase in support needs around housing, mental health, domestic abuse & exploitation, benefits, basic needs (food, access to mobile phones).” – survey respondent

“Isolation, mental health, substance misuse, accommodation, debt issues have all been heightened for many clients facing these challenges.” – survey respondent

- **A number of responses specifically raised concern about the impact that the lockdown is having on women.** The responses highlighted exacerbated mental health, increased poverty, and additional pressures many women face with caring responsibilities. In particular concern was raised about the increased risk of domestic abuse for women during this time and the difficulty accessing support and safe spaces at this time.

“The group of women that we support already face multiple forms of disadvantage, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. These include domestic violence, mental health issues, low income, familial and caring responsibilities, and employment issues. Many women have been furloughed or lost their jobs, making their circumstances more acute.” – survey respondent

*“... Many more women disclosing abuse and exploitation & related difficulties in safeguarding due to lack of face to face contact/safe spaces to talk/ability to communicate ... Increase in need for housing for women, particularly those who are sofa surfing or hidden homeless and may have been kicked out of their accommodation but have never flagged up to services before.”
– survey respondent*

“An increase in domestic abuse and coercive control during lockdown” – survey respondent

Service delivery

Service provision

- **As previously highlighted levels of service provision are lower than they were prior to the pandemic.** 58% say that service provision has decreased as a result of the pandemic and a further 7% say they still have not been able to deliver any services.
- **In the last month service provision however has for many organisations begun to increase again.** 43% say service provision has increased slightly and 14% say service provision has increased a lot in the last month.
- **Organisations continue to struggle to engage new clients in their service,** with 57% saying that the number of new clients they are able to engage has decreased slightly or a lot. The responses highlight that this for those that work in prisons this drop is primarily because they have not been able to enter prisons to engage with clients. In the community challenges have been highlighted around:
 - **Digital exclusion and challenges keeping people engaged remotely**

“for the sector of people unused to being in contact via phone, who frequently miss calls, we are struggling to get them the help they need eg GP, citizens advice, benefits, as it is telephone based.” – survey respondent

“There has been a drop in referrals, coupled with an inability to progress existing caseloads due to the restrictions in place. Lack of face to face contact has resulted in delays in communication, additional time to build relationships and increased disengagement.” – survey respondent

- **Capacity issues** responses highlighted not having the staff or volunteer numbers to engage people

“We rely a lot on volunteers and they've been limited in their ability to volunteer due to the lockdown.” – survey respondent

- **Working one on one** There are challenges with running group work and organisations are still primarily only able to work with people on a one-to-one basis

“we are working more intensely with individual clients” – survey respondent

- **Walk-ins and word of mouth** Some responses highlight that they would usually have a community space open for people to walk into to and access which is now closed. Information about the available services would also often take place by word of mouth which has decreased as social interaction has fallen.

Delivering in-person services

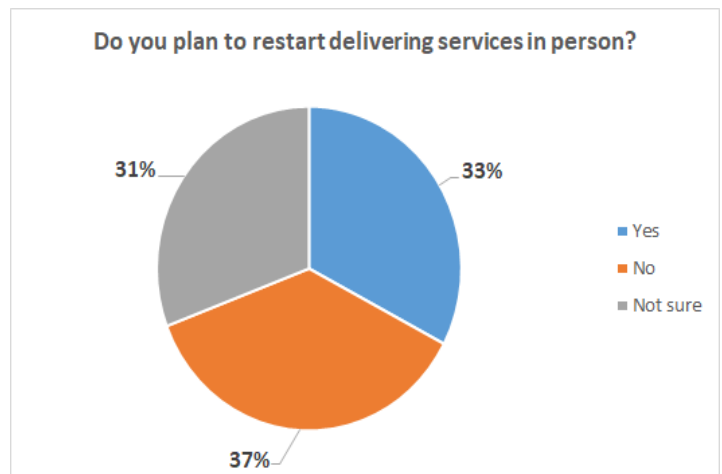
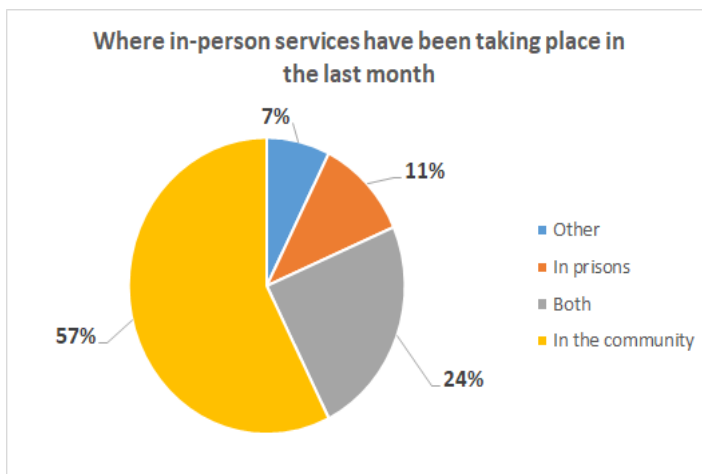
- **There is an even split of organisations that have been delivering face-to-face services in the last month.** 48% say that have been delivering in-person services in the last month and 47% say they have not been. The remaining 4% did not deliver in-person services prior to the pandemic.
 - **The majority of those that have been delivering services in-person have been doing so in the community.** However 35% (19 organisations) say they have been delivering services in prison.
- **Of those not currently delivering in-person services, there is still uncertainty about returning to face-to-face services.** 33% say they plan to restart delivering services in-person in the next month, 37% will not be and 31% are not sure whether to.
 - For organisations who will not be returning to face-to-face delivery this is primarily due to prisons they work in not yet allowing them to restart services. Responses indicate that many do not anticipate this will change in the foreseeable future.
- When asked to expand on any other challenges organisations were facing with returning to deliver face-to-face services, organisations highlighted challenges with communication with prisons and probation and inconsistency between information from central government and what is taking place at the local level. There were also challenges cited depending on the type of activity to be delivered and particular issues with delivering group work at this time. One response also highlighted the challenge of working in the community and accessing a space that is appropriate and safeguards staff and service users against Covid-19.

“Fragmentation between what is said centrally and what is happening locally. Spent months working on a sensible timeframe and sign off process and then HMPPS announced visits could reopen in a matter of days. ... Adherence to cleaning regimes in individual establishments. Sites writing their EDMs without consulting us. Ongoing poor communication around what is and isn't acceptable.”
- survey respondent

“Lack of information from prison what they want to do and how and what are the risk assessment measures in place.” - survey respondent

“Challenge in finding sheltered and private locations to conduct outdoor visits.”
- survey respondent

- This reinforces qualitative evidence collected by Clinks through our engagement with the sector in our support work and network events. Feedback from some organisations highlights that they have asked to start delivering services again regardless of what stage of the national framework they are and the EDMs. This indicates an inconsistent approach across the prison estate towards the delivery of in-person services and one that is at odds with guidance from central government. The responses also reiterate feedback received at our events from organisations who have also raised concern that they will be going back into prisons but have not been made aware of the safety measures in place.



Staff and volunteers

- **Organisations continue to see reduced volunteer numbers**, with over half (57%) saying that the number of volunteers that support their organisation has decreased slightly or a lot during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Added to this some organisations also report a reduction in staff working**. 34% say the number of staff working has as decreased slightly or a lot.
- **Use of the coronavirus job retention scheme is mixed**. 55% of organisations that responded to the question (n=94) say they have furloughed during the pandemic and 45% have not.
- **Of those that have used the scheme, approximately half say staff are still on furlough**. Just over half of those organisations (14 organisations) are aiming to bring those staff back from

furlough in the next month. However organisations are facing significant challenges bringing staff back. There is a particular challenge for organisations who are not able to generate income (e.g. through trading arms and social enterprises in prison) due to current restrictions and funding challenge to cover staff costs and bring them back from furlough.

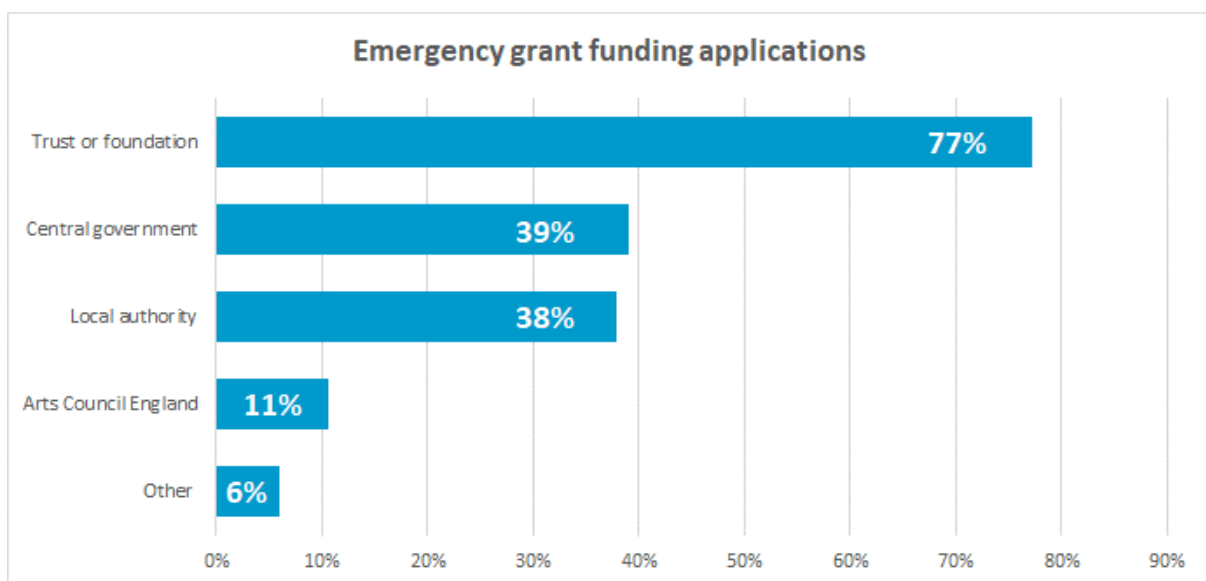
“We are navigating a careful balance between part-time returning to work and supporting salaries with no income. We want to start working again but need to remain very low in expenditure whilst we can't generate any kind of income.” - survey respondent

- For some who deliver in prisons in particular, until prisons enable the service to restart, there isn't the work for staff to deliver. There is concern what this means for organisations if they cannot restart their services before the job retention scheme comes to an end at the end of October particularly if they are impacted by local lockdowns.

Financial impact

Emergency grant funding

- **The majority of organisations applied for emergency grant funding as a result of the pandemic.** 72% of respondents to the question (n=93) said this was the case.
- **Of the organisations that did not apply for emergency grant funding, the primary reason was because they did not meet the eligibility criteria for the available funding.** Of the 23 organisations that did not apply for emergency grant funding, 48% (11 organisations) said they did not meet eligibility criteria for the available funding. Only 8 organisations said it was because it was not needed.
- **Charitable trusts and foundations were the primary source that organisations applied to for emergency grant funding over government emergency funding.** 77% of those that said they applied for emergency grant funding applied to trusts and foundations compared to 39% who said they applied to central government.



- **From our qualitative engagement with the sector, we believe organisations haven't applied for emergency funding from government sources as much is because there has been no fund aimed specifically at the criminal justice voluntary sector that also encompasses and is accessible to the breadth and diversity of organisations working in our sector.** With a potential recession on the horizon, further funding cuts and less funding available for charitable trusts and foundations greater consideration needs to be given to stabilisation and long-term grant funding directed specifically at the sector in criminal justice. This is especially important given how reliant the criminal justice voluntary sector is on government and charitable trust & foundation funding because they receive such limited public donations.

Income

- **Many organisations have lost earned income as a result of the pandemic,** with over half of respondents (51%) saying this is the case.

“Without events and with limited routes to market, our income streams from donations and trading are down by 50%” – survey respondent

“Our trainees and staff produce market garden, woodwork and pottery products for sale to the public. During the lockdown, woodwork and pottery sales all but ceased...” – survey respondent

“Almost all income that we were expecting from Prisons has ceased. We expect to have lost in excess of £50,000 by the end of the year” – survey respondent

“[We've lost] approximately a quarter of our turnover this year including cancelled bookings.” – survey respondent

- **Organisations continue to apply for funding to sustain and rebuild services and maintain core activities that are not specifically related to the Covid-19 emergency response but there are challenges with funds being redirected for Covid-19.** 62% of respondents to the question (n=88) tell us that they have applied for funding outside of the Covid-19 response, but the feedback highlights some challenge with organisations not accepting applications or pausing funding processes due to the crisis and redirecting funds towards Covid-19.

*“We have ongoing funding needs for areas of work that are part of our normal service e.g staff we have in post who were needed to support families before the Covid-19 crisis and will be even more needed after. These needs do not 'fit' many of the Covid-19 Response Grant Programme criteria and we have therefore been unable to make as many applications as we would normally make to Trusts & Foundations who have put normal programmes on hold.”
- survey respondent*

“some funders not accepting applications due to crisis” - survey respondent

Sustainability

- **Organisations are not fully confident about their long-term sustainability.** Whilst some organisations remain cautiously optimistic, 65% of respondents to the question (n=88) say they are only somewhat confident about their long-term sustainability, a further 14% are not so confident and 2% are not at all confident.

