

# **Summary of evidence and insight: Placing people at the centre in service delivery responses during Covid-19**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents a summary of evidence and insight relating to the approaches grantholders have taken to placing people at the centre in service delivery during Covid-19. It draws upon evidence from Fulfilling Lives, Help through Crisis (HtC), #iwill Fund, Place Based Social Action (PBSA) and Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). It focuses upon the themes of: 1) remote working; 2) face-to-face service delivery; 3) supporting people's voices to be heard including via remote co-production; and 4) the importance of blended delivery approaches. The paper also presents key considerations for beneficiaries and staff. The final section provides a summary of key points.

## **Remote working**

Grantholders, partnerships and projects have found that there are both benefits of remote working and challenges relating to reach.

### **Benefits of remote working**

Fulfilling Lives, WGI and HtC partnerships and projects have utilised the opportunities provided by remote working to address multiple disadvantage through person centred approaches (Smeaton et al 2020). These opportunities have benefited those they support in a number of ways (Moreton et al 2020). For example, alongside enabling more frequent contact, remote working has removed the stress, time and cost involved in travelling to appointments - particularly useful if someone has multiple appointments on the same day. Online or telephone communication can provide a more neutral space than meeting at a clinical or administrative building. Crucially, remote working allows for more tailored and individual support (rather than people having to conform to more rigid service processes).

There are initial positive impressions from #iwill Fund about remote digital delivery to facilitate youth social action (Dartington Social Design Lab 2020). In relation to young people, online meetings have made it easier to engage with some young people: those perceived as engaging more successfully in online spaces than in person. This suggests that digital delivery may be useful to enhance initial engagement and relationship building with some. Remote digital delivery means young people can be exposed to a wider range of partners, increase their learning and be provided with new ways to reflect upon their learning. Increased participation in decision-making within organisations has supported embedding youth leadership and youth voice in more organisations. Relationships have also been strengthened between funded local groups that has resulted in cross-referrals and increased awareness of grants and support available from member organisations.

Digital delivery has enabled #iwill Fund organisations to hold live events that have reached large numbers of young people and enabled huge reach and participation from young people beyond that previously reached. This has also reduced geographical barriers and enable local projects to connect with young people anywhere in the country. This includes those in rural areas who might not have been able to access face-to-face social action and young people with disabilities (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020).

### **Concerns about remote working, reach and access to support**

Evidence from HtC (Help through Crisis Support, Learning and Evaluation Team, 2020) and #iwill Fund (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020) reveals that the shift to digital is dependent upon the extent to which an organisation is digitally based prior to Covid-19. While some organisations have been able to convert existing engagement to digital, engaging new people through remote digital means has proven to be difficult (Smeaton et al 2020). Partnerships and projects addressing multiple disadvantage are concerned that working remotely may mean they can't reach those who previously relied on face-to-face contact to access support or to effectively access and engage with new referrals (Smeaton et al 2020). Certain groups may be left isolated and become difficult to reach. Without being able to access support online, people may not receive support and their situation worsen.

The move to remote working has raised concerns across the board about the increased digital divide and its impact upon those less able or comfortable in the digital environment, or who have limited or no internet access. Age, disability and poverty are key factors but there is also a gendered dimension to digital exclusion (Cheshire et al 2020). In recognition of this, Fulfilling Lives, WGI and HtC partnerships and projects have recognised the importance of taking steps to reduce digital exclusion by, for example, providing basic equipment, providing phone credit, and support to get online, create accounts and log-ins (Smeaton et al 2020). One PBSA partnership in Hartlepool is also working with a local care home as a part of an intergenerational project to share stories digitally. Alongside facilitating younger and older people to develop friendship, this has enabled older people to use digital equipment and technology (Renaissi 2020).

The following from #iwill Fund (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020) highlights some of the challenges of working digitally and building and retaining engagement with young people:

While working digitally allows for mass engagement with, this does not equate to building and retaining engagement.

Barriers to engaging new young people relate to the inability to draw upon the more traditional method of face-to-face engagement and the amount of online interaction expected from young people.

There are concerns that working digitally may undermine long-term engagement as there are challenges of sustaining trusting relationships through online contact and some describe losing engagement from core groups of young people due to the move away from face-to-face engagement.

There is also acknowledgement that digital delivery disadvantages young people from poorer households due to the reliance upon access to devices, Wi-Fi or data and a suitable environment.

Concerns have been raised about young people with caring responsibilities whose time on these have increased during lockdown with less time to engage with youth social action than when they were at school.

## **Considerations relating to staff: wellbeing, embedding technical skills and continuing to develop knowledge and practice**

While some staff find themselves suited to remote digital working, others find it challenging and that it has a detrimental impact upon wellbeing. Areas of concern include impact upon staff privacy, maintaining other boundaries while using video conferencing technology in the home and the emotional impacts of working in isolation at home (Smeaton et al 2020). In recognition of these concerns, partnership and projects from Fulfilling Lives, HtC and WGI are supporting staff wellbeing by: prioritising self-care by encouraging staff to reflect upon how they are feeling and know that they can seek support; providing casual remote support for staff including opportunities for peer support; encouraging a culture of reflective practice; and increasing formal support (Cheshire et al 2020).

Enabling staff to provide effective online support and activities requires the provision of equipment and building upon existing skills. This includes addressing online safety including safeguarding, privacy and data protection (Cheshire et al 2000). In response to evidence that the women's sector is digitally under-powered with many staff and volunteers, as well as service users, lacking training or confidence in technological skills (Women and Girls Initiative Learning and Impact Service 2020), it is important to assess where gaps lie and provide training and other support to meet these gaps.

Similarly, continuing to develop knowledge and practice about working in the online space is important in recognition that remote service delivery is likely to continue during the pandemic and post-pandemic (Stradling 2020).

## **Considerations relating to beneficiaries: ensuring access to remote support and reducing the digital divide**

Evidence gathered relating to addressing multiple disadvantage with technology during Covid-19 (Cheshire et al 2020) provides solutions and resources to support those people who are less comfortable using online services. These include:

**Finding a motivating factor or 'hook'** can help encourage people to engage online and access the support they need. For example, [RISE](#), a WGI project, is trying out ways of building activities into group work by delivering sewing kits and then working on them together when they meet online.

**Focus on encouragement**, rather than 'training', as trust grows with every positive experience.

Encourage people to **use the internet in a familiar setting and for a short time each day** can help build positive routines and slowly develop trust and motivation.

While it acknowledged that specific challenges relate to digital inclusion and working with people who have English as a second language or those with disabilities or have specific access requirements, there are ways to tailor support (Help through Crisis Learning, Support and Evaluation Team 2020):

Support will benefit from improving both skills and understanding which can be facilitated by **working at the pace of the learner and using a person-centred approach**.

Avoid jargon and **use simple language relating to the task being completed** rather than the technology being used.

**Allow space for repetition and reflection** to support people to reflect upon their learning, recognise their progress and increase in confidence.

Providing **long-term support** allows support to be ongoing and structured to enable people to ask questions as they go along. Consider the **use of digital buddies / volunteers** who can be on hand to answer questions and provide support.

## **Delivering face-to-face support**

There is recognition that some people cannot be reached remotely and require face-to-face support (Moreton et al 2020, Help through Crisis Learning, Support and Evaluation Team 2020, Stradling 2020). Some WGI services, for example, with larger building and/or outdoor spaces have moved to some carefully navigated face-to-face work.

Evidence from #iwill Fund reveals that some projects have continued socially distanced face-to-face activities or meeting through lockdown in line with restrictions. One project, Young Manchester, have delivered what they describe as ‘highly focused protective youth work interventions’ (Young Manchester in Dartington Service Design Lab 2020, 4) in ten minute engagements where personal protective equipment is worn. Some #iwill Fund partners have attempted to organise outdoor trips and social action trips but found that engagement was difficult due to parents and carers’ concerns about health risks. Those organisations who are not reliant upon schools and teachers for delivery support or referrals have been able to retain young people’s engagement more easily than those organisations who are reliant upon schools and teachers. Some #iwill Match Funders<sup>1</sup> have reported that some grantees delivering via schools have been informed that in-person delivery will not be resumed for some time.

### **Considerations relating to staff: staying safe and attention to wellbeing**

While many staff may welcome the opportunity to deliver some face-to-face work (Smeaton et al 2020), staff may also have concerns about their safety and wellbeing due to the potential risks of Covid-19 or may not be in a position to undertake work away from the home due to, for example, caring responsibilities. Evidence from WGI reveals how projects undertaking face-to-face work are ensuring careful consideration of staff, and beneficiaries, feelings:

In the process, they are navigating staff members’ and clients’ feelings about the changing rules, decisions around safety measures implemented (e.g. 1 metre or 2 metres distancing indoors), and staff availability as some cannot easily work away from home without childcare.  
(Stradling 2020)

### **Considerations relating to beneficiaries: challenges for some young people to participate in face-to-face social action**

There is recognition within #iwill Fund that, when wider face-to-face social action becomes possible, there are some groups of young people who will encounter challenges (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020). This includes carers for family members with health conditions and those from more marginalised backgrounds who may be most affected by wider economic and social uncertainty. There is also the challenge of translating the enhanced engagement of those who engage more successfully in online spaces when ‘in-person’ delivery resumes.

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<sup>1</sup> Match-funders are other funders that match the funding on the #iwill Fund investment on at least a £1: £1 ratio. They work in partnership with The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to distribute the fund’s investment.

## Ensuring people's voices are heard

The volunteering or service-based activities that formed the majority of #iwill Fund activities largely ground to a sudden halt with the onset of the pandemic. This, along with the prevalent feeling that the government were largely ignoring young people, and the exam crisis drove young people to engage in online campaigning activities. The Black Lives Matter movement and the resulting focus on entrenched inequalities is also recognised as a prominent force and contributed to the rise in campaigning activities. Some #iwill Fund organisations supported mobilisation of young people's voices about the exam crisis. In Greater Manchester, this mobilisation led to the metropolitan Mayor to establish a taskforce to consider a 'youth guarantee'.

There is learning from PBSA about how partnerships engaged local communities, including those not previously reached, and consulted with them to identify next steps as the pandemic continues. The following examples are provided:

In Colchester, the Community Response Team are working with local community groups to understand the most pressing needs and adapting their support offer to meet these. In Halifax, the partnership plan to hold a 'Big Conversation' with local people to get them involved in designing services that address issues that are most pertinent to them.

(Renaissi 2020, 2)

The boost in social action led to people developing 'sustainable hyperlocal solutions to helping themselves' (Renaissi 2020, 6). Rather than a reliance on the statutory sector, these solutions have come through friends, neighbours and volunteer matching systems. This appears to be supported by: 1) the lead partners' existing relationships within the community and the focus of existing work; and 2) quick mobilisation based upon newly developed relationships with agencies, volunteers and with those in PBSA partnerships. Relationships based on trust between partnerships and communities have also played a critical part in an effective response. In addition, placing the communities needs and motivations at the core of the response has enabled more people to become involved.

There have also been some benefits of delivering remote co-production activities that ensure the individual is placed at the centre (Revolving Doors 2020). This is largely due to online remote co-production being more inclusive, and improving access for some due to reduced costs and enabling those with anxiety and / or physical conditions to participate. Collaboration is benefited because of the ease of bringing those with lived experience together with policymakers. One example from HtC relates to beneficiaries co-producing work relating to council tenant groups (Smeaton et al 2020).

### **Considerations relating to beneficiaries: online campaigning may not be for all young people**

While there are benefits of online campaigning, there are concerns about inclusivity when the focus of youth social action is upon campaigning. Some young people may not be able to participate in external-facing campaigning activity and the emphasis upon campaigning may be off-putting for some (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020).

Remote co-production remains inaccessible for some. There are also questions around the potential for video fatigue, what is sacrificed by co-producing in this way and what do those with lived experience think about remote co-production (Revolving Doors 2020).

## A blended approach to service delivery

For some providers of services and support whose offer before the onset of Covid-19 was face-to-face, the pandemic enabled them to develop and deliver remote ways of working that have had successful. For some, there is the intention to continue with digital delivery along with face-to-face work when this resumes. As explained by one #iwill Fund grantee:

*'We're planning to continue with JLGB Virtual<sup>2</sup> one night a week when face-to-face delivery resumes. The success of JLGB Virtual [which has gained over one million views] had resulted in us reflecting and believing that going forward we may be able to be more agile and efficient and provide more training and social action sessions.'*

(JLGB in Dartington Service Design Lab 2020, 19)

There are clear arguments for maintaining remote delivery due to the benefits it brings. While there is currently some face-to-face service delivery on, for example, Fulfilling Lives, HtC, #iwill Fund and WGI, a remote offer safeguards against future restrictions. Evidence supports the importance of offering a blended approach to meet individual's needs and circumstances (Cheshire et al 2020, Moreton et al 2020, Smeaton et al 2020a).

## Summary of key points

The evidence and insight presented in this paper presents how grantholders' have placed the people they support at the centre of their responses to Covid-19.

While there are positive impacts of remote delivery to address multiple disadvantage and to enable some young people to participate in youth social action, particularly online campaigning activity, there are those for whom digital exclusion acts as a barrier to receive remote services and support. There are also concerns about the impact of remote working upon staff wellbeing. While it is acknowledged that addressing marginalisation and the impact of wider economic and social uncertainty goes far beyond the scope of this paper, the paper presents some options for grantholders to facilitate access to remote delivery, including support for staff. However, it is also acknowledged that these options require

Face-to-face delivery is taking place across programmes but appears to require some key requirements such as consideration of staff safety and availability, premises of a scale that can facilitate face-to-face delivery and, in relation to children and young people, parental willingness for this form of delivery to take place.

Grantholders ensuring opportunities for people's voices to be heard have resulted in some impressive impacts at local levels. However, there are key voices that are missing from the evidence and insight presented in this paper: those of beneficiaries.

Lastly, a blended approach to service delivery that includes both remote and face-to-face delivery provides the means to ensure that individual's needs and circumstances are met. It allows for the benefits of remote working and face-to-face delivery to continue, alongside providing for some form of delivery to continue during the pandemic when there is uncertainty of future restriction.

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<sup>2</sup> JLGB works to empower young Jewish people to achieve positive change in society through training and development. JLGB Virtual is a Covid-19 response where young leaders are at the heart of weekly programme of online activities.

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