Evidence and insight: Placing people at the centre of service delivery in Covid-19

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1. Introduction

The content of this paper is drawn from evidence and insight presented in programme evaluation reports about how grantholders have placed the people they support at the centre of their responses to Covid-19, drawing upon:

- Fulfilling Lives
- Help through Crisis (HtC)
- #iwill Fund
- Place Based Social Action (PBSA)
- Women and Girls Initiative (WGI).

The evidence and insight relate to the themes of: 1) ensuring people's voices are heard including via remote co-production; 2) remote working; 3) face-to-face service delivery; and 4) the importance of blended delivery approaches.

The aim of the paper is to draw upon evidence and insight about how grantholders have placed the people they support at the centre of their responses to Covid-19 from across programmes to inform strategic developments, support to grantholders and assessment of grant applications. The paper is intended to be of use to SMT, others whose work addresses strategic considerations and funding staff.

The paper is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides evidence-based strategic considerations along with recommendations for the Fund to consider (pages 2 - 4).
- Section 3 addresses evidence and insight for funding staff to utilise in their support to grantholders and when assessing grant applications (pages 5 - 8).

2. Strategic considerations

Opportunities provided by external events and actions to ensure people's voices are heard

External events and actions have provided stimuli and opportunities for people, supported by programme partnerships and projects, to take action to ensure their voices are heard, as illustrated by the following examples from #iwill Fund and PBSA:

> 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 (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020). 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'.

A boost in social action on PBSA has led to people developing 'sustainable hyperlocal[1] solutions [through friends, neighbours and volunteer matching systems] to helping themselves' (Renaisi 2020, 6) rather than a reliance on the statutory sector.

Grantholders promoting opportunities for people's voices to be heard have resulted in some impressive outcomes. However, there are key voices that are missing from the evidence and insight provided to-date across evaluation contracts and presented in this paper: those of beneficiaries.

Recommendations

I. Drawing upon evidence from #iwill Fund and PBSA, and evidence, insight and learning from other programmes, the Fund can support with the provision of information to enable other communities to develop sustainable hyperlocal solutions and build this into future programme design.

II. That the Fund consider how, through its evaluation contracts and other available opportunities across programmes, it can incorporate beneficiaries' voices first hand, and benefit from their insight, about how they have been placed at the centre of grantholders' responses in general and, specifically, to Covid-19. This could include what has worked well from their perspective, what has not worked well and their ideas for future approaches to ensure people are placed at the centre of future programme design and grantholders' responses.

III. Given the recent emphasis upon remote co-production, there is merit in finding out what beneficiaries *really* think about remote co-production activities and using this insight to further develop remote co-production, and consider alternatives if beneficiaries articulate any alternative preferences to ensure their voices are included.

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[1] The term 'hyperlocal' relates to, or focuses upon, matters concerning a small community or geographical area.

Remote working and concerns about the digital divide

Evidence reinforces how grantholders' ability to shift to digital remote working is dependent upon the extent to which an organisation was digitally based prior to Covid-19 (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020; Help through Crisis Support, Learning and Evaluation Team 2020). 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 that remote service delivery is likely to continue during the pandemic and post-pandemic, it is importance to continue to develop knowledge and practice about working in the online space (Stradling 2020).

Trying to engage new people through remote digital means has proven to be difficult (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020, Help through Crisis Learning Support and Evaluation Team 2020, 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.

Recommendations

IV.　Given the level of impact of the Fund's investment in IT infrastructure and its unique position of having led the government's Covid-19 funding response, there is scope for the Fund to assess the impact of this investment and provide further evidence and insight to learn about what promotes remote service delivery and support, reducing digital exclusion and promoting digital inclusion. Emerging evidence from the Coronovirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) evaluation will support with meeting this recommended step.

V.　Of note is the significant distinction between mass engagement and building and retaining engagement (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020) to both ensure individuals receive the support they require and are able to contribute to planning, delivery, evaluation and redesign of services. It is therefore recommended that the Fund consider how it can support grantholders, and potential grantholders, to build and retain engagement.

VI.　Any evidence, learning and insight relating to providing support to those who are not reached through remote working but will rely upon face-to-face delivery will be supported by learning from programmes, partnerships and projects who are delivering face-to-face services. Once again, the CCSF evaluation can support with this.

Key considerations for face-to-face delivery

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.

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.

> *Recommendations*
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> VII.   To support the Fund and grantholders to assess both where face-to-face delivery will meet people's needs and circumstances and how it can be delivered, there is benefit for focused learning, evidence and insight about face-to-face delivery. This aligns with recommended next step VI with a focus upon identifying the factors that support face-to-face delivery and consideration of ensuring delivery of those who are 'harder to reach' via face-to-face delivery.

A blended approach to service delivery

A blended approach to service delivery including both remote and face-to-face delivery provides the means to ensure that individual's needs and circumstances are met (Cheshire et al 2020, Moreton et al 2020, Smeaton et al 2020a). 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 restrictions.

> *Recommendations*
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> VIII.   There is scope to support grantholders with blended approaches to service delivery through gathering and sharing knowledge, learning and insight from across the Fund's programmes and the external world.

3. Evidence and insight to support grantholders and grant assessment

Remote working: benefits, challenges and solutions

Evidence and insights focusing upon remote delivery have identified benefits and challenges that are highlighted below, alongside options for addressing challenges.

Benefits of remote working to address multiple disadvantage

While there may be concerns about addressing multiple disadvantage through remote working, there is evidence of positive impacts of utilising the opportunities provided by remote working to address multiple disadvantage through person centred approaches (Moreton et al 2020). 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).

Use of remote digital delivery to facilitate youth social action

Similarly, there are initial positive impressions from #iwill Fund about using remote digital delivery to facilitate youth social action (Dartington Social Design Lab 2020):

> Some young people are perceived as engaging more successfully in online spaces than in person, suggesting that **digital delivery can be useful to enhance initial engagement and relationship building** with some individuals. Young people can be **exposed to a wider range of partners**, thereby **increasing their learning** and providing **new ways to reflect upon their learning**. Increased participation in decision-making within organisations has supported **embedding youth leadership and youth voice**. 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**. This has **reduced geographical barriers** and **enabled local projects to connect with young people anywhere in the country (**including those in rural areas who might not have been able to access face-to-face social action and young people with disabilities).

Ensuring beneficiaries' access to remote support and reducing the digital divide

Solutions to support those people who are less comfortable using online services include the following (Cheshire et al 2020):

> **Find a motivating factor or 'hook'** to 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 working on them together 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.

There are specific challenges relate to digital inclusion and working with, for example, people who have English as a second language, those with disabilities or have other specific access requirements. However, there are ways to tailor support to meet needs (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. Provide **long-term support** to facilitate it being ongoing and structured to enable people to ask questions as they go along. Consider **digital buddies / volunteers** who can be on hand to answer questions and provide support.

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. One PBSA partnership is 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 friendships, this has enabled older people to use digital equipment and technology (Renaisi 2020).

Remote digital working, staff wellbeing and embedding technical skills

Evidence from Fulfilling Lives, HtC and WGI reinforces the importance of ensuring grantholders and potential grant applicants considering how remote digital working impacts upon their staff. 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: the impact upon staff privacy; maintaining boundaries while using video conferencing technology in the home; and the emotional impacts of working in isolation at home. In recognition of these concerns, Fulfilling Lives, HtC and WGI partnerships and projects are supporting staff wellbeing by: prioritising self-care by encouraging staff to reflect upon how they are feeling and seek support; providing casual remote support including peer support; encouraging a culture of reflective practice; and increasing formal support (Cheshire et al 2020, Smeaton et al 2020).

Enabling staff to provide effective online support and activities requires provision of equipment and building upon existing skills. This includes addressing online safety including safeguarding, privacy and data protection (Cheshire et al 2020). In recognition that the women's sector is digitally under-powered, with many staff and volunteers 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 gaps.

Challenges of working digitally and retaining engagement with young people

Experiences from #iwill Fund have highlighted challenges of building and retaining engagement with young people through remote digital working (Dartington Service Design Lab 2020):

Barriers to engaging new young people relate to the **inability to draw upon the 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** due to the challenges of sustaining trust-based relationships through online contact and losing engagement from core groups of young people due to the lack of face-to-face engagement. D**igital delivery disadvantages young people from poorer households** due to the reliance upon access to devices, Wi-Fi or data and a suitable environment.

Support with remote co-production

There are benefits and challenges of remote co-production (Revolving Doors 2020) that can be shared with grantholders, or those seeking to apply for a grant, who may be uncertain about progressing co-production activities with beneficiaries:

Remote co-production can **be more inclusive and improve 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**. However, remote co-production remains **inaccessible for some**. There are also questions around the **potential for video fatigue**, **what is sacrificed by remote co-producing** and **not knowing what those with lived experience think about remote co-production**.

Recommendations

IX.   It is suggested that, where appropriate, funding staff promote discussion with grantholders to include consideration of the following in grant applications and service delivery:

- Are there any opportunities for person-centred approaches to be utilised through remote working?
- How can remote working facilitate youth social action?
- When working remotely with young people, what strategies are in place to retain their engagement?
- What steps can be taken to ensure access to remote support and reduce the digital divide?
- How will you identify those who are not able to access remote support and what response will be established to reach these people (including young people from poorer households)?
- How does remote working impact upon staff?
- What steps are in place to support staff to work remotely, including those to address their wellbeing?
- How can co-production activities be delivered remotely and what steps can be taken to ensure activities are accessible and sustainable?

Delivering face-to-face support: opportunities and challenges

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, Smeaton et al 2020, Stradling 2020). Socially distanced face-to-face support has continued through the pandemic to address multiple disadvantage in public spaces. In addition, some WGI services with larger building and/or outdoor spaces having moved to some carefully navigated face-to-face work (Stradling 2020). Some #iwill Fund projects have continued socially distanced face-to-face activities or through lockdown in line with restrictions. One project has delivered '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.

Challenges to face-to-face work

In relation to young people, evidence from #iwill Fund that attempts to organise outdoor trips and social action trips were hindered by parents and carers' concerns about health risks (Dartington Service Design Lab). Those organisations 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 reliant upon schools and teachers.

While many staff welcome the opportunity to deliver 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 by 'navigating staff members' and clients' feelings about the changing rules, decisions around safety' (Stradling 2020).

Recommendations

X.   In relation to face-to-face service delivery, it is important to assess:

- Is there a need to provide face-to-face service delivery to those who cannot be reached remoted?
- What barriers are in place to face-to-face service delivery and what steps can be taken to remove these barriers?
- What steps will be put in place to assess and allay any staff concerns about delivering face-to-face services and how will staff and beneficiaries' safety be guaranteed?

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