CAPITAL CITY PARTNERSHIP

Service Delivery in a Pandemic. An examination of how employability services have been delivered across Edinburgh and the City Region in 2020.

Introduction

In December 2020, CCP sent an invite to caseworkers, managers and other staff delivering employability services in South East Scotland to participate in a survey. This survey aimed to provide an insight into the way the COVID pandemic impacted on service delivery over the course of 2020. The invite was sent to 264 users of Caselink in Edinburgh, East Lothian and to a lesser extent elsewhere in the City Region. By the end of the year 91 responses were recorded on Survey Monkey a response rate of 35%.

The period in which the survey was collecting responses was slightly different from the situation currently. Rather than the restrictions we are currently under the position in December was slightly more positive as vaccination was beginning to be rolled out and we were looking forward to Christmas and the relaxation of restrictions to allow more social interaction. If we were to ask some of the questions again in early 2021, it is likely that some of the answers, particularly the answers to open questions, may be different.

Before looking at the results of the survey it will be useful to provide a picture of the number of new client engagements, support sessions and outcomes recorded in 2020 compared to previous years.

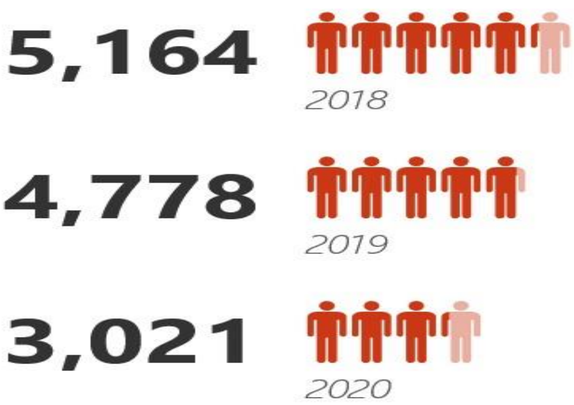
New Engagements

Over the course of 2020 there have been several interventions by both UK and Scottish Governments which have aimed to alleviate the health impacts of COVID 19. On one side this has temporarily closed enterprises and organisations delivering services, whilst at the same time has increased the number of people either out of work[1] or working reduced hours.

As we can see in the graph below in 2018 and 2019 there were around 5,000 new client engagements recorded on Caselink. In 2020 this appears to have fallen by around nearly 40%. This data is based on **all** Caselink records, not simply those supporting Edinburgh residents or those funded by one of the Local Authorities.

[1] According to NOMIS The claimant count in the 6 Local Authorities that make up the City region has increased from 23,000 in September 2019 to 50,255 in September 2020.

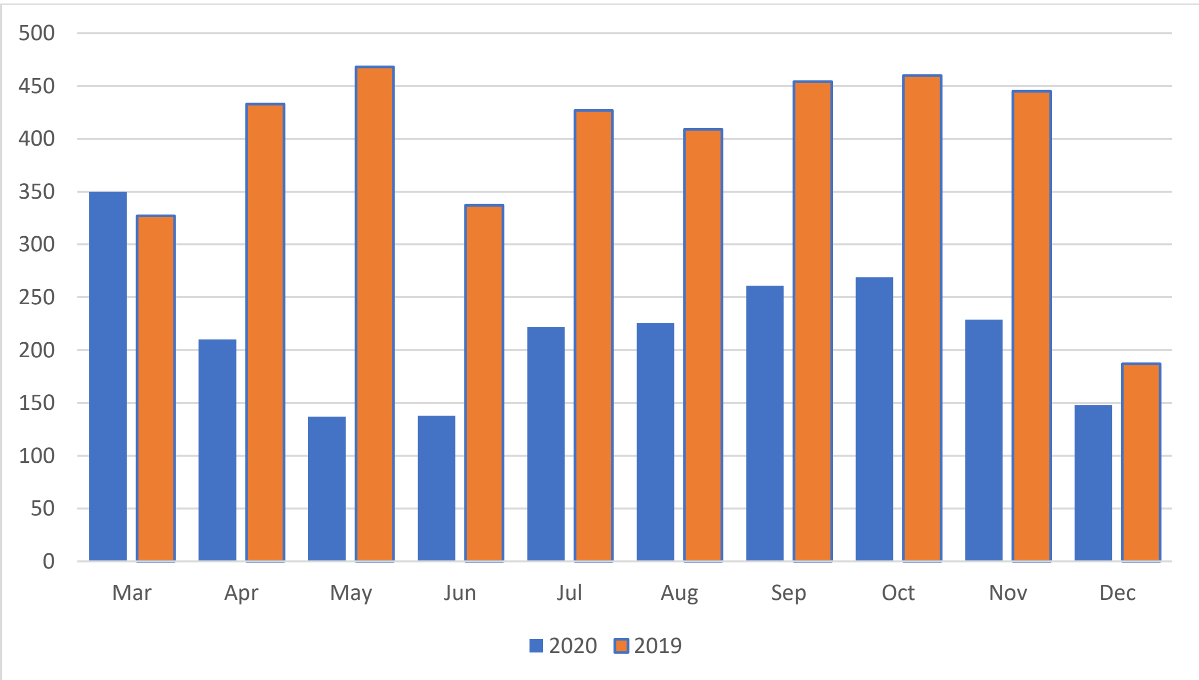
Figure 1 New Engagements



What we are seeing here is that despite a rise in claimant numbers which reflects more people looking for work, there has been a fall in the number of new starts with the employability support projects. What could be the cause of this?

Firstly, and most likely, is the impact lock down and social distance restrictions will have had, making it more difficult for projects to engage with new clients. Offices where would-be clients have been able to drop in for support have been closed, caseworkers have not been able to meet with would be clients, recruitment fairs have been suspended, organisations referring clients on to the services have changed the way they operate. All of these restrictions will have impacted on new recruitment and this can be seen in the Figure below.

Figure 2 Month to Month New Engagement Numbers

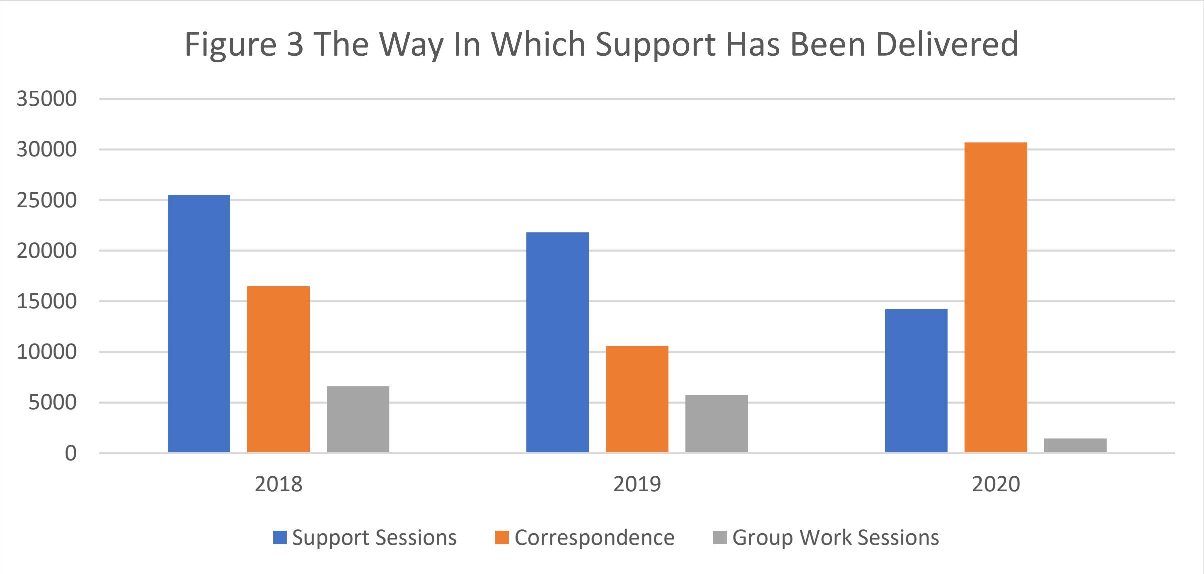


The second possible reason is that those who have found themselves out of work in large numbers in 2020 may not consider that they need support. From the claimant count data,[2] we can see that a relatively large number of new out of work claimants have come from areas of the City Region where there have traditionally been low claimant rates. This seems to suggest that in the past these individuals have been able to access employment opportunities themselves, however this may not be the case going forward. Certain sectors – hospitality and retail for example- may not return to the same position as pre-pandemic due to possible changing consumer preferences and the fact that social distancing may be with us for some time. These individuals may not be fully aware of the options for retraining that are available if they were to consider changing careers.

The third reason is the driver from DWP which asks for those who are claiming out of work benefits to actively look for employment opportunities. This has either been removed or at least not pursued as heavily over the pandemic where the guidance to stay at home during lockdowns and reduce social contact at other times is likely to have reduced the impetus for many of those out of work and claiming, to look for work. This will be particularly acute if the sector you work in has been one of those affected by restrictions.

Support

The next graphic looks at how the clients are being supported. What we can see is that in 2018 and 2019 support sessions delivered through face to face 1:1 meetings, had dominated with around 25,000 sessions recorded in 2018 and 20,000 in 2019. Compare this to 2020 when 14,300 or so were recorded. When looked at in more detail it can be seen that most of these sessions were delivered through zoom, teams, skype etc.



However, we can also see that projects have recorded far higher numbers of ‘correspondence’ type support (emails, SMS messages and phone calls) than had been the case in the previous years – almost 3 times the number of correspondence sessions were recorded in 2020 when compared to 2019.

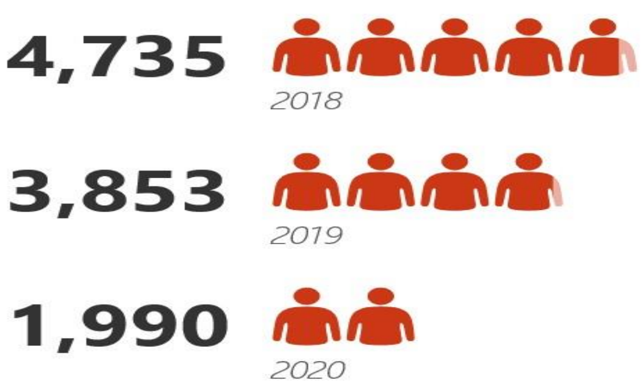
[2] https://www.joinedupforjobs.org/uploads/store/mediaupload/232/file/11%20Edinburgh%20and%20South%20East%20Scotland%20Regional%20Claimant%20Count%20November%202020%20(002).pdf

The one service delivery approach that really suffered in 2020 was group work with only 1,451 sessions being recorded over the course of the year compared to nearly 6,000 the year before. Looked at in detail, those that were delivered tended to be through Zoom, Teams or other virtual meet-up systems. Where this doesn't work particularly well would be for practical courses where hands on experience in kitchen skills for example, were the aim of the session.

Outcomes

The final contextual data to look at concerns' outcomes. What we would expect to see is a fall in the outcomes overall given that far fewer clients have started to work with projects and the testing labour market which has seen sectors that have traditionally recruited many clients of the employability network (hospitality, catering and retail for example) bearing the brunt of the restrictions applied to tackle the health pandemic. We can see in Figure 4 that the overall outcomes recorded in 2020 is around half of what we saw in 2019.

FIGURE 4 OVERALL OUTCOMES



However, when we look at outcome type, we can see that whilst numbers across the board are generally down, the fall has been less marked for some outcomes than for others. Table 1 below looks at the different outcome types.

Table 1 Outcomes by Type

	2018	2019	2020	% Change 2019 to 2020
Employability Training	497	298	109	-63%
In Work Progression	72	67	54	-19%
Job Entry Full Time	804	504	358	-29%
Job Entry Part Time	235	234	97	-59%
Activity Agreement	120	71	33	-54%
Education Full-Time	186	211	146	-31%
Education Part-Time	91	105	69	-34%
Other	124	110	50	-55%
Vocational Training	723	580	365	-37%
Volunteering	173	141	79	-44%
Work Placement	248	196	35	-82%
Qualification	1055	960	463	-52%
Re-Engage with Education	335	271	38	-86%
Retained Employment	51	88	76	-14%
Self-Employed Outcome	13	9	16	78%
Supported Employment	8	8	2	-75%

We can see that there has been an increase in the number of self-employed outcomes (up from 9 in 2019 to 16 in 2020). By comparison work placements have fallen by 82% since 2019.

Perhaps most surprising is job outcomes, particularly full-time job outcomes. Whilst there has been a fall in full time job outcomes it is one of the least pronounced falls. Part-time jobs have not fared as well and there has been a more marked fall in part-time jobs.

One thing to bear in mind in the outcome data is that this is based on all outcomes – *regardless of whether or not they have been verified*. This is to allow as many outcomes in 2020 to be considered as outcome verification, even in normal circumstances, takes time and we would undercount the 2020 figures significantly if we only reproduced verified outcomes.

What we can see is that whilst overall new engagements fell in 2020, the support delivered for those working with the organisations remained high, even if it was delivered differently and outcomes have fallen but for some outcome types the fall is less than for outcomes overall.

Providers Survey

The next section of this report looks at how the providers have delivered services and continued to support clients despite the difficulties that have been caused by the pandemic. The survey was sent out in December to all of those with an active log-in for Caselink regardless of role, type of project or geography in which they work. The survey was anonymised which means that some of the specific comments in the open questions cannot be attributed to any caseworker- useful for getting an honest response - but can be limiting if specific issues are raised.

Generally, the questions were of a ‘closed’ type allowing the respondent to choose from a range of options as these are easy to analyse. In addition, there were some open questions or even free text options to a closed question. These are less straightforward to analyse and have been used to illustrate points in the report in the form of quotes or summarised to provide a flavour of the views expressed.

The first question in the survey asked the respondents what their role was within the organisation. We can see in Table 2 that 63% of those that responded described themselves as Caseworkers/Client Support

Table 2 “What is your primary role in the organisation?”

	Percent	Count
Manager	32.2%	29
Caseworker/Client Support	63.3%	57
Administration/Back Office	5.6%	5
Other Not Specified	2.2%	2

The survey then asked, *“As far as you are aware was anyone furloughed within your organisation over the course of the pandemic?”*. We found that 36.7% of respondents said that there had been staff furloughed in their organisation over the course of the year. Drilling down further we can see that 8 of the 91 respondents had been furloughed themselves and this ranged from 1 month through to 5 months. This gives an indication that over a third of the organisations delivering support had had to furlough staff and nearly 9% of those that answered had been furloughed directly.

Remote Working and Technology

> *"I think the initial lockdown led a lot of clients wanting to stay at home and "wait" until services resumed face to face or until they felt safer. As it became apparent that remote working will last much longer than anyone could have anticipated in March, clients then began to adapt or understand that they may have to compromise with digital support as it won't be going away quickly. There was also a lot of emotional support for our client group in the initial period and trying to help people cope day to day began to overtake employment support."* Caseworker, Edinburgh

Table 3 below looks at how services have been delivered over 2020. From this we can see that between March and May, the period of the first lockdown, 93% of services were delivered remotely. Even towards the end of the year over half of all services were still being delivered remotely.

Table 3 How have services been delivered?

	Mostly remote or virtual	**Mostly face to face**	**Mixture**	**Total**
March - May	93.10% (81)	2.30% (2)	4.60% (4)	87
June - August	70.11% (61)	1.15% (1)	28.74% (25)	87
September - November	56.04% (51)	8.79% (8)	35.16% (32)	91

At the time of the survey around a third of respondents seem to have been delivering a mixed service and one would anticipate that until the vaccination roll out has been successful this is likely to be the form that services will take, with the majority of the support continuing to be virtual/and remote and hardly any face to face contact.

The survey asked about how technology has been used to help providers continue to deliver support. We can see that Teams and Zoom have been the most commonly used software and for around half of all respondents they have been used at least once a week.

Table 4 Use of Technology

	Never used this for work	**Occasionally (at least once a month)**	**Often (at least once a week)**	**Will continue to use in the future**	**Total respondents**
Zoom	10.47% (9)	16.28% (14)	60.47% (52)	66.28% (57)	86
Teams	4.82% (4)	34.94% (29)	45.78% (38)	62.65% (52)	83
Skype	53.95% (41)	30.26% (23)	11.84% (9)	13.16% (10)	76
Facetime	84.51% (60)	11.27% (8)	2.82% (2)	5.63% (4)	71
Discord	92.86% (65)	4.29% (3)	2.86% (2)	2.86% (2)	70
Other	65.85% (27)	19.51% (8)	9.76% (4)	24.39% (10)	41

What was clear is that the providers very quickly came to appreciate that software such as Zoom, Teams etc. was likely to be the only way they would be able to operate anything approaching a 'normal' service.

Going forward we can also see that this is likely to have an impact on the manner in which services are delivered in the future and 66.3% of respondents said they will use Zoom in the future and 62.7% have said they will be using Teams in the future. As one respondent said;

> *"We will maintain the option of meeting clients virtually, via Zoom, Teams. We have had success with delivering online learning, and one for one course it has actually improved attendance and sustainment (when this was least expected). We may continue this course with initial engagement online, followed by face-to-face contact."* Manager, Fife

What was clear in the survey was that whilst software is available to allow remote learning and support to be delivered, there were limitations regarding hardware not only for the clients but also for the caseworkers.

> *"Having access to digital equipment that is fit for purpose. The first 6 months a lot of people had to get by using dusted off ancient personal laptops that struggled to cope with the demands of moving completely to digital working."* Caseworker, Edinburgh

One manager went as far as saying that they would never buy desktop computers again as laptops were more flexible.

For some respondents working remotely and meeting with clients over technology has proved difficult,

> *"For me personally building a rapport with a new client that you have never met before is more difficult and especially if they do not want to engage via video conference calls. Not being able to read body language, facial expression and eye contact."* Caseworker, Edinburgh

A view shared by this respondent,

> *"Realisation that we can operate and work remotely for some things but our clients preference is still face to face. You cannot pick up on non verbal communication or risk assess peoples vulnerabilities the same way over digital that you can face to face."* Manager, Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian

This isn't the case for all respondents and some, as seen below, have found it's a useful additional tool to supporting clients.

> *"Online delivery has been fantastic in my view. It has led to a more structured day, our young people have gained so many more employability skills. It has taken away the hands on in person, but it has also made them more responsible and work ready in my opinion. I have had better retention and higher pass rate too - it has been a very positive outcome and I have seen so much more confidence in the young people too. The young people have gelled so well too even using zoom, they have commented on this and we have had a wider geographical intake, which has helped with numbers, on our course."* Caseworker, Edinburgh and West Lothian

Ability to Access Premises and Working from Home

Several projects have found that they have not been able to access their premises over the course of 2020. Again, this was most apparent between March and May when 92% could not access their base for service delivery and meeting clients. Yet even into the tail end of the year over half of projects were not able to access their base.

Some mentioned that the closure of premises, both their own and that of partner organisations, has had an impact on the number of clients that they work with. For example, some more specialist services mentioned that they rely on the organisations with an 'on street presence' to refer clients on to them. As these other agencies, such as job centres, have either closed or limited access, they have found that they themselves haven't seen as many new clients coming through. This links into the smaller number of new engagements recorded in 2020 and illustrates how traditional recruitment – i.e., an office base accessible to would be clients- is not the best approach currently.

What is perhaps surprising is that a high number (48% by the end of the year) have been able to operate out of offices again although from what was said earlier it is unlikely to be the same as before i.e., they are unlikely to be meeting with clients and have the full compliment of staff in the office.

Table 5 Ability to Access Base for Service Delivery

	Able to access our base for service delivery and meeting clients	**Not able to access our base for service delivery and meeting clients**	**Total**
March - May	7.95% (7)	92.05% (81)	88
June - August	31.46% (28)	68.54% (61)	89
September - November	48.35% (44)	51.65% (47)	91

Generally working from home has been welcomed, with positive attributes ranging from better flexibility to reduced impact on the environment through reductions in the need to commute. Some managers indicated that it isn't without cost as organisations still have to pay rent and, in many cases, have had to upgrade technology and resources to support home working across the staff team. Working away from the office may have worked for some but not every respondent has had a positive experience,

> *"It has been very difficult to work from home. I don't have a suitable set up to work from and struggle to concentrate. Living alone, I miss the social aspect of an office base. Strange as it sounds, the chat and opportunity to share ideas and opinions helps me to focus. I also feel that it is much harder to keep clients engaged with a service that is totally remote. I think it would be sensible going into the future to be able to provide both in person and remote support."* Caseworker, Edinburgh

This leads into the most common concern – the impact on mental health for the staff team from social isolation. We will see later in this report the impact of social isolation on the mental health of clients and the fact that many of the organisations have focused heavily on this, but what was clear from the comments is that isolation was just as likely to be impacting on staff members.

> *"The team is still feeling stressed and feeling down. We have spent a lot of time holding people that we could not move forward - due to services not taking on new people on or offering anything appropriate to the immediate needs."* Manager, Edinburgh

One respondent was more direct,

"Like many other people, my mental health and wellbeing has been affected. I think that the need for mutual support is greater than it has been before, especially due to us not meeting up. I think that there therefore needs to be greater focus on supportive systems in place to allow colleagues to know that support is available." Manager, Edinburgh

Others mentioned that due to working from home it was difficult to retain focus. One respondent thought it would be useful to have Motivational tools for workers while working at home as it,

"… is easy to either get distracted and not do much work or spend all day in the house and do too much work." Caseworker, Edinburgh

Others brought up the fact that they were missing team working.

"Bouncing ideas of others and getting energy from interaction with others does not happen through technology so keeping your practice creative and fresh can be difficult." Caseworker, East Lothian

Paperwork, Admin and Evidence

In the past projects would get clients to sign sheets, complete forms and generally provide evidence that they exist, are accessing the services and have the barriers and difficulties that the project has said that they have. If they achieved an outcome this would generate its own evidence record. This has worked in the past through a very traditional paper trail of evidence. Table 6 looks at how the pandemic and policies to tackle the health implications have impacted on the administrative part of the service delivery.

Table 6 Ability to Gather and Maintain Paperwork

	Difficulties around getting client signatures, form completion, etc.	**Difficulties around getting physical copies of paperwork from**	**Difficulties around getting access to technology to scan or upload documents**	**Total Respondents**
March - May	84.09% (74)	57.95% (51)	56.82% (50)	88
June - August	76.14% (67)	51.14% (45)	43.18% (38)	88
September - November	72.22% (65)	41.11% (37)	32.22% (29)	90

It is clear that even latter into the year nearly 3/4s of organisations have encountered difficulties getting evidence such as client signatures,

"The difficulty in getting verification for outcomes has proved extremely difficult in some cases, but this has been addressed." Caseworker, Edinburgh

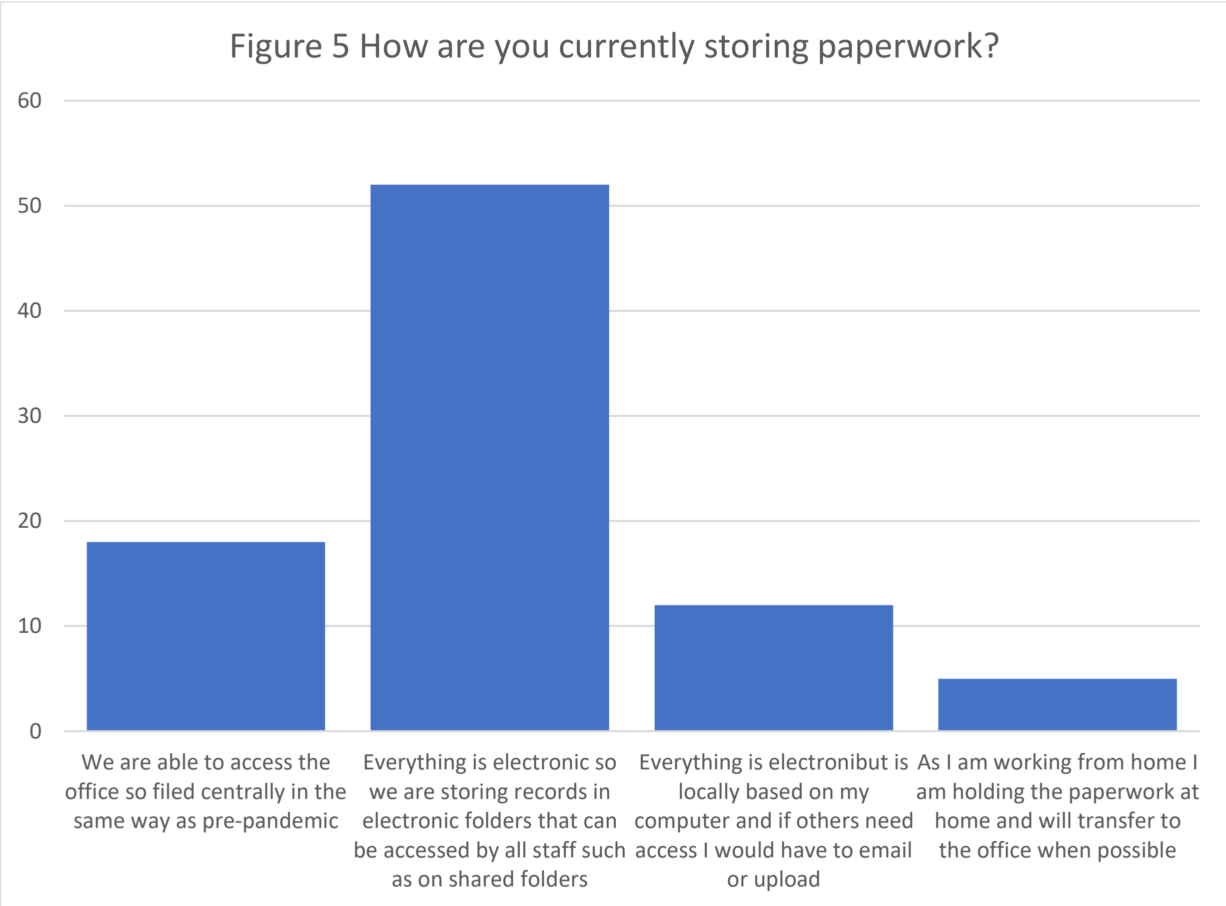
Similarly,

"Ability to get ESF evidence from clients. New process for getting clients to sign paperwork. New processes have been developed for the above, but especially difficult for clients without IT access, IT skills, ID documents or English not first language. Has been a struggle but have been able to develop processes to support as many clients as possible." Manager, Edinburgh

Getting access to the office to gather physical copies of paperwork proved difficult for around 58% of respondents in March, April and May and has fallen slightly but is still a difficulty for around 41%. Access to technology for scanning and uploading evidence appears to have been a difficulty at the start of the pandemic for 57% of respondents and continues to cause problems for around 1/3rd of those who completed the questionnaire.

This could have an impact on project outcomes and progressions going forward. Generally, the longer it takes for clients to provide the paperwork required by the project, the less likely it is that it will be obtained. If the client has been assisted by the project and no longer is receiving support as the pandemic ends and normal service is resumed, it will be more difficult for projects to retrospectively contact and gather evidence from these individuals. To put this in context around 16% of all new engagements that have started since the 1/4/2020 have already been completed- essentially the client is no longer receiving support.

We asked how organisations were storing paperwork. Not only is this important for auditing purposes where a sample of records will be checked, it is also important for data security to ensure client records remain confidential. We can see in Figure 5 that the majority of respondents are holding all records and paperwork electronically on a centrally accessed system. This is the best way both in terms of data security but also in terms of delivering a service to a client as it allows other caseworkers to access records if required, for example if the key caseworker is unavailable.



We can see that a very small number are holding paperwork at home. Whilst this is understandable in the current situation it does pose a theoretical data protection risk as others in the household may see the record and there is also a risk of data being lost from accidental damage to simply getting misplaced amongst other papers in the household.

For some the pandemic has created practical difficulties and meant that they have had to speed up changes that had been planned. Solutions have ranged from significant changes to the way paperwork is stored and staff practices through to rather 'low tech' solutions. Take for example these two comments left in the questionnaire.

> *"Technology investment is being made now funds are available to expand into cloud storage for all staff once multi factor authentication is in place for all. Has not been rolled out to all due to ensuring security of data. Frontline staff have been able to save client documents onto our electronic casework system remotely as they must record on this and the Caselink system. The security for this has been in place for several years and is hosted by Citizens Advice Scotland. For non client documents (timesheets for ESIF, reports etc) are stored on computer and then uploaded onto shared drive when a pre agreed visit to head office for IT updates or can be emailed to the duty administration person. This role has been put in place to be in head office each day to open mail received, scan and attach to system or email to advisers in addition to receiving emails for non client documents that must be stored for audit or compliance. Clients have been encouraged to send documentation to advisers by email. For those who cannot do so, they can post or deliver documents to any of our offices. These are collected daily and passed to the administration person to scan, attach to system and return original documentation to the client. It has been helpful that statutory agencies have also adapted their processes and will issue documents such as DS1500's to advisers by email, Accountant In Bankruptcy accepting screen shots of Local Authority rent accounts in place of tenancy agreements etc."* Manager, Fife

Others have had to take more straightforward approaches to overcome security issues:

> *" - we can only access our office for one morning per week. We have organised access to another secure cabinet in another building for storage throughout the week until we can go into the office."* Manager, East Lothian

Type of Support Offered

As the country went into lock down and the guidance was to remain at home, we would have expected to see less of the providers delivering support for job interviews, establishing placements, volunteering opportunities, etc. This is what we saw in the outcomes reported in Table 1 above.

What was generally clear was how important referrals are and in normal circumstances with the network all working as one integrated employability pipeline, clients move along to the more specialist, possibly less 'front facing', services. As the more front facing organisations closed their face-to-face operations, other services quickly found that new client engagements reduced. Although this is across the board the closure of Job Centres and the totally understandable move away from actively encouraging job seekers to pursue job opportunities has meant that there was a reduction in new clients for the organisations to engage with. At the same time, the clients themselves were seeking different types of support,

> *"Full lockdown resulted in difficulties reaching new engagements. Focus very much shifted to supporting current active clients, especially those in work as well as ensuring our team were safe and well"* Caseworker, Edinburgh

For some the limited access to a client base has proved difficult. For example, childcare provisions were closed for much of the early part of the pandemic, agencies that work in school settings had to look again at how services were delivered and those that provide support to individuals within settings such as prisons often found it difficult to access client groups. Whilst for others the danger of the virus to them or their household meant that they reduced all social interaction including employment support and job search.

The survey asked if the respondents thought there had been any change in the number of clients requesting employability support. From the responses we can see that over the period March to May, 58% said there was a decline in the employability support asked for by clients. One respondent summed up the three phases of the pandemic and how it impacted on them,

> *"March- May: many agencies were still putting new operating processes and systems in place. Those who were not already engaged with employability services were not being referred in as no visible service available within the community due to the lockdown.*
>
> *June-August: Public and agencies have had time to adjust to new ways of working and furlough schemes helped people from seeking new employment.*
>
> *September- November: Some sense of normality and an increase in job availability for festive period and within key worker roles has helped engage the public."* Manager, Fife

Many of the projects expanded to say they were dealing with more enquiries that related to changes to employment particularly regarding furlough and provided advice around that as well as what new Coronavirus regulations meant for clients. Health and safety concerns at work also appeared to be something that caseworkers were assisting with.

Table 7 Type of Support Offered

	Hardly ever	**Same as before**	**More than before**	**Much more than before**	**Total**
Supporting clients with anxiety relating to Covid directly - health concerns	12.79% (11)	5.81% (5)	47.67% (41)	33.72% (29)	86
Supporting clients with anxiety relating to social distancing/isolation.	14.77% (13)	2.27% (2)	48.86% (43)	34.09% (30)	88
Supporting clients with financial issues including food support and benefits	10.11% (9)	15.73% (14)	41.57% (37)	32.58% (29)	89
Supporting clients with housing and accommodation concerns	16.85% (15)	38.20% (34)	32.58% (29)	12.36% (11)	89
Other	18.52% (5)	29.63% (8)	11.11% (3)	40.74% (11)	27

Table 7 above goes further in that it looks at what caseworkers have seen change, in terms of the support required. Its apparent that there has been a substantial increase in the support provided linked to anxiety and concerns around, health, isolation, and social distance. As we can see in the table above mental health issues and supporting clients with anxiety either caused or exacerbated by the pandemic has been a key support provided. From other comments on the survey it is clear that this has extended to the staff delivering support who have found that they have been isolated and are working from home for months. One response highlighted that they had set up a listening project for staff and key volunteers whilst another said that

> *"There needs to be much more mental health support for participants and delivery teams. Good mental health practice built into the programme so that when they leave for their next steps they are resilient and able to cope."* Manager, Edinburgh and West Lothian

When we look at issues around food and finances the survey indicates that around 74% of respondents said that they were spending more time dealing with this sort of enquiries and concerns from clients.

> *"People are more concerned with the basics of life - food, shelter, mental health. While they express the desire for work and qualifications, that is definitely taking a back seat."* Manager, Edinburgh, East and Midlothian

The comments from the respondents are interesting. For example, one respondent whose focus ordinarily is on debt and money advice suggested that overall calls for this type of support is less than they would have expected, but believe that it is simply delaying these discussions till some time in the future.

> *"Our role within the partnership is to deliver Financial inclusion advice therefore the majority of these questions is our bread and butter work, however we have seen an increase in demand for this. We have seen an increase in the need for advice relating to employment issues and explanations of the government guidelines on "tiers" and restrictions. Interestingly though, we have seen a marked decrease in the number of people initially approaching for debt advice, we expect this is due to the Coronavirus Scotland Act which is providing protection from diligence, in particular relating to priority debt of housing related debt. As no court action can be taken unless the process was started prior to 23rd March 2020, we predict a Tsunami of clients requiring assistance and at risk of homelessness when these restrictions are lifted. Although at present the message is being communicated to the public that the protection is being extended, the media and others do not provide the message on the importance of seeking advice in the meantime to avoid debts becoming an unmanageable level."* Manager, Fife

A number of the comments around the support provided related to sourcing IT, providing support to access IT and looking at questions around broadband and internet connectivity. The remote nature of service delivery in everything from entertainment to schooling has meant in 2020 that efforts to reduce digital exclusion was of more critical importance for those being supported by the employability network. Simply having the hardware available is not enough if the user doesn't know how to use it and doesn't have affordable and reliable internet connectivity. Free wifi zones in public spaces such as libraries are of no relevance when these facilities are closed.

Whilst requests for employability support did fall away in the first 3 months of the pandemic, what we can see is that by the end of the year this type of support was back to pre-pandemic levels and 86% of respondents said that in September to November employability support was around about where it was pre pandemic, although being delivered in different ways. As one respondent said;

> *"Everyone was in a state of shock to begin with and the focus was on mental health rather than employability. As this became the new normal and plans for the future were made a focus on employability returned."* Manager, Edinburgh and West Lothian

Whilst another commented that they had seen,

"…increased referrals after lockdown. Furloughed people getting notice of their employment ending. Also requests from other agencies e.g. Penumbra to help some referrals gain employment with understanding and supportive employers. Not an easy task as job market is SO competitive and pressure on new recruits to "hit the ground running"" Caseworker East Lothian

Overall, from the respondents, it was clear that employability and the pursuit of work became secondary during the beginnings of the pandemic. At that point, that focus was, rightly, on human contact, reducing isolation and basic needs. Despite that, respondents did mention that this changed over the course of the year and as restrictions eased and guidance often changed many started to prioritise work, training and education again.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

Currently, January 2021, we are in another lockdown. If this survey and study were to have been produced in April 2021 it is likely that some of the responses would have differed as respondents would have been commenting on a situation similar to that experience in April 2020 it is likely that they may have been more pessimistic as caseworkers, clients, in fact society in general have to face restrictions that they would have hoped would not be seen again.

However, one would hope that the second lock down whilst difficult in many ways, should be practically easier for providers to deal with having put procedures in place in April 2020. For example, IT, homeworking, etc.

As we move out of the restriction phase and with the aid of mass vaccination progress to something that resembles a normal service, it will be interesting to see what practices may be carried forward into the way services are delivered in the future.

Greater Use of IT, Virtual Meetings and Remote Working

Generally, the move to digital delivery has been welcomed with some respondents surprised by what a practical difference this has made. Some said that it has improved efficiency as it has reduced travel times and no-show appointments, whilst others indicated that it has been more accessible for individuals who may have been reluctant or found it difficult to attend appointments. This seems to be a change that isn't likely to be dropped when restrictions are lifted.

There were concerns raised around access to IT and skills of the clients in being able to use the software but there were also concerns around the use of specific IT platforms for clients that may not pass internal IT security tests. One respondent said that,

"This has been a major barrier to working with clients and needs to be addressed if we are to offer blended learning/engagement in the future." Manager East Lothian

If greater IT use is to be seen in the future to facilitate virtual meetings and improved accessibility, then these issues will need to be addressed.

Forced to change working from office based/in person delivery to remote/virtual services, has opened a door to possibilities that many organisations hadn't properly considered in the past. It was clear from the survey that with the right technology and support, remote and virtual sessions can work and be successful. It was particularly highlighted that its useful to allow those that for a variety of reasons cannot attend traditional face to face meetings. From the staff perspective, there appears to be a reluctance to go wholly back to office-based working. What will this mean for the future?

Well, it would appear that many providers services will become split between face-to-face sessions and virtual support, staff will be able to work more flexibly with more days spent from home offices than in the past. The only negative from this could be that there is less need for large offices so organisations may find themselves paying rent on underused space.

> *"We don't need to be office based, but we need a base. Team creativity is better in person occasionally - constant digital meetings are draining. Meeting clients face to face and assessing their skills in different environments is still as important as it was previously and can't be done digitally"* Caseworker, Edinburgh.

There does not appear to be any appetite for a whole scale removal of face-to-face support, and some mentioned the confidentiality of a face to face meeting and the perception that it is easier to build up trust when you are in the room with the client. Going forward one would suggest that a mixed approach will become the norm, with some clients and organisations delivering more in a traditional face to face style, while others find that virtual meetings are more useful. What is welcomed is that when we are out of the pandemic there will be a choice.

Wellbeing and Looking Beyond Employability

We can see from the free text responses in particular, that mental health and general wellbeing, both for staff and clients, was seen to be an area that should continue to be looked at as we move through and out of the Covid restrictions. However, it was clear that this did not impact on everyone in the same way. Some of the anxiety was directly linked to the pandemic, whilst for others it was more about the isolation, Whatever the reason, it looks likely that mental wellbeing will feature more strongly in the way projects deliver services and support staff going forward.

Perhaps the most interesting points made by respondents were those that were more philosophical in tone, linked into the 'build back better' discussions around in the summer of 2020. Some of these focused on very practical issues such as how the internet and skills in navigating the online world are critical in 21st century Scotland, whilst others discussed the importance of physical and mental health. Perhaps the quote below is one of the best at summing up the broad range of comments that could be collated under this broad heading

> *"…employability cannot be viewed in isolation. Unemployment is an inequality in the same way that homelessness, addiction and poverty are. Collaboration is needed to address multiple inequalities simultaneously to achieve sustainable change. We have also learned that we must bring the voices of the people we work with to the surface and enable more control. This year has shone a light on some appalling, systemic flaws in the employability sector in Scotland."* Manager, Edinburgh

General flexibility

Probably the key positive that could be taken from the pandemic, according to the responses at least was flexibility, in terms of service delivery, ways of working for staff and support provided to clients. Those that have been better able to adjust quickly have been able to cope with the circumstances of 2020 far easier than those that maybe had more structured approaches that had worked in the past- this would be appropriate for clients as well as organisations.

One example has been how to get referrals? Those that have relied on a set referral route be that through the door of 'high street service' or setting up outreach in locations were clients congregate have found referrals fall away. Whilst conversely one would expect that those that have had an online presence may have been better able to continue supporting new clients. In the past CEC have delivered a Gateway telephone service which could have helped at times when the traditional routes were less available.

The flexibility needed to cope better with COVID may not be the same flexibility needed to cope with another future shock so suggesting a set of steps to take would not be appropriate. What is appropriate though is hoping that all projects, services, etc. look at what they did in 2020 and consider how this could help them going forward.

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