

Covid, Coffee and Catch up



“This is an economic crisis wrapped up in a health crisis. As one passes, the other will become more prevalent.”

- Employment lead in a local authority

The following is a summary note on key themes raised in the second ‘Covid, Coffee and Catch up’ session facilitated by Rocket Science on the 22nd April with representatives of **employment services, providers and funders.**

The Covid, Coffee and Catch Up sessions are an informal opportunity to discuss issues, emerging practice, share learning and develop ideas. We may not have the answers as yet, but we do need to know the problems first and work together to find ways and solutions to help people impacted by Covid 19 now and in the future. If you want to join in, the next session is being held on 6th May 2020 at 11.00 am. Contact caroline.masundire@rocketsciencelab.co.uk

Key points

- Demand for work is varying across local authorities – there is no pattern
 - In general, local authorities are finding vacancy numbers flattening out
 - However, there is variation in demand from job seekers - some local authorities are having to manage responses to ensure they are not overwhelmed; others have very little demand from jobseekers
 - Vacancies in care work, essential construction, supermarkets are prevalent
 - Vulnerable people and those with childcare responsibilities who would normally be applying for jobs no longer can – this will change when we move out of lockdown
 - Employment support offer is going to have to change to accommodate for people who are new to engaging with the employment and welfare system
 - Local authorities are responding rapidly to local need e.g. providing advice services on furloughing for businesses, some particularly targeting those who do not speak English fluently who may not fully understand things like furlough
- Does the employment and skills sector have the capacity to deal with this increased need in particular after lockdown?

- Flow of funding has been stalled – decisions on pre Covid 19 proposals to DWP and others likely to be cancelled. No news on support from ESFA and concerns about ESF decisions taking too long to be confirmed
- Employees are being redeployed to other parts of the council e.g. care, NHS shielding calls, management of UC claims
- People will be using employment and skills services who never have before. Diversity of need demonstrates how many industries have been hit and staff need to be prepared to work with people who may not have accessed these services before and may need different skill sets and resources
- Services will still have complex caseloads with wide variety of needs and levels of support required – staff will need to be flexible and skilled to deal with this
- **With furloughing to what extent are we delaying redundancy?**
 - We are expecting peaks of redundancies as people who have been furloughed are made redundant - first wave in July and then over the next 6 months as businesses struggle to get back to where they were pre Covid 19.
 - Redundant furloughed staff are going to need employment support and help to navigate systems as well as have good careers advice so that they can find alternatives if they cannot go back to the sector they were working in – do services have the resources to help?
 - The flood of immediate need is going to impact on support for the most vulnerable and these are likely to be the last to be able to take part in activities as relaxation of social distancing measures are implemented
- **There are challenges associated with delivering services online including broadband and mobile data poverty**
 - As services are being moved from in person to online it has become clear that there is a lack of technology, both for staff and service users. Not all local authorities have the tech e.g. laptops and smartphones to enable staff to work from home. The vulnerable people who these services are designed to reach may not have the equipment to access help online
 - Even if service users are supplied with the technology/if they already have smartphones, they may not have the broadband or data needed to access support online. For example, service users may be on pay as you go and not be able to afford the data needed for an advice service video call
 - Households in which multiple family members are expected to work/study from home may face heightened challenges. More vulnerable families will not have the space or technology to do this. For example

- A family may have one shared computer with clashing time schedules in which they are required to be online
 - A family with a small living space will struggle to have multiple people working in one room, in particular with calls/video calls
 - This is expected to remain an issue once we come out of lockdown as even if strict lockdown ends, there will likely be a transition period in which people are still required/recommended to work from home
 - How can local authorities coordinate getting technology to people? Who can they work with? BASE has developed a programme to support local residents in the Battersea area
- **Labour market is going to change after lockdown**
 - Labour market isn't just going to 'switch on' after lockdown and we need to prepare for this. A number of changes that have been made in lockdown may have longer lasting impacts. For example:
 - People who are made redundant and cannot find other work risk becoming long-term unemployed – longer than six months to find work increases risk of being out of work a year later
 - More flexible working and more home working is likely (in some sectors)
 - Young people in apprenticeships facing redundancy – how do we protect placements and courses
 - We must consider which sectors might come out of lockdown first e.g. construction, and which might take longer e.g. leisure, arts and culture and how we build the response to support employers to take on people quickly
 - Retail and hospitality in particular have been and will continue to be hit hard. These sectors are based around other workers coming into places, buying lunch, coffee etc. If home working becomes more common what will be the impact on business space and demand for services and hospitality for workers?
 - Moving services and work online during lockdown could create a shift in the labour market which will impact people. If this results in digital becoming the norm we must ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind – they need to be engaged now and get used to this way of working and interacting
 - There is talk of young people, healthy people and those who have had Covid 19 being 'allowed out' of lockdown first, with the old and vulnerable being left at home under the reasoning of keeping the economy going. If this does happen we must ensure that the old and vulnerable are not left even further behind
- **There is a need for up to date data and intelligence**

- The current data on the impact of Covid 19 is lacking meaning local authorities are unable to quantify need despite knowing to some extent what is going on and who is in need. Without this data they prove that they need support. For example, DWP figures do not show full number of extra claimants for UC or where these are located
- DWP know the problem, they are getting a lot of individual requests from local authorities asking for number of claims. They cannot release certain numbers as there are claims that will not go through to payment. However, DWP have said they are going to provide a forecast to allow local authorities to better plan for services and demand. There is a need to move quickly so these estimations and forecasting will be very welcome, the sense was there is not time to wait for concrete data about labour market changes.
- Need for data to be organised by both location (local communities) and sector so we can understand local impact better
- **Funding and expectations for the future**
 - Statistics on number of people local authorities/organisations are assisting into work will need to change as a result of this – the numbers during the lockdown period will affect the yearly averages
 - **Will funders readjust their expectations based on this crisis?**
 - Will funders expect current targets/outputs to be met for existing funding or adjust these based on the circumstances?
 - Will commissioners be realistic about this situation and change outputs/targets for future funding? If not, are organisations are being set up to fail?
- **Government employment programmes as part of recovery**
 - What programmes/ funding streams might DWP set up for recovery period?
 - Will they just revert to 'sausage factory' of low cost, high volume, one-size-fits-all provision – we know this doesn't work for more vulnerable, harder to help groups
 - Also this disadvantages specialist/ VCS providers who may lose out to national prime contractors
 - Sector needs to be putting together a case and lobbying now to influence future commissioning to ensure smaller providers and more vulnerable groups are not squeezed out

Links/ further info

- Waystowork.org.uk - Professionals and organisations offering employment support in Bristol – <https://ways2work.org.uk/>

- Wandsworth Council and Battersea Power Station Foundation, Power to Connect – <https://www.powertoconnect.co.uk/>
 - Website set up with three strands to it – data/broadband poverty, lack of laptops and volunteers to donate these things
 - Volunteers clean up laptops and restore factory settings. 25 laptops and iPads already donated.

