



Key learning for equalities organisations

- Equalities organisations found **adapting services quickly** during Covid-19 more or less challenging depending on their size, the needs of their communities, and their ability to make changes.
- Equalities organisations found it easier or more difficult to **switch to digital and online services** depending on their IT systems and staff skills; older people found it difficult to learn new skills in a pandemic and most preferred phone support, but this needs more staff and time.
- Equalities organisations worked hard to meet high levels of **mental health support needs**, which increased during the pandemic, but there were gaps in funding and linking people to the right kinds of support.
- Equalities organisations found **partnership working** helpful where they already had strong relationships, but they felt statutory organisations did not consult with them early enough.

INTRODUCTION

Our **Pandemic Pressures** report looked at how equalities organisations supporting marginalised older people managed during the Covid-19 crisis.

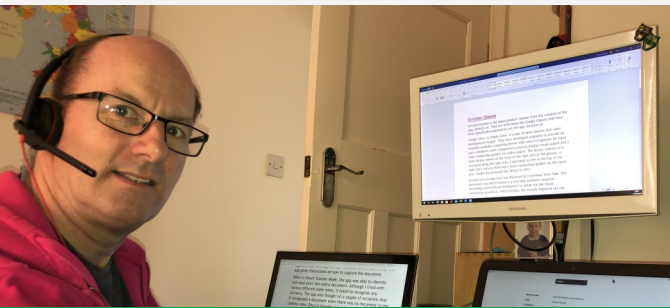
This briefing summarises the learning from the report to help equalities organisations demonstrate their role during the pandemic. They faced two particular challenges. First, many of the people they supported were more at risk from either Covid-19 itself or increased social isolation due to pandemic restrictions. Second, mainstream services did not always reach these communities and equalities organisations had to fill the gaps.

Equalities organisations continued to provide specialist support to people in great need. They know how to listen to and work with community members. Statutory agencies need to support equalities organisations to make sure crisis response is more equal in the future.

Full recommendations are included in our report. There is a link to this on the back page of this briefing.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age-friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by providing small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester in addition to funding larger scale work across the city-region. As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy. Ambition for Ageing is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK.



ADAPTING SERVICES

Equalities organisations worked hard to quickly change their services for older people in their communities. Some more locally based organisations started providing services to meet basic needs, such as delivering food. Some organisations had to start new services to help people, such as signposting to local services. Some larger equalities organisations that usually provided services across a large area had to quickly develop local partnerships. It was very important for equalities organisations to do this, but it was difficult to keep providing new or different services as time went on.

Adapting services posed different challenges for equalities organisations depending on their size and the way they worked with their communities. Small organisations did not have enough staff. Some larger organisations were located far away from their service users. The speed of adapting services was more challenging for different organisations depending on what IT systems they had, how many staff, and what kind of leadership.

Case Study: Adapting Services

Henshaws found it easier to move to providing advice and befriending support services by phone and online. This was because they are a larger organisation and already had IT systems and digital support staff already in place.

Henshaws service users are spread across Greater Manchester, so they had to signpost and refer people to more local services.

ONLINE SERVICE DELIVERY AND DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Changing to delivering all services by telephone or online was a big challenge for all equalities organisations. It had some benefits, but it also caused difficulties for many organisations for different reasons. For example, many staff and older service users found it difficult to change from face-to-face services. However, many organisations have been positive about developing new ways of working and new partnerships through online work. This has helped them meet older people's needs in the short term. They also hope it will help them reach a wider range of older people in the future. Some organisations are thinking about how to do a mixture in the future of online and in-person work.

Larger organisations moved to online and telephone services more easily because they had the right IT and phone systems. Smaller organisations took longer or had more difficulty. Some organisations found that many staff did not have the IT skills they needed to use IT in new ways. This has shown them that they need to train staff in new ways.

Many organisations found that the older people they support had difficulties with online services. Many older people have experienced 'digital fatigue' and 'zoom fatigue', or find online services tiring and stressful, and they would prefer face to face services. For some this has got worse as time has gone on. Many older people were not able to access online services because they did not have IT equipment such as computers or smartphones. They had to start with telephone services first, which needed more staff to run them. Some older people did have equipment but did not know how to use it in new ways. This was particularly difficult for older people with no friends or family to help. Many found it difficult to learn new things when feeling stressed or under pressure. Cost was another barrier for many older people.

“ The main issues for us is the role of the VCSE in providing a lifeline to some individuals who are still missing out from mainstream help and support. The public sector, i.e., Councils and the NHS/PHE talk the talk but don't always walk the walk.

We have been delivering support and assistance despite facing health and wellbeing challenges ourselves; we recognised and reacted urgently to perceived needs in the community... ”



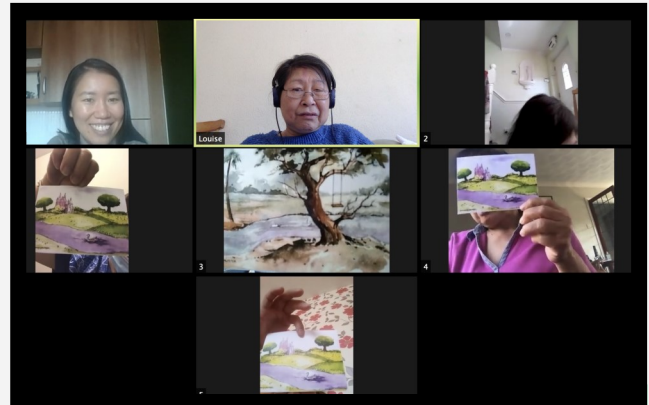
It has always been challenging to provide mental health support to older people. This is because of the stigma around mental ill health, and because there are not enough services to help people. Before the pandemic older people in marginalised communities already faced many barriers to using mainstream mental health services. These services often lack cultural understanding of mental health issues. During the pandemic these issues have become more complex as both mental and physical health have got worse. In addition, more services are needed as more people are dealing with social isolation and more people need support to cope with losing someone. Marginalised older people reported feeling more anxious and less safe as isolation continued, and more people were affected personally by the pandemic. This also affected families and friends of older people as the pandemic went on into autumn 2020. Staff in equalities organisations were also affected as they are often members of the communities that they support.

Equalities organisations provided many different services. These included 'check-in' calls by staff or volunteers, befriending, and online exercise/wellbeing activities, as well as increased counselling services and referrals to the NHS. Some organisations have not been able to get funding for all of these activities. They have also found that funding sources do not connect up even though services may be connected. For example community and wellbeing projects are funded separately from mental health support such as counselling services.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Equalities organisations in Greater Manchester are involved in many different partnerships. These include with other organisations, with funders, and with government agencies such as local authorities and health bodies. During the Covid-19 crisis these partnerships provided both benefits and challenges. Some equalities organisations have benefited from being part of national or regional networks. It has helped them to share experience and resources and learn from others. Most organisations reported that funders have been positive and supportive about making changes to project work and funding agreements. However there have been different experiences of the amount of administration work for these changes for different funders.

Equalities organisations said that there was not enough consultation to address equalities issues with crisis services such as community hubs and vaccinations programme. This resulted in these services not reaching marginalised older people effectively. They felt that consultation was not meaningful, and although they understood this during the first lockdown they felt it should have improved later as the pandemic continued. The unequal access to services led to some organisations learning more about inequalities affecting their communities. Some of them lobbied statutory services and local councillors or MPs for the first time. This meant learning about issues and learning new skills during the pandemic that they can use to help their communities in the future.



Case Study: Partnerships

More people have needed Wai Yin's counselling support during the pandemic. It is good that older Chinese people are able to talk together about these issues, and reduce the stigma of mental health. But the increasing need has been challenging for Wai Yin.

Wai Yin partnered with the GM Health and Social Care Partnership and started a new counselling and psychotherapy service called East Meets West. However, they report it is difficult to find funding for the future of the service, and more systematic support over time.



Warm Hut UK offered exercise classes via their Facebook page.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Equalities organisations worked hard during the Covid-19 crisis to fill gaps and provide support for marginalised older people who could not access mainstream services. Many organisations had to change their usual ways of working quickly and under pressure but were still highly effective. Funders and service commissioners need to recognise the expertise of equalities organisations.

Key Recommendations for Commissioners and Funders

- Recognise and utilise the expertise of equalities organisations to mitigate against increasing inequalities in a crisis.** Identify where equalities organisations can deliver added value services and take part in co-designing, monitoring and assessing emergency response plans. Introduce a clear point of contact between equalities organisations and statutory services, and compensate organisations for contributing expertise.
- Build and support the resilience of equalities organisations to respond in a crisis.** Develop trusted relationships with equalities organisations and networks during good times and support wellbeing of staff and volunteers so they can respond in times of crisis. Invest in smaller equalities organisations and support them to develop digital skills of staff and volunteers.
- Learn from the experiences of equalities organisations during this pandemic.** Capture learning locally and nationally in order to better respond in the future.

“ There needs to be a system change so that older people and those most in need continue to be supported – the VCSE sector provides an excellent value for money way of doing this. Equity and equality is a key issue. ”

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To read the full report visit www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/pandemicpressures



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