



Emerging needs - the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of employability services

Associate Professor Claire Paterson-Young and Doctor Toa Giroletti

Background and Objectives

- The impact of COVID-19 on individuals' mental health and well-being has received increased attention (Paterson-Young, 2021, Public Health England, 2020).
- However, the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on service continuity for organisations supporting vulnerable groups, experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity, is under-developed.
- Service continuity during COVID-19 has been highly complex, with organisations expected to rapidly adapt to circumstances completely beyond their control (i.e. Government restrictions).
- Organisations delivering Employability Support are, generally, labour intensive, with staff delivering front-line services to disadvantaged groups across the country.
- Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on an organisation ability to offer support and services is paramount to ensuring sufficient service continuity to meet the emerging needs of individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity.
- This paper presents data collected from 16 semi-structured interviews, collected between July 2020 and March 2021, to explore the anxieties and concerns of organisations delivering Employability Services in the United Kingdom.

A background image showing a group of people in a meeting or discussion. On the left, a man with glasses and a beard is seen in profile. On the right, a man in a purple shirt is looking towards the center. The image is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the text overlay.

Method and Participants

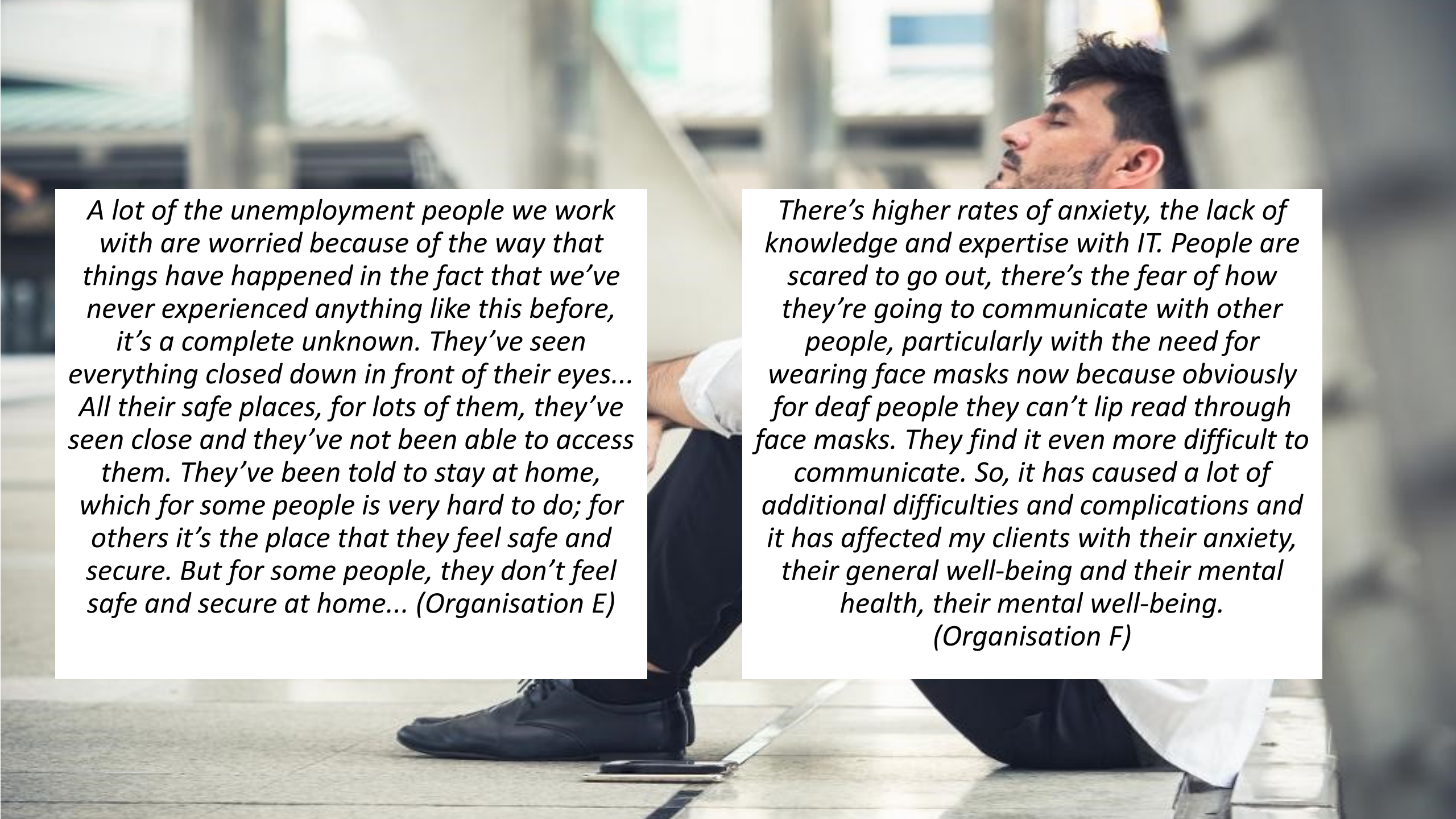
- The research was designed in response to emerging challenges resulting from COVID-19 that were highlighted in a partnership meeting with Employability Services in the East Midlands.
- Semi-structured Interviews, designed in consultation with organisations delivering support, were conducted with project staff online (Zoom and/or Blackboard Collaborate).
- Organisations participating in research *all* offered Employability Services to people categorised as vulnerable, including:
 - Adults with caring responsibilities
 - Adults with disabilities or mental health conditions
 - Adults with criminal histories
 - Adults with English as a second language
- Organisation *all* operated in the voluntary sector, relying on limited funding to deliver support.
- Staff and senior management in *all* organisations had lived experience.

Results

- Information collected for the research were analysed to: (i) explore how practitioners have delivered Employability Services during COVID-19; (ii) identify the challenges to delivering Employability; (iii) contribute to an understanding of how services can be delivered; and (iv) the opportunities/barriers experienced by practitioners.
- Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), through a six-phase process, was used to analyse the interview data. This six-phase process involved 'data familiarisation'; 'data coding'; 'theme development'; 'theme review and development'; 'theme refinement and naming'; and 'reporting' (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2020).
- Themes identified through thematic analysis were:
 - Emerging and compounded need
 - Delivering support in a pandemic
 - Managing stress and well-being' and 'adaption and innovation

Emerging and compounded needs

- COVID-19 and physical distancing measures have had a significant impact on life, with individuals isolated from their social networks and facilities (closing of shops and restaurants).
- Changes in the family environment, with children home 24 hours a day, created challenges for parents seeking employment with organisations noting that partners had extra pressure and responsibilities that can lead to arguments and disagreements within the family. Interestingly, one organisation referred to the emergence of new needs, rather than changing needs, with participants experiencing significant pressure at home.
- Programme participants' well-being, finances, health, employability, and access to services have all been affected by COVID-19. The organisations discussed the issues that participants experience with regard to accessing technology, which is exacerbated by pre-existing conditions (for example, autism).
- Fear and anxiety were significant issues for participants, with organisations reporting that participants were scared to leave their houses and communicate with other people. This was especially true for organisations supporting deaf participants who found it difficult to communicate with people when wearing a face mask.
- Participants' anxiety and fear was not, of course, unfounded, with Organisations reporting that many participants experienced the loss of the loved ones during the pandemic. This loss was two-fold, with participants not only losing loved ones but also losing the opportunity to say goodbye due to the restriction (impacting the grieving process).
- COVID-19 has had an impact on employment in all countries (Bell and Blanchflower, 2020) which itself impacts financial security and individual well-being (Blustein et al., 2020; Zacher and Rudolph, 2020). The organisations reflected on this issue, with Organisation B and Organisation C explaining that participants were experiencing financial issues due to redundancy and furlough arrangements.


A man with dark hair and a beard is sitting on a metal bench in what appears to be a public space, possibly a train station. He is looking upwards and to the right with a distressed or anxious expression. His hands are resting on his knees. He is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. The background is blurred, showing architectural elements of the station.

A lot of the unemployment people we work with are worried because of the way that things have happened in the fact that we've never experienced anything like this before, it's a complete unknown. They've seen everything closed down in front of their eyes... All their safe places, for lots of them, they've seen close and they've not been able to access them. They've been told to stay at home, which for some people is very hard to do; for others it's the place that they feel safe and secure. But for some people, they don't feel safe and secure at home... (Organisation E)

*There's higher rates of anxiety, the lack of knowledge and expertise with IT. People are scared to go out, there's the fear of how they're going to communicate with other people, particularly with the need for wearing face masks now because obviously for deaf people they can't lip read through face masks. They find it even more difficult to communicate. So, it has caused a lot of additional difficulties and complications and it has affected my clients with their anxiety, their general well-being and their mental health, their mental well-being.
(Organisation F)*

Delivering support in a pandemic

- COVID-19 has changed our world, with face-to-face delivery halted, creating challenges for organisations delivering support.
- Changes in way that support could be delivered created challenges that organisations overcame by introducing digital services; however, other challenges have been more difficult to overcome. For example, organisations are encountering recruitment challenges due to limited opportunities to attend job fairs and events.
- Organisations' responses to the challenges varied, with changing working conditions creating opportunities for practitioners to deliver flexible support from home (Dockery and Bawa, 2020).
- Adapting services to offer participants support over the phone means that organisations can continue to deliver support. One significant issue discussed by the organisations was the ability to complete the required administrative tasks.
- For many, COVID-19 slowed down the process of signing up participants, with organisations discussing challenges during the referral process (for example, obtaining signatures from participants). Even when alternative methods were applied (such as posting documents), the situation still affected their ability to hit targets in terms of number of referrals.
- Opportunities for reaching participants by phone was described as positive for most delivery partners however some organisations explained that phone calls did not allow for the interpretation of body language, which had an impact on their ability to build relationships.
- Vulnerable participants often preferred in-person contact, explaining that this support helped participants feel more relaxed about and engaged in the process. Organisations considered participants preferences and offered in-person visits in parks and outdoor spaces (if possible).

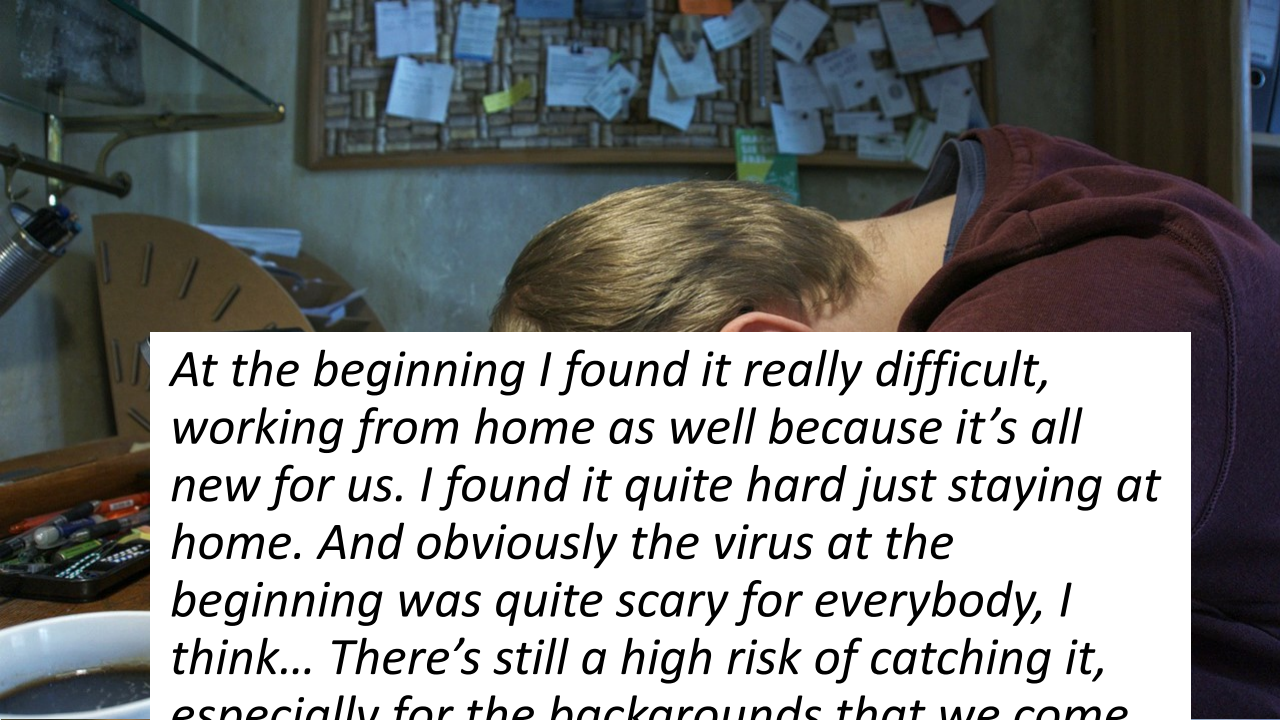


The main difference really was not being face to face, it was being over the telephone. Personally I hate the telephone, I absolutely hate making telephone calls and things like that. But I accept that it is part of the job and so I am pretty much on my phone all day every day. So, I think personally for me, that's one of the biggest challenges, one of the biggest problems. But then it's also quite nice with the trade-off that I don't have to go anywhere (Organisation A)

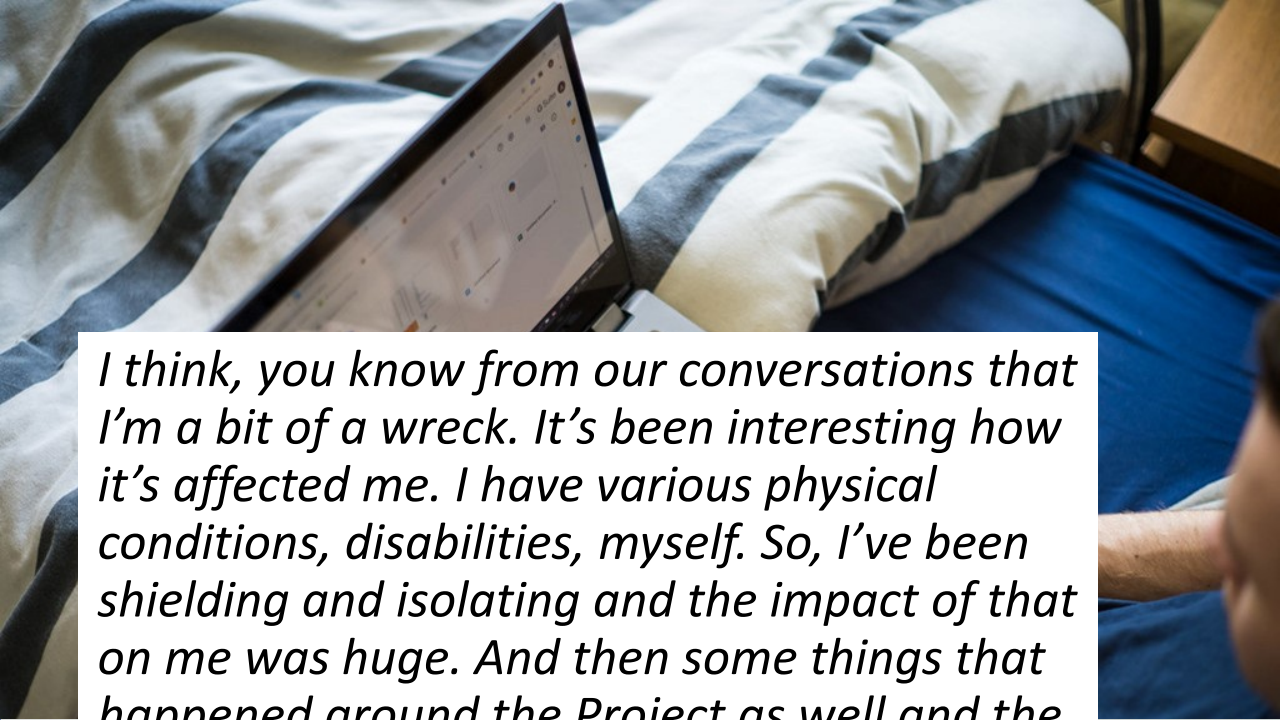
...the biggest challenge COVID's presenting to us I guess is it's actually engagement and referrals, getting out there. The traditional methods of being in the Job Centre and being out at events and fairs and stuff and engaging with the people, that's just non-existent at the moment. Yes, that's the biggest challenge for us (Organisation P)

Managing stress and well-being

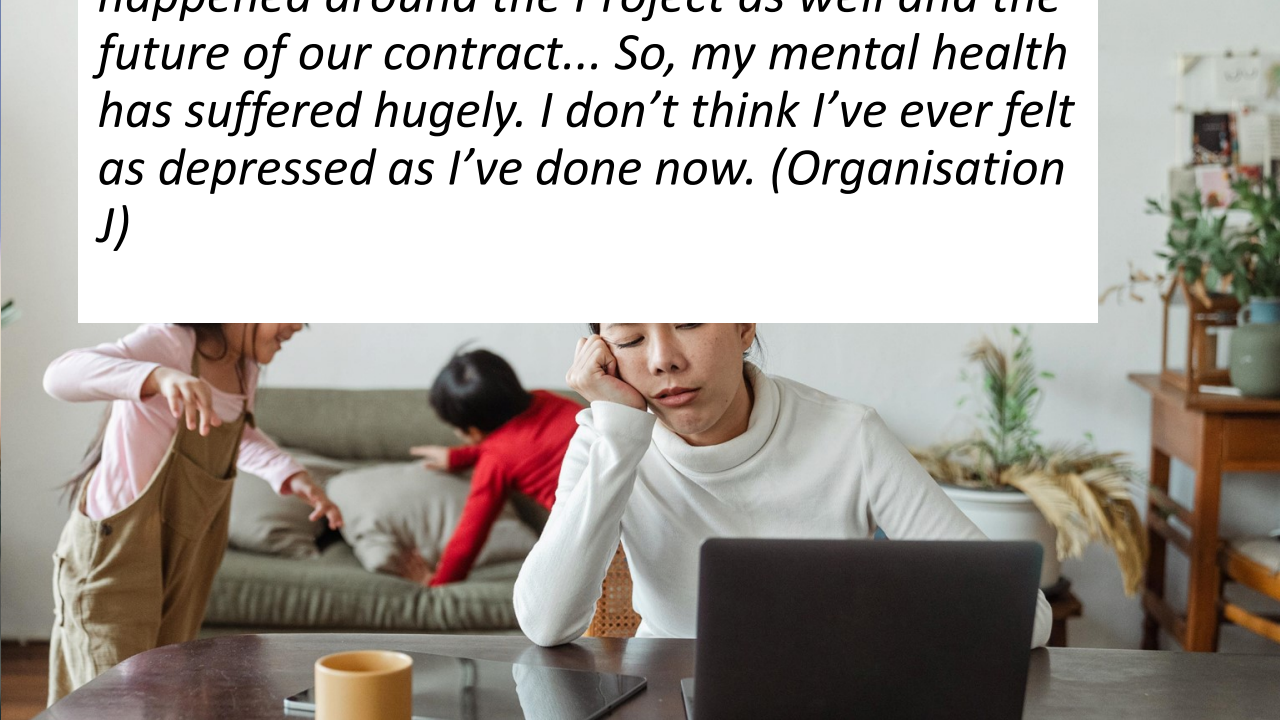
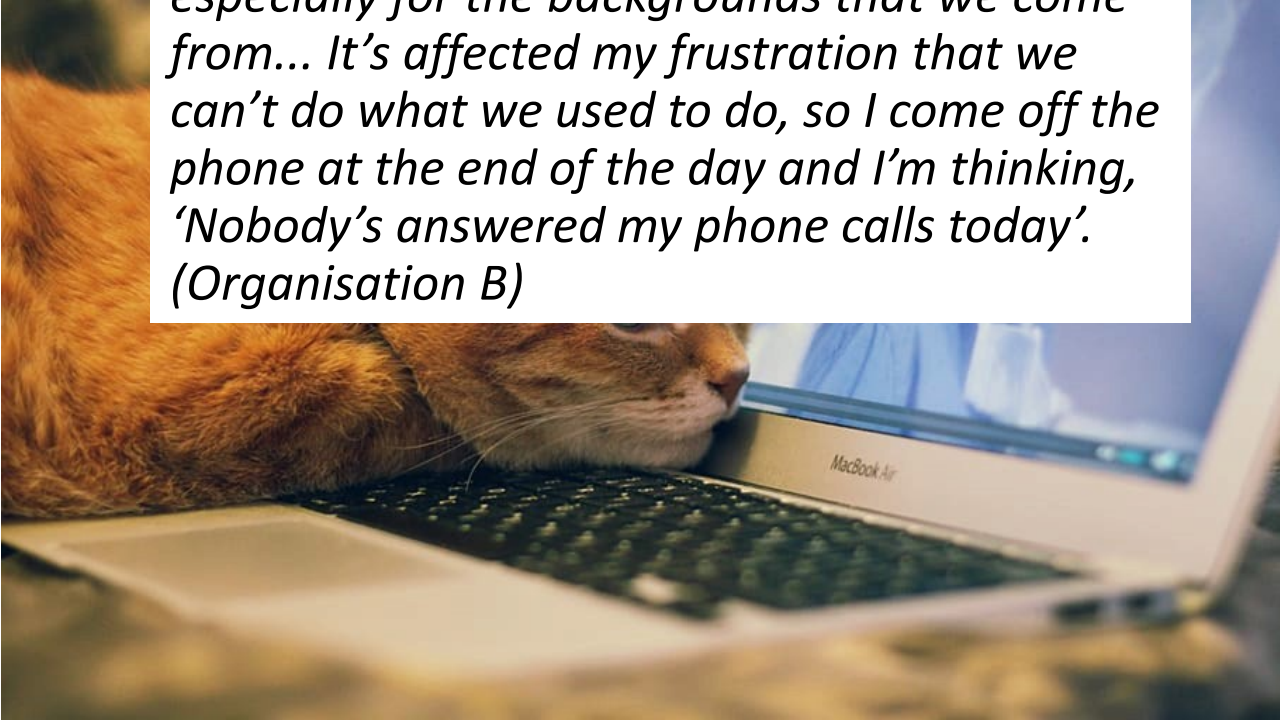
- Organisations delivering support to participants experience certain personal challenges, but some organisations felt that their own well-being remained the same during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Working from home presents certain benefits (Dockery and Bawa, 2020), some of which were experienced by the organisations - reduced commuting time and increased flexibility.
- Conversely, other organisations described the negative impact of COVID-19 on well-being, with factors such as fear of the virus and changing working dynamics impacting on well-being.
- Although working from home entails certain positive aspects, it can lead to the reduction of well-being as it increases individual isolation and, as described by some respondents, can reduce the motivation to work (Dockery and Bawa, 2020).
- Organisations experienced the same stressors outlined by Blustein et al. (2020) and Zacher and Rudolph (2020), including frustration.
- Other stressors discussed by organisations were associated with mental well-being. In particular, social isolation due to shielding can produce loneliness and boredom, which are risk factors for depression and anxiety (Banerjee and Rai, 2020).
- COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on organisational well-being with some practitioners expressing positivity in working from home, especially related to reduced travel and increased flexibility, while others discussed negative experiences, among which were isolation and frustration with changes to working dynamics.



At the beginning I found it really difficult, working from home as well because it's all new for us. I found it quite hard just staying at home. And obviously the virus at the beginning was quite scary for everybody, I think... There's still a high risk of catching it, especially for the backgrounds that we come from... It's affected my frustration that we can't do what we used to do, so I come off the phone at the end of the day and I'm thinking, 'Nobody's answered my phone calls today'. (Organisation B)

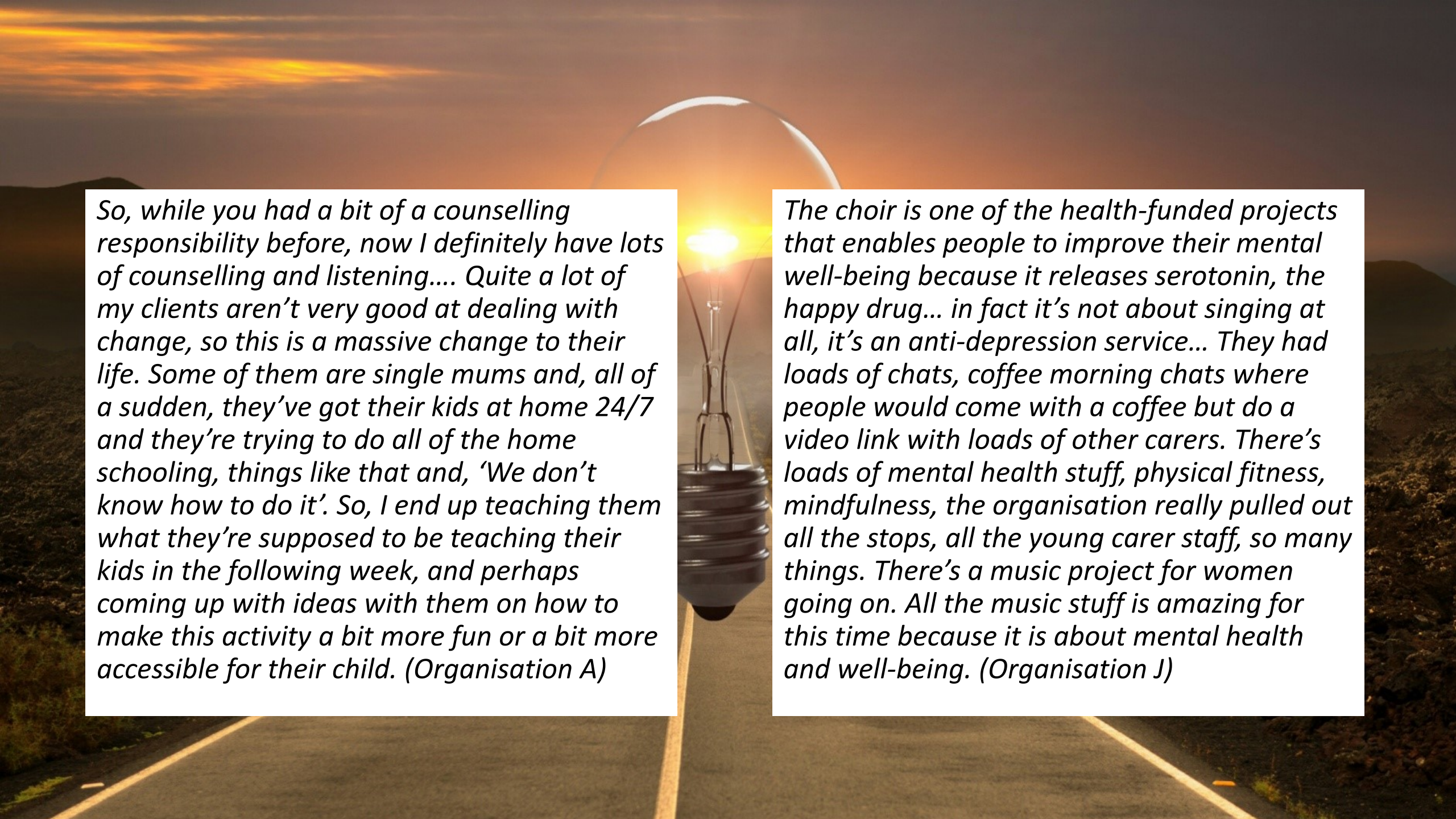


I think, you know from our conversations that I'm a bit of a wreck. It's been interesting how it's affected me. I have various physical conditions, disabilities, myself. So, I've been shielding and isolating and the impact of that on me was huge. And then some things that happened around the Project as well and the future of our contract... So, my mental health has suffered hugely. I don't think I've ever felt as depressed as I've done now. (Organisation J)



Adaption and innovation

- As discussed in the previous themes, COVID-19 has had an impact on participants' well-being, which placed increased pressure on organisations to adapt their activities and the support they were offering.
- To respond to the changing needs, many organisations took on additional responsibilities to ensure participants received support, including offering counselling and listening services.
- Because of isolation and physical distancing measures, the organisations' communication strategies changed, leading to partnerships to create and distribute leaflets and information to participants.
- The implementation of different forms of adaptation were evident in all interviews. Some consisted of employing new activities and new mechanisms of support, and, in the case of organisation C, by providing materials to allow the new activities to be carried out at home.
- Organisations were able to transfer them online and, although this exercise has been widely implemented during the pandemic (Mouratidis and Papagiannakis, 2021), it still remains considerably interesting when its practice involves musical activities and a choir.
- Delivering support during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for organisations; however, through adapting their own support, organisations were able to ensure participants received support.
- In particular, organisations were able to enhance and adjust pre-existing services (i.e., counselling and listening services), share their expertise with external organisations, develop new and more effective forms of communication, develop new activities and new forms of delivering them, and transfer online existing effective activities.

A glowing lightbulb hangs in the center of the frame, its light illuminating the scene. The background is a sunset over a road, with the sun low on the horizon and its light reflecting on the road surface. The lightbulb is a standard incandescent bulb with a visible filament. The overall mood is warm and hopeful.

So, while you had a bit of a counselling responsibility before, now I definitely have lots of counselling and listening.... Quite a lot of my clients aren't very good at dealing with change, so this is a massive change to their life. Some of them are single mums and, all of a sudden, they've got their kids at home 24/7 and they're trying to do all of the home schooling, things like that and, 'We don't know how to do it'. So, I end up teaching them what they're supposed to be teaching their kids in the following week, and perhaps coming up with ideas with them on how to make this activity a bit more fun or a bit more accessible for their child. (Organisation A)

The choir is one of the health-funded projects that enables people to improve their mental well-being because it releases serotonin, the happy drug... in fact it's not about singing at all, it's an anti-depression service... They had loads of chats, coffee morning chats where people would come with a coffee but do a video link with loads of other carers. There's loads of mental health stuff, physical fitness, mindfulness, the organisation really pulled out all the stops, all the young carer staff, so many things. There's a music project for women going on. All the music stuff is amazing for this time because it is about mental health and well-being. (Organisation J)

Conclusions

- Unemployment and economic inactivity have soared across the globe, with restrictions ('lockdown') resulting with the retail and hospitality sector closing temporarily - reducing labour force participation (Petts et al., 2021).
- The pandemic had an impact on service delivery, with organisations forced to adapt activities and/or support whilst navigating the challenges for staff and participants.
- Practitioners experience challenges with caregiving responsibilities exacerbated by school closures and access to the internet and/or computers , as dependent on individuals' home environments (i.e. office space).
- Alleviating demands on practitioners requires a commitment from the organisations to introduce a supportive environment that empowers practitioners. This includes offering practitioners flexibility in the delivery of services, modification of intervention policies and practices and offering resources/support for the transition to remote working.

Limitations and Future Research

- Practitioner/project staff views on the experience of participants only provides a partial picture however research with individuals receiving support is currently in progress.
- Research required to understand developments since COVID-19 restrictions "ended" – how have organisations delivered support? Have organisations returned to *normal*? Have organisations adopted a hybrid approach?

Thank you for listening

Claire Paterson-Young
Associate Professor
Institute for Social Innovation and Impact
University of Northampton
