

# **COVID Client and Staff Impact report**

## **June 2020**

by

**Angela Hamilton**  
**Supported Employment Service – Fife Council**  
**SUSE Board Member**

## **Fife Council Supported Employment Service**

### **COVID Client and Staff Impact report: June 2020.**

National and local COVID 19 restrictions were put in place on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. This led to the closure of the Supported Employment Service office bases and suspension of all face to face contact with clients and customers.

By far the biggest change to service delivery was the cessation of face to face engagement and immediate introduction of remote methods of contact. Face to face meetings are the predominant method and preference of client engagement. Staff undertake assessments and develop action plans that requires the full participation of the client. Clients may also participate in either one on one or group training for employment.

Face to face meetings personalise the service and help key workers and clients build rapport and trust with each other. During face to face meetings key workers establish the boundaries and clarify the aims and objectives of the service to promote an effective working relationship.

Studies indicate between 55-93% of non-verbal communication plays a vital role in interpreting verbal communication. Clearly, removing face to face meetings reduces opportunities to interpret non-verbal clues and this can be particularly challenging when building relationships with clients who may not be overly verbally communicative either through choice or ability.

Many of our clients are disadvantaged in the labour market due to the impacts and perceptions of disability and health conditions, and these disadvantages escalated due to the challenges arising from COVID-19 restrictions. People with disabilities and health issues were immediately identified as “vulnerable” with many individuals placed on furlough or instructed to self-isolate. Although this was rightly put in place and based on sound medical advice at the time, these decisions may have a long- term negative impact on the perceived risk of employing disabled people and an adverse view of their value and contribution to the workplace.

We were keen to measure the COVID 19 effect on our clients and staff. We did so by:

- Collecting data on clients’ employability journey
- Conducting surveys with clients and staff

We gathered data on the following:

- 1.Client position on the employability pathway
  - 1.1. Stage 1-3 Assessment and Action plan
  - 1.2. In training
  - 1.3. In work placement
  - 1.4. In work
- 2.Client view of remote contact: People not working and working
- 3.Staff view of remote contact and home working

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## **1. Client position on the employability pathway**

Staff provided data on all clients supported by SES in the two weeks following March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 and implementation of social distancing, stay at home guidance and furlough. 336 clients were registered at this time.

### **1.1. 171 clients at Stage 1-3 Assessment and action planning**

#### **Considerations:**

COVID 19 may have changed the individual's circumstances, support needs and work ambitions due to possible impact areas listed below (not exhaustive):

- Their or their family's health, wellbeing and welfare (e.g. onset of ill health, mental health issues, child or dependent care, bereavement, new priorities)
- Reduced labour market demand e.g. lack of hospitality/retail opportunities
- Increased labour market demand e.g. driving, warehousing, social care, retail pickers
- Increased reliance on remote engagement to deliver service may be problematic for some client groups e.g. learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, visually or hearing impaired, mental health issues, digital exclusion due to resources or capability

#### **Recommendations:**

Staff must review all client vocational profiles and actions plans to identify:

- Changes to clients' circumstances such as new or additional caring responsibilities, increased mental health issues, bereavement, onset of ill health or disability, family/financial concerns
- Additional or new work preferences and ambitions
- Digital and remote engagement issues and solutions to address deficits

### **1.2. 36 clients in training- 23 training placements stopped**

#### **Considerations:**

- Due to potential changes in clients' circumstances- see 1.1. - the training placement might not be a viable or desirable opportunity
- Client needs additional support to re-engage with the training provider
- Client needs to improve their digital capabilities and have access to the resources necessary for distance learning.
- Training provider needs guidance on individual challenges in using distance and remote learning methods.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Review client VP and action plan to identify changes to the clients' circumstances as outlined in 1.1.
- Record additional or new work preferences and ambitions/update action plan
- Maintain regular contact with the training provider to facilitate a move back to training as early as possible once restrictions are lifted
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- Facilitate a move back to training by addressing concerns, challenges, learning needs and additional COVID impacts related to individual clients' through three-way discussion- and record updates on action plan
- Build client's digital capacity if required through learning and support to access resources if required
- Make referral for additional support e.g. digital learning
- Clients may need encouragement to re-engage with the training provider
- Training providers require guidance on the challenges faced by some clients in using distance and remote learning methods.

### **1.3. 25 in work placements- all work placements stopped**

#### Considerations:

- Employers' business is likely to be adversely affected and their priorities will be focused elsewhere
- Employers' premises/businesses will have changed considerably- physically, culturally and economically therefore their priority will be to address these challenges and re-induction of paid staff
- Providing work placements is unlikely to be deemed a business need- and employers may view this as additional and unnecessary risk at this time leading to removal of existing, or reduction in future, work placement opportunities.
- Work placements may have a valuable contribution to meet future business needs in industries with increased labour demands or for businesses who have lost staff due to COVID impacts.
- Clients' circumstances, work aspirations may have changed and no longer focussed on previous work placement
- Clients may be reluctant to return due to change/challenges in the workplace, to their circumstances, mental health concerns or additional support needs
- Clients may require significant additional support/retraining to return to placement and they may view this as insurmountable
- Clients may need to improve their digital capabilities and have access to the resources necessary for distance learning for re-induction and work placement training.
- Placement providers may need guidance on the challenges faced by some clients with distance and remote learning methods.

#### Recommendations:

- Maintain regular contact with the placement provider to facilitate a move back to placement as early as possible once restrictions are lifted
- Review client VP and action plan to identify changes to their circumstances see 1.1. and facilitate a move back to work placement by addressing concerns, challenges, learning needs and additional COVID impacts in three-way discussion with the employer and the client
- Sustain conversations with the employer about the value of work placement opportunities for the business and the individual
- Broker conversations with employers affected by increased demands such as cleaning, driving, warehousing, health and social care, retail pickers to discuss the value of work placements in training/identifying future workforce

- Seek opportunities to discuss wider ES offer e.g. Fife Job Contract and Academies to keep employer engaged
- Offer employer additional support such as equality and disability awareness training, mental health awareness (JALT), COVID health and safety guidance and signposting, individual risk assessment for paid staff struggling, off sick or identifying underlying disabilities or health concerns previously unknown
- Make referral for Employment Support Worker for additional support

#### **1.4. 104 clients in work- 17 at risk of losing their job/6 lost work**

##### Considerations:

- Employers' premises/businesses will have changed considerably- physically, culturally and economically- their priority will be to address these challenges and re-induct paid staff
- Clients may be reluctant to return to work due to physical, cultural, work changes in the workplace
- Clients disability, health condition, mental health may have been adversely affected due to COVID 19 restrictions and they may have additional concerns about returning to work
- Clients may require significant additional support/retraining to return to work
- Clients may need to improve their digital capabilities and gain access to the resources necessary for distance learning for re-induction and work training
- Many employees will face additional challenges in returning to work and the employer will have to overcome increasing demand for work flexibility for all staff in addition to accommodations/adjustments for our clients

##### Recommendations:

- Physical changes to workplace such as reconfiguration of space, signage, new health and safety measures, single use toilet facilities etc, will have an additional and adverse impact on people disabilities and health conditions and particularly for people with learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, mental health issues, visual impairments, digestive/food related conditions and mobility issues. **All** clients' job introduction paperwork, health & safety checklists and individual risk assessments must be reviewed and updated to account for additional COVID impacts in the workplace. It is essential staff and employers are encouraged to consider and find solutions to the changes and challenges that affect our clients
- Maintain regular contact with employer to facilitate a move back to work as early as possible once restrictions are lifted or to adopt more flexible working practices to accommodate the change to the business or the client's circumstances
- Review client VP and action plan to identify changes to their circumstances see 1.1. and facilitate a move back to work by addressing concerns, challenges, learning needs and additional COVID impacts through three-way discussion with the employer and the client
- Seek opportunities to discuss wider ES offer e.g. Fife Job Contract, Academies to keep employer engaged
- Offer employer additional support such as equality and disability awareness training, mental health awareness (JALT), COVID health and safety guidance

and signposting, individual risk assessment for paid staff struggling, off sick or who are identifying underlying disabilities/health concerns previously unknown

- Provide employer with guidance on the challenges faced by some clients with distance and remote learning methods/ and in returning to the workplace- as well as advising employer about new or previously unknown underlying conditions
- Make referral for Employment Support Worker for additional support
- Offer innovative solutions to support clients back to work e.g. pre-visit and video of premises for clients to allay concerns, face to face remote contact with employer prior to start etc.

Through all stages outlined in this section, an update to VP, Action Plan and Job Start paperwork will be required.

## 2. Client Survey

COVID restrictions as of March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 led to an end to all face to face meetings. As yet, we are unsure when these restrictions will be lifted.

Remote engagement flagged up immediate concerns for our staff and client group.

Two electronic surveys were created:

### 2.1. Clients not in work

93% were keen to continue their journey to find work

86% found it easy to use remote contact – approximately the same % of clients indicated no issue using remote methods of contact such as email, Skype, Zoom, text, messenger etc.

80% were keen to sustain weekly contact

43% were worried about COVID impacts

62% were coping well with the information on COVID

52% were actively planning their life and work future

14% needed extra support to cope with change due to COVID

30% needed extra support to help with their mental wellbeing

#### Considerations: (refer to 1.1- 1.3. for additional considerations)

- On face value, these responses were encouraging insofar as those responding seemed willing to stay on course with their journey to work and able to engage using remote contact methods. However, we may assume that people completing an electronic questionnaire are digitally capable in skills and resources, therefore those completing the survey had the necessary skills or were supported to do so and this had a favourable affect the results
- Our key workers did not support clients whom we might assume would have difficulties in completing the survey as this may have influenced the clients' responses. We offered independent 121 support- no clients requested this support
- It is fair to assume people who use remote methods of contact such as email, text, messenger, video chat and social media and have the resources to do so, have few concerns adopting these mediums to support them on their employability journey



- It is fair to assume that people who did not participate in the survey due to a lack of digital capacity, whether due to resources or ability, will have concerns about using these methods in their employability journey
- Remote methods of engagement are likely to become integral and adopted as standard expectations within employability service delivery for a considerable period.

**Recommendations:**

- Clients' digital capacity must be assessed from the outset of engagement with the service to identify individuals who are digitally excluded due to deficit in skills or resources
- Clients facing digital exclusion must be supported [and encouraged] to enhance and improve their digital capacity (where appropriate and reasonable) through interactive learning/access to resource funds/access to resource hubs/ and or additional 121 support
- Staff must be supported to improve their digital skills and use of remote methods of contact due to expected increase in remote methods of contact for reach, recruitment, training, induction and on-going learning in the workplace

**Client Comments**

*Looking for work at the moment but not able to leave the house as I have a letter from NHS stating that I have to stay at home for 12 weeks due to being a vulnerable person.*

*My keyworker has been a godsend to me especially with the current situation. She is doing all she can for me and contacts me regularly on a weekly basis. I can't thank her enough for the support she continues to give me.*

*I'm finding I have good days and bad days at the moment and have valued my weekly contact with my employability worker which adds a bit of structure to my week.*

*I am Ok using a telephone to stay in contact. I have no access to any video chat and tend to avoid social media as I have no idea how to use it*

*I cannot use remote contact independently I need help to communicate. I am joining in with a Family WhatsApp group only...I am happy and reassured by my family that my journey to work will resume when it's safe to do so.*

*My key worker has been in touch regularly to offer support which has been great.*

*My mental health has started to decline with the restrictions in place, but I am trying my best to stay on top of everything*

**2.2. Clients in work**

- 28% furloughed
- 7% lost job
- 14% in danger of losing work
- 21% self-isolation
- 0% COVID symptoms
- 57% felt supported to cope with the changes (15% didn't feel supported)



- 71% good advice about COVID from SES (15% felt they didn't receive advice)
- 64% felt helped and supported by their employer (7% didn't feel supported)
- 51% felt they needed extra support to cope with COVID impacts
- 57% felt they needed extra support with their mental health issues

Considerations: (see 1.4. for additional considerations)

- As this was an electronic survey and as previously outlined, of those responding, we may assume these individuals had the literacy and digital capacity- or support- to do so, and:
  - Are likely to have a fair insight of their future digital and workplace needs
  - Have some understanding of potential changes and challenges in the workplace particularly regarding digital methods of engagement
- Of those **not** responding, and as previously outlined, it would be reasonable to assume these individuals:
  - Chose not to respond
  - Did not have the digital capacity, resources or support to respond
- We may reasonably assume some of the negative responses are attributed to the uncertainties arising from the pandemic at that time
- More than 50% of respondents felt they needed extra support to cope with COVID impacts and mental health issues over and above the support they are already being provided with
- The number of clients at risk of losing their jobs may rise, for reasons such as business decline, reticence of client to return to work, ill health or through choice.

Recommendations: (see 1.4. for additional recommendations)

- Encourage clients to discuss their mental wellbeing and negative impacts that might affect them in the workplace
- Review and improve health and safety checklist to include COVID health and safety workplace expectations
- Engage with employer to ensure COVID measures are being put in place
- Visit the worksite when safe to do so or arrange for video of site for assurance that COVID signage, health and safety measures are in place
- Seek Corporate guidance on staff visits to work sites to re-start in-work support such as job coaching, observation, travel training
- Discuss and agree PPE for staff visiting sites
- Provide guidance for employers on in work support for clients

**Clients Comments**

*I think there isn't much else anyone can do. I'll just have to do what I can from home*

*My employer is doing her best during difficult times. There have been hiccups, but overall, I have felt supported in the transition to working from home.*

*My support worker has been excellent. She has been available to listen to any concerns I've had and has offered advise when needed*

*The situation is not ideal, but I am trying to make the best of things. When I count my blessings and think about it, I am more fortunate than many other people. I am more worried about the longer term, with the cost of all of this and cuts to public spending.*

### 3. Staff Survey

Staff responded to an electronic survey to provide their views on COVID impacts and changes to service delivery.

- 65% - found remote methods of contact are easy to use
- 65% - felt weekly contact with their clients useful
- 92% - were confident using calls and emails to contact clients
- 23% - are not confident using video contact methods
- 42% - felt clients had no issues using remote contact
- 31% - did not feel they had the right resources to use remote contact
- 7% - thought clients would have additional concerns due to COVID
- 19%- were concerned about lack of remote/interactive training materials
- 42% - are not confident contacting employers
- 27% - viewed working from home detrimental to their work focus
- 27% - viewed working from home as less productive

#### Considerations

The survey was undertaken within the first six weeks of lockdown. During this time:

- Fife Council were coping with a major and emergency event that affected all areas of service delivery
- A contingency SES delivery plan was disseminated within the first week of lockdown outlining the “new” way of working
- Staff were required to adapt to immediate major changes in service delivery in a short timescale and support clients and employers to adapt to these changes.
- Staff were not familiar with remote and home working practice
- Staff were coping with their own family crisis during the initial lockdown period whilst continuing to support clients
- The escalation of emails, information and advice raised staff anxieties
- Many clients were experiencing additional adverse effects and required a significant shift in support from progression on the pathway to emotional and mental health support
- The immediate impacts of the lockdown, anxieties, uncertainty and change added to enforced remote contact may have influenced the view of the “new way” of working
- Culturally, many people prefer face to face meetings, in person
- Within the first six weeks of lockdown all staff and clients were provided with 121 support to use remote methods of engagement.
- Within the first six weeks of lockdown all staff were provided with the resources they needed to work from home (as far as was practicable at that time) and discussions are on-going to ensure staff can continue to work safely in their home
- Staff and clients are becoming better equipped and informed on remote methods of contact

- Where previously remote engagement was being referred to as the “new way” it has now become the “now way.”

### Recommendations

The following actions have already been taken to ensure staff are able to deliver a remote service:

- Fife Council and SES have provided guidance and instruction to all staff on home working, remote methods of contact, interactive client learning tools, regular updates on COVID related matters, signposting to relevant government and local sites, additional e-learning modules and training, information for employers and individuals.
- Staff have been provided with full written guidance on how to apply remote contact methods with clients and employers through all stages of the employability pathway
- Electronic and remote interactive learning resources are available for clients
- Clients are advised of remote methods of contact from the outset of service delivery
- Staff can refer clients for 121 support to build digital skills
- Staff have been provided with 121 support to enhance their remote digital skills particularly in use of video sites such as Skype, Teams, WhatsApp and CISCO WebEx

### Further recommendations:

- Continue to reference and seek guidance/instruction from Fife Council Corporate Team on remote and home working practice
- Ensure information on clients’ digital capacity is captured from the outset of service delivery and fast track to 121 support for those who need upskilling
- Build partnerships with Community Learning colleagues responsible for addressing digital exclusion due to lack of resources/web access
- Enable clients to express their preference for remote contact for the initial service contact (this is currently undertaken by telephone)
- Assess staff digital capacity and provide training and upskilling where needed
- Support staff with the cultural shift to remote contact and particularly those who have concerns with this shift
- Lateral thinking provided new and innovate ways of working in a very short period. Many of these enforced changes would not have previously been considered an option. It is important we continue to find ways to emphasise the benefits of these improvements for employers and clients e.g. the flexibility of working day, increased home working, reduced travel/carbon footprint etc.
- Continue to keep abreast of national and local phased actions and contingency planning required to move to recovery
- Continue to seek feedback and consult with staff and clients on views of home working and remote contact methods
- Increase knowledge and good practice on managing remote teams and home working practice

## **Staff Comments- summarised**

*...my typical client interactions are face-to-face; I feel stressed by number of emails, and by inadequacies of equipment/software...*

*Difficulties will be when employers choose to employ people who have ...recently become redundant.*

*Working from home is difficult with children as they are having to be quiet etc. the distractions at home are different to the distractions in the work place but are equal.*

*I have offered video calls to my clients...they either do not feel comfortable, do not have the technology or do not have the need...There may also be issues with protocol here - clients may not use the technology appropriately etc. (i.e. suitably dressed etc for "meetings")*

*Telephone contact with new clients - I find this difficult...we rely very heavily on visual cues in the VP process...in everyday meetings to assess peoples' feelings or the clients' wellbeing in general.*

*I think we could do more online group work with clients or webinars to address and improve mental health issues relating to COVID-19?!*

*Contacting employers to offer our wider service is a great idea...may generate a lot of retention cases*

*Clients would need to have access to a computer or smartphone with enough data to engage.*

*As there are other countries ahead of us in the COVID 19 journey it may be an idea to research and find good examples from others!*

*...Technology ...better communications with employers able to "meet" virtually rather than travel to meetings taking additional time out of their busy schedule...doing "live" video on social media and engage new clients this way.*

*...encouraging clients to use online resources to help them discover what type of job they may like to do - My world of work, Alison and Barclays.*

*...Some of my clients...expressed a concern about using up their mobile data if they were to take part in on line training sessions.*

*Employers will likely be reluctant for some time to offer placements etc...employers don't know what to do with their own staff let alone having to support placements.*

*Some employers especially hospitality will be difficult to engage with...care sector will be ready to employ...*

*Mental Health has improved working from home. Fit more things in a day, no down time between appointments. Less disruptions, can focus more.*

## **Final Thoughts**

Remote methods of engagement are likely to continue indefinitely as standard practices within employability provision, with some face to face meetings incorporated as required. It is important we assess clients' digital capacity from the outset to address digital exclusion and the barriers this creates for our clients in the job market.

Clients who are most disadvantaged in the labour market, may also be those digitally excluded e.g. people with learning disabilities, living in poverty, mental health issues. We must address these disadvantages strategically through partnership working and through consultation with stakeholders to ensure these clients are not further disadvantaged in the labour market

Remote engagement may also play a key role in future recruitment, training and induction. This will also have a negative impact on clients who are not digitally capable unless we address these deficits within the employability journey and ensure employers are aware of the potential issues arising.

We support clients (people with disabilities, health conditions and other disadvantages that create barriers to work) on the journey to work and act as consultants/negotiators with employers to find safe and suitable paid jobs.

Assessing individual's health, safety and welfare at work and negotiating accommodations and adjustments for people with disabilities and health issues is key to our success in helping people engage in the labour market to find and sustain safe and good work.

The workplace has changed for everyone. COVID 19 is an added dimension to the workplace physically, culturally and in work practice. This must now be a factor of all individual risk assessments in addition to all previous considerations.

Staff must be equipped with the information, resources and learning they need to have good conversations with employers and continue to be positioned as consultant/negotiators with employers for the people we support.

People already disadvantaged in the labour market may be further affected by an economic downturn at a time when employers may have their pick of recently redundant, skilled and proven workforce ready candidates.

An increase in work such as retail pickers, packers, delivery drivers, social care, cleaning and warehousing may provide opportunities for clients keen to progress in the labour market. We should increase our engagement in these sectors.

In many instances, businesses have been forced to adopt more flexible work practices. This increases the potential for home working, flexible and part time working, out of normal office work opportunities than ever before. This in turn may increase work progression for people unable to work in a “standard” 9-5 way. We must showcase the benefits of these enforced changes and highlight how this has a favourable impact for the business, the workforce and customers.

People with disabilities and health issues who have medical input may have faced a delay or reduction in treatment. This is likely to have on-going and long- term negative impact on their ability to get back to work, stay in work or even begin to look for work.

Employees who may not have considered themselves as having a disability or health condition or where their condition or disability did not impact in the workplace pre COVID, may now be faced with redundancy, new duties, different work practices and physically and culturally changed work environments. These changes may highlight undisclosed or underlying conditions or create new challenges for the individual where previously this was not an issue.

Most aspects of day to day living have been adversely affected and made more challenging by COVID impacts. These changes add further barriers to the disabling society previously faced by people with disabilities and health issues. Standing in queues, additional rules and regulations to learn and new signage all make life a bit more difficult for everyone, and more so for people with disabilities and health issues. The cultural norms have changed- we don’t shake hands anymore, we keep our mouths covered, we mustn’t touch items in shops and so on. People with learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, visual impairments, mental health issues and physical conditions are likely to be most affected by these changes.

The Scottish Government’s plan to halve the disabled employment gap and the NOLB agenda may be detrimentally affected by COVID 19 and ensuing economic downturn. People already disadvantaged in the labour market may find themselves further removed for finding work. People with disabilities may be perceived as “vulnerable” due to the measures taken for at “risk groups” such as self-isolation. This in turn may affect employers’ views of individual’s “employability” and value in the workplace. We must challenge these damaging views in the same way as was evident in and around the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act leading to the Equality Act. This can be undertaken through positive promotional campaigns and activities- good news releases, testimonial evidence via multiple mediums whilst at the same time highlighting the benefits of more flexible ways of working that are often more suitable for people with disabilities and health issues.

**Report: Angela Hamilton, Supported Employment Service June 2020.**