



**Disabled People's Organisations Sharing Experiences During
Covid 19**

Project Report 3 – DPO Future Concerns

June 2021



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DPO Future Concerns

Executive Summary

- Most DPOs have future funding concerns regarding their organisation's sustainability – no DPO funding is ever guaranteed
- Covid provided some DPOs with short-term funding during the crisis
- Real-term reductions in LA funding impact directly on the DPOs that rely on them for their funding
- Competition is increasing within the voluntary sector community for ever scarcer funding
- The majority of DPOs are reliant on finding appropriate funding for their sustainability
- Most DPOs said they had been recognised by their Local Authority during the pandemic, including helping with local 'Pandemic Management', in a range of ways
- In general, DPOs seem to have been recognised as specialists in disability issues. Including for their provision of accessible information, by a range of bodies including Local Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups, Healthwatch, voluntary sector organisations and others
- Some DPOs have been part of relevant boards and strategic groups to assist with the local Covid response, recognised for their specialist knowledge in relation to local disabled populations
- The pandemic created new, and strengthened more established, local networks and connections, which included DPOs
- If local recognition and funding can continue then the future stability of DPOs might be better assured.
- Relationships made between DPOs and a range of organisations during the pandemic could last into the future
- DPO flexibility is a real strength and asset
- Some DPOs had been heading down the Blended provision route for a while, before the pandemic
- Not all 'Blended' provision needs to involve digital service access. It can be possible to deliver some services through the telephone, as well as face-to-face in new ways
- In combination, the delivery of services in new ways can help a DPO to reach more people than the provision of services through more 'traditional' methods
- DPOs play a very strong role in the creation of social capital with and for disabled people before, during and after the pandemic
- Remote/Blended working are 'normal' practice for many disabled people, and therefore their DPOs
- The majority of these DPOs do not feel the need to fundamentally reassess the nature or function of their organisations.

Project Introduction

In March 2020 the government initiated the first national lockdown in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. As the death toll rose, with over two thirds of the total mortality figures being disabled peopleⁱ, many disabled people were either told by the government to shield or decided for themselves to do so.

This impacted all sectors of the economy including Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). These organisations found themselves at the frontline of service delivery, whilst also having to physically shut their premises to reduce human to human contact.

In February 2021 we devised and sent an online questionnaire to 115 DPOs across England. This was an incredibly difficult time for DPOs, managed, controlled and staffed by disabled people, as workloads were often increasing, staff and volunteers were working from home, and the government were issuing new deadlines about when it would be safe to open and go back to work.

Many disabled people were experiencing increased mental health difficultiesⁱⁱ at this time because of the pandemic, which affected the staff, volunteers clients and customers of DPOs. The questionnaire was targeted at understanding whether and how DPOs are operating in these difficult circumstances. This brief document presents some findings from this questionnaire, and can either be read alone or with the other documents in this series.

I have grouped the data from these questionnaires into three documents –

- 1 – DPO Staff
- 2 – DPO Buildings and services during the pandemic
- 3 – DPO Future Concerns.

In this document I will look at DPO Future Concerns.

Future Funding Concerns

Do you have future funding concerns regarding your organisation's sustainability?

36 answered

26 yes

9 no

29 people answered the subsequent question In what way? I have grouped the responses into the five most common themes as follows. Underpinning all DPO work, and always posing a real existential threat to all DPOs, is the lack of funding to support their core business, or indeed any DPO activity whatsoever –

Funding is not guaranteed

DPO Future Concerns

This creates enormous pressure on these organisations at the best of times, which undoubtedly increases during a global pandemic.

Usual Funding Issues

Eight respondents talked about how they are being affected by the 'Usual' DPO funding issues –

As a DPO, our funding is always precarious

Usual- time-limited funding (between 1 and 3 year)

The key emergent themes are also interconnected somewhat –

Lost income from cancelled fund raising activities and difficulty securing core costs not covid specific.

One of the key funding issues for DPOs at the best of times is the ending of project-specific funding, whether that be for a short- or long-term project –

Main stream of lottery funding ends in April.

The consequences of funding running out can be very serious for a DPO –

We can not afford to stay open unless we receive extra funding

Without funds we will be unable to reimburse expenses

Short Term Covid Funding

Seven people talked about how Covid had provided them with short-term funding during the crisis –

All new funding won in the past 12 months has been short term. Many contracts have been extended but no solid recomissioning plans announced

All of the Covid funding originating from govt but disbursed by others, e.g. Comm Fund Covid fund, Disability Ation, etc runs out between end March and end of May, with no indication of any further funding mentioned in the budget. This is despite the fact that the support we have been giving to Disabled people will be needed even more than when we applied for the funds to introduce this new work!

One DPO described the short term funding they had received as 'usual' –

We are entirely dependent on short-term grants for research, which is always precarious

Local Authority Funding

Seven DPOs talked about their dependency on funding from their Local Authority (LA) –

If we lost out contract for providing direct payment support

Real-term reductions in LA funding impact directly on the DPOs that rely on them for their funding –

Anticipate that in the post Covid climate it will be increasingly difficult to access funding. We are already working on contracts frozen at past levels (more than 5 years) with the local authority

DPO Future Concerns

Ok for coming year but concerned about squeeze on social care funding in future years

We are funded by the Council, we're not sure what their future budgets will look like

One DPO described the broader picture regarding DPO funding –

Not immediate concerns but long-term concerned about the lack of weight given to DPOs in government procurement processes

Funding Competition

Four of these DPOs described the competition within the voluntary sector community for ever scarcer funding –

Challenges of funding availability - a number of grants are closed, paused or reduced in scope. More competition for grant funding than ever before as more organisations seek this instead of corporate or community fundraising where this activity has slowed because of lockdown.

Due to Covid funding Patterns are changing (favouring big 'mainstream' orgs.

Pandemic

The final category, and underpinning many of the comments made in the other groupings, are the negative impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on DPO funding –

Our conference centre has to rebuild from being closed, losing £45k income a year

How Long Can You Continue?

36 people answered the question How long do you feel you can continue with the funding you currently have in place/expect to be receiving? E.g. 0-6mths, 6-12 mths etc

Here I have grouped them into four categories as follows. With the largest first –

More than 12 months

18 people answered that they thought they could last twelve months or more. one person answered "indefinitely", while another stated

we are fully sustainable as far as i am aware. varous funding comes and goes-we continue

The majority of those who answered said they were reliant on finding appropriate funding for their sustainability -

We have made a reasonable surplus this year due to covid relief funding which would be enough to cover a deficit next year. Any further than that is hard to see but more difficult if funding doesn't pick up.

12 months

9 people said they would be able to last for the next 12 months, with one saying

12 months of guaranteed

One person said

DPO Future Concerns

If the contract continues, we are financially viable at present, so at least 12 months. This reflects the continuous state of uncertainty in which these organisations operate.

Less than 12 months

7 DPOs said they had less than 12 months funding secured, with two of these stating they could only see “0-6 months” into the future, financially.

Unsure

Two organisations could not state with any certainty how long they would be able to keep going for –

An unknown, at this point. It will very much depend on whether the local council will fund this new Covid work with the LA moneys announbnced in the budget statement. Without an injection of £30-40k, all our projects would end and most staff have to be made redundant i.e. we'd be down to one person, half-time until our reserves run out.

If we get the Lottery Funding, very long term. if not 4 months?

Local Authority Recognition

Question 24 asked

Do you feel you have been recognised as a key organisation to engage with by your Local Authority/Health Authority, given the impact of Covid on disabled people in particular?

35 answered, with 21 saying Yes, 14 saying No.

Question 25 asked

If Yes, in what way?

21 DPOs answered, with twelve talking about how they had helped with the local ‘Pandemic Management’, in a range of ways –

Carried out weekly Safe and Well checks with over 7000 disabled people each week to make sure they were ok, supported the CCG/LA with the PA vaccine roll out and supported with plain English/accessible communications and supported delivery of PPE

CCG, LA and WECA turned to us almost immediately - but not paid for engaging with them. They asked for our involvement in pandemic management, to aid them around accessibility and accessible communications, for equalities perspective on lockdown easing plans towards the end of the first lockdown, to hear our views when they wanted to make temporary increases to pedestrian space in shopping areas a permanent thing; etc. However, our LA has (partly retrospectively) provided two lots of largely unrestricted funding in recognition of the support we are providing to CEV Disabled people that is otherwise unfunded.

During this pandemic it has become clear to some Local Authorities how essential DPOs are in relation to contacting disabled people, making information accessible to the people who most need it, and for direct referrals for individuals –

Local Authority have relied on us as essential service making many referrals from COVID hub

DPO Future Concerns

We are classed as an essential service to local disabled people

Some DPOs are invited onto relevant boards and strategic groups to assist with the local Covid response, again recognised for their specialist knowledge in relation to local disabled populations –

i was not sure it is a yes or a no...i sit on most of the strategic COVID groups but in the context of our major county wide engagement commissioned work and to represent the VCSE as well as disability and Deaf people

Included as key partner in contact with at risk customers and PAs and assist with PPE distribution and recently getting vaccine appointment information to cutomers' PAs at the same time as other front-line workers working with people in their own homes.

The roll-out of PPE and Personal Assistant (PA) vaccines became vital, as these staff became recognised as essential workers. DPOs were ideally placed to help in this –

Work in close partnership e.g. co-ordinated roll out of vaccines for PAs. We also sit on a number of boards hosted by the LA to support response and recovery

The pandemic created new, and strengthened more established, networks and connections, which included local DPOs –

Healthwatch and Engaging Kent have been asking for our experience on a very regular basis.

Included in steering groups, stakeholder groups, expert panels etc.

Involved in emergency borough wide discussions

Involvement in general voluntary work and through maintaining our usual contacts with the council.

This pandemic represented an opportunity for DPOs to demonstrate their expertise and local knowledge, which might lead to longer-term engagement with their Local Authorities as well as other voluntary sector organisations on other issues into the future –

We support the local voluntary sector and have been a key player in the local response

Four of the DPOs used this as an opportunity to talk about their funding issues –

Funding to provide additional services and increased engagement, better engagement with them

We have been supported with additional funding to provide a specialist service for Carers during the pandemic. Despite being small we are also part of weekly Covid update meetings with larger providers and are recognised as having valuable input to make regarding disability issues

Funding has continued

DPO Future Concerns

Continuation funding provided. We have been contacted to raise awareness with regard to Vaccinations, the Census 2021 and Substance misuse services.

If this recognition and funding can continue then the future stability of DPOs might be better assured.

DPOs talked about how their Local Authority had recognised them for their expertise in relation to information and advice provision –

Direct Payments, Welfare Benefits, Youth and Peer Support

One DPO said how they circulate the information they receive from their council to a wider audience –

I receive constant informative e mails from my colleagues at South Gloucestershire council, which I can send on to people with some technology. Or post off information to other colleagues.

Two of the DPOs talked about how they had been sought for the wellbeing advice and support offered to disabled people –

extra support to the community

We have provided 3 local authorities with their front-line access to disabled people in receipt of Direct Payments to manage their care, families of disabled children and a wide range of other disabled people. We have supported the creation of self-directed support plans and created risk appraisals to supply of existing care packages. We have completed welfare checks on behalf of our largest local authority. We have been responsible for the provision of PPE to PAs in our region. We have been responsible for ensuring PAs access vaccinations in our region. We have been publicly acknowledged for our work by the Local Authorities many times and have received both advanced and post-impact payments for our additional work

Only one DPO explicitly said that they had not been recognised locally –

Only by some people/organisations - some e.g. the CCG didn't seem to be aware of us still and organised an event for disabled people without our input, giving us very short notice to attend/publicise.

In general, DPOs seem to have been recognised as specialists in disability issues. Including for their provision of accessible information, by a range of bodies including Local Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups, Healthwatch, voluntary sector organisations and others.

DPO Role/Function

34 DPOs answered the question –

Has this pandemic made you think about the role and function of your organisation now and into the future? Have you thought about changing the things you do and the ways in which you do them?

The responses can be divided into two categories – those who talked about 'External', client/customer-facing elements of their organisation, and those who talked about the 'Internal', structural elements of their organisation.

External

Blended

By far the biggest category here is that of the eleven respondents who talked about providing a more 'Blended' service, with some elements being delivered online, and others face to face –

I think we have shown how flexible we can work to support people's needs looking to embrace mixed models to be more flexible in meeting beneficiary need

Yes. Ongoing offer of remote access to services as an option to all

Yes, more flexible working where appropriate, meeting with mixture of people present and accessing remotely, where this increases inclusion and does not further isolate (because it is less expensive) people with access requirements who want to attend in person.

Yes. We will continue to use some of the tools we've developed. However we remain very concerned about the digital divide and some of our clients who don't use the internet.

Yes. Some things will depend on the fall out from the pandemic on our service users. We are thinking about helping others to cope with the push towards digital but at the same time try and protect those who are digitally excluded.

This DPO flexibility is a real strength and asset for these organisations. In the same way as individual disabled people find new ways to achieve the things they wish to achieve, often discovering new ways around the societal barriers that hinder progress, the organisations run and controlled by them show similar flexibility and imagination to overcome the barriers created by this pandemic.

These DPO quotes sum up many of the concerns that have come up throughout this questionnaire. There are many disabled people who embrace digital technology, while many others do not – for access, financial, or other reasons.

Some DPOs had been heading down this Blended route for a while, before the pandemic –

Only in as much as it has furthered what was an organisational aim to provide more digitally, but was previously shelved as it was not what our members and customers wanted. Now that they have been forced to access many services this way a preference for blended digital and IRL services has emerged.

One DPO talked about how this has been an opportunity to reimagine their provision –

Yes - unlikely that all aspects of services will need to return to face-to-face. and we are likely to re-imagine how we use our premises to support organisations who think like us.

Not all 'Blended' provision needs to involve digital service access. It can be possible to deliver some services through the telephone, as well as face-to-face –

DPO Future Concerns

It has been easier to talk to people over the phone, especially people with mental health problems, but it does not help during a medical assessment

In combination, the delivery of services in new ways can help a DPO to reach more people than the provision of services through more 'traditional' methods –

Yes, the impact has been hard on disabled people but we have been able to reach a wider number of disabled people than previously and want to ensure we build on that engagement, we have also worked with other organisations in different ways and have developed new links with DPOs nationally

One DPO, providing advocacy services, said –

Yes, we will close down as we cannot deliver our services online

No

Six DPOs stated that the pandemic has not made them think about the role and function of their organisation, though one of these did say –

no - because we have been able to provide services remotely

One DPO looks forward to a return to their core business, of bringing disabled people together again –

No we run a voluntary group of disabled people, carers and anyone with an interest in disabilities who mostly who have been shielding. We hope to meet up in the future. Our group run well like this allowed time out of peoples homes to meet up with friends and colleagues locally.

Two DPOs had answered this question from the perspective of their core external activities, which they do not see as changing, even though the method of delivery might alter –

Not fundamentally but may maintain some of the social networking side of what we've developed during the pandemic

Some of them but our core service will always want people to see them in person

Proactive

Two of the DPOs talked about the need to be more proactive –

we will not go back to a fully reactive service for IAG, will become more proactive trying to reach the most isolated disabled people

The biggest 'wake up' call has been around inequality that have been shown up by the pandemic, we want to ensure we are proactive in addressing this in Wiltshire

Unknown

Finally, one DPO said they did not yet know how their organisations would be affected in the longer term –

We are still not sure how the future will be. It doesn't feel like we are out the other side yet.

Internal

DPO Future Concerns

Blended

Blended provision is also the largest category when DPOs talked about their internal, organisational processes, with five responses, including the following –

We had been waiting til we could afford a good quality video-conferencing kit (codec, cameras, mics etc) to open our work up to those who want to access it remotely. The pandemic pushed us into going ahead. Whilst this is good on one level, without a good quality video-conferencing set up, those with poor quality PCs/webcams/phones etc are effectively excluded because they can hear what's being said clearly enough. Ditto re: visual quality. In addition, the increased commitment to speeding up action to address the climate crisis has led us to get very involved in this area of work, with regard to ensuring whatever strategy and actions agreed are inclusive of Disabled people (and, ideally, based on universal design principles) from the very start.

The changes to the IT system means we have more flexibility of staff to work from home. We plan to continue with a mix of home and office working after the pandemic. The use of Teams and Zoom have increased our ability to attend meetings, etc and we delivered a DET course to a DPO in London. Something we wouldn't have done before as it would not have been cost effective for either organisation.

Online meetings have worked well though so it would be good to continue those, though it will likely be felt that they aren't inclusive enough so we may do a mix of online and in person.

As well as the technical and IT changes made during the pandemic, there are also changes to working practices that might stay in place –

definitely work balance - some days at the office, some days at home
issues on working from home; remote working;

Normal

Three DPOs said that the ways of working during the pandemic were their 'normal' ways of working anyway –

We were really ready for lockdown as this is how many of us leave our lives, rarely leaving home and working from bed is our normal.

One DPO described its working practice as –

continually evolving in any case.

Uncertain

Three of the DPOs declared that they were uncertain about the way they will work into the future –

We are currently developing our post-covid strategy in response to recent consultation with our service users about their future needs.

Yes -we are completing and evaluation with the support of DPO Covid Emergency Fund with a view to reassessing our delivery, looking at a new strategy and developing a new business plan

Yes: fundamental restructuring of society and funders (favouring mainstream)
we expect to cease to exist

Youth

One DPO used this question to talk about involving younger disabled people –

When covid 19 restrictions allow we intend to host some Kickstart trainees,
especially young people with disabilities

Mentoring

One DPO said how they were undergoing mentoring to help them into the future –

It has brought home the need to be better prepared, we are currently working
with a CVS mentor to strengthen our planning and looking at other areas
needing modernisation.

Conclusions

Despite the longevity, and depth of changes required by this pandemic, the majority of these DPOs do not have a sense of the need to fundamentally reassess the nature or function of their organisations. The responses to the other questions demonstrate how flexible and responsive to local needs most DPOs have been during this time. Many have been called on by their Local Authorities and Health bodies to help reach local disabled people, who might otherwise miss out on services and provision that can help navigate the pandemic.

Disabled people often find themselves having to navigate difficult processes in their daily lives at the best of times. Despite the existence of anti-discrimination legislation since 1996 much statutory, business and voluntary sector provision is still inaccessible to many disabled people. Everyday life presents barriers to inclusion at every turn.

The ability to negotiate these barriers can mean that organisations run and controlled by disabled people are able to negotiate through the pandemic by being responsive, agile and inclusive. These organisations have more than demonstrated their value right now.

ⁱ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00625-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00625-5/fulltext)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/publications-and-technical-guidance/mental-health-and-covid-19#:~:text=As%20the%20coronavirus%20pandemic%20rapidly,also%20expected%20to%20rise.>