Disabled People's Organisations Sharing Experiences During Covid 19

Project Report 1 – Disabled Peoples' Organisations Staffing

June 2021

Contents

Executive Summary

- As a cohort these DPOs –
  - employ more non-disabled than disabled people in full-time roles
  - employ more disabled than non-disabled people in part time roles
  - have more than 75% of trustees who are disabled people
- Many of the staff and volunteers within DPOs are disabled people, who have been shielding or self-isolating during this pandemic
- Most of these DPOs did not use the government Furlough scheme
- During the pandemic the changed use of DPO premises and services impacted on staff and volunteers, with some roles shifting dramatically
- Much Covid-specific pandemic funding, from whatever source, is short-term and does not provide DPOs with any long-term financial security. Although an organisation might therefore expand in size and staffing during the pandemic, it might return to its pre-pandemic size, or even shrink, thereafter
- Covid has made DPOs develop in new directions whilst also contracting in others
- Due to constant changes in funding for DPOs it is difficult to maintain staff, and the Cultural Capital of these organisations is always changing over time – it can be difficult to build a long-term, consistent depth of knowledge and understanding throughout the organisation
- For some DPOs there has been an increase in Local Authority recognition, in recognition that they are the best placed organisations to meet the needs of the local disabled population. This LA recognition might be seen as an unforeseen positive outcome of the pandemic
- Pandemic-specific DPO services included Wellbeing services for disabled people
- Some DPOs conducted holistic assessments on their own organisation to help their home workers
- For many disabled people their work with a DPO might be their main route to social contact, especially those who are living alone. Working from home can lead to increased feelings of isolation and social exclusion
- Several DPOs provided extra support to increase positive staff mental health whilst working from home
- Key to staff support for many DPOs is regular contact, including regular virtual team meetings
- DPOs recognise the 'gaps' in human contact that are created by working remotely
- There is a recognition of the need to support staff members to be tailored to meet individual needs
- Zoom seems to have become a staple for the way DPOs work, both internally with staff as well as externally with clients
- Effective, and safe, homeworking requires tech, a range of software, and new or updated organisational policies
- Clients/Customers, staff and volunteers need to be certain that the new ways of working maintain security and confidentiality
- By far the most mentioned software here was Zoom.

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 people[i], 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 was issuing new deadlines about when it would be safe to open and go back to work.

Many disabled people were experiencing increased mental health difficulties[ii] 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 staff issues during the pandemic.

Staff Numbers

We took this questionnaire as an opportunity to ask some general staffing questions, as well as specific questions about DPO staff during the pandemic.

We asked four questions to understand about DPO staff before and during the pandemic. We asked about disabled and non-disabled paid staff and volunteers 'Before Covid' and 'Now' (Feb/March 2021), and gathered the following data –

35 DPOs answered these questions.

DPO Staff	Disabled People		Non-Disabled People	
	BC	NOW	BC	NOW
Full time paid staff	85	84	102	102
Part time paid staff	126	124	86	94

DPO Staff	Disabled People		Non-Disabled People	
Full time volunteers	9	4	13	15
Part time volunteers	271	165	183	174
Trustees	184	180	52	41

BC = Before Coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic does not seem to be having a major impact on the numbers of paid DPO staff, though it has impacted on the numbers of part-time volunteers.

It is interesting to note the following from these figures –

- As a cohort these DPOs employ more non-disabled than disabled people in full-time roles
- The same DPOs employ more part time disabled than non-disabled people in part time roles
- The total figures in March 2021 are 208 full and part time disabled staff members, vs. 196 full and part time non-disabled staff members. This is approximately a 50/50 split between disabled and non-disabled staff populating Disabled Peoples' Organisations
- There are more non-disabled than disabled people used by these DPOs as volunteers
- In accordance with basic definitional characteristics of DPOs more than 75% of trustees, within this cohort as a whole, are disabled people.

Staff Changes

We asked these organisations

> If the number of staff you employ or have as volunteers has changed during this pandemic, why is this so? e.g. Have you started or lost contracts? Have staff stopped working due to Covid? etc.

29 DPOs answered this question

This has been a complex time in relation to DPO staffing and volunteering. These organisations described the 'usual' DPO issues of contracts ending, as well as the 'usual' issues of staff ill health, neither of which they described as 'covid related'.

However, during the pandemic the roles of DPO volunteers have shifted dramatically without a physical building to go to. Traditionally many of the DPO roles filled by volunteers are office-based, and because offices are being used less consistently, with many people working from home, or out in the community, the need for these volunteer roles has decreased or changed.

This complexity is illustrated well by one DPO response –

> During the period we had 1 staff member who resigned due to ill-health not covid related. We have increased our staffing levels due to covid-19 related

funding we have secured, mainly short term though some has been extended into 2021/22. A couple of our volunteers have not been engaged in volunteering due to the remote nature of the work however we have increased the number of volunteers supporting in particular our self advocacy group that has been running a number of sessions on zoom

There were five emergent themes from the responses to this question, however it is not strictly possible to separate them neatly – most responses contained two or even three of the emergent themes in their answers.

The biggest theme to emerge, with ten responses, was that these DPOs have been dealing with 'normal' levels of staff turnover during the pandemic –

> 2 left because of uncertainty about future funding, more are thinking about leaving.

> Contracts come to an end

> New contracts, some staff retired, recruited new volunteer roles

Many DPOs operate in a very fluid, dynamic and responsive way, dependent on relatively small-scale, intermittent, short term funding streams from a variety of sources. DPOs can create specific projects in response to funding becoming available, which then stop operating when that funding runs out. This means that DPOs are constantly expanding and contracting as staff come and go.

For many DPOs this means it is always difficult to maintain staff, it means that the Cultural Capital of these organisations is always changing, and it means that it can be difficult to build a depth of knowledge and understanding throughout the organisation as staff come and go –

> We lost one contract in August 2020, which meant ending two fixed-term contracts and reducing the hours for a full time employee into a redeployed post.

The second theme to emerge from this question related to the volunteers in the DPOs, with seven of these DPOs talking about this. The first key theme here is how the changing use of DPO premises and services has impacted on staff and volunteers –

> Initially, volunteer had to stop coming in as we had reduced number of staff in office and no support was available.

The second theme relates to how many of the volunteers used by DPOs are disabled people, many of whom have been self-isolating during this pandemic –

> Volunteers are disabled and been shielding for whole time.

Because DPOs are voluntary sector organisations they have a Board of Trustees, or a Management Committee, the majority of whom are disabled people –

> Lost 1 trustee for too ill health and all volunteers due to Covid restrictions

It is important to be able to maintain a consistent governing team in order to maintain and develop organisational Cultural Capitals, including in how the DPO operates, the services it offers, and the understandings underpinning the organisation.

The next emergent theme, with six responses, is that of organisational growth, in response to the pandemic, the changing needs of local disabled people and the consequent need to provide new services –

> We have secured additional funding during Covid for short term covid specific projects.

One DPO reported how Covid had both helped them expand in one direction whilst contracting in another –

> We have won new contracts which have increased the number of employees slightly. We have been unable to continue delivery of our young people's befriending service during the pandemic leading to a significant loss of volunteers - the majority of whom were non-disabled

For some DPOs there has been an increase in Local Authority support, in recognition that they are best placed to meet the needs of the local disabled population –

> our local authority has been financially very supportive, providing two lots of money for core funding of anything that benefits… Disabled people. Given that everything we do benefits them (as well as others) it is effectively unrestricted. In addition, we persuaded them to also provide funding for us to produce a Coronavirus newsletter for digitally excluded Disabled people, and given us part of their Winter Fund allocation to support… people over the winter.

In some Local Authority areas this recognition might be an unforeseen positive outcome of the pandemic, as the DPOs gain local recognition.

Much of this Covid-specific pandemic funding, from whatever source, is short-term and does not provide the DPOs with any long-term financial security. Although an organisation might therefore expand in size and staffing during the pandemic, it will return to its pre-pandemic size, or even shrink, thereafter.

Some of the key work that was provided by many DPOs during the pandemic was described by one DPO –

> We launched an emergency volunteer project (to deliver food, medicine and other essentials to isolated disabled people)

Other emergency pandemic services included several DPOs phoning isolated disabled people every week to have a chat and provide company.

Three of the DPOs talked about the Covid limitations in relation to staffing that they were experiencing –

> We are only having limited people that are not at risk of Covid due to their disabilities

> We had to stop one project, we couldn't deliver it due to Covid-19

During this time many disabled people were living in increased fear, with increased levels of mental distress, as news reports relayed that over two thirds of UK Covid deaths were disabled people.

Staff Furlough

We asked the question

How many staff have you furloughed at present?

36 DPOs answered this question as follows –

- 28 said 0 ('at present'), with one adding 'but we have furloughed 4 people in total'.
- 5 said 1
- 2 said 2
- 1 said 4

We then asked

Do you intend to continue to employ them after this pandemic?

Yes – 20

No - 2

Staff Support Needs

Later in the questionnaire we talked about life during the pandemic, and asked –

In what ways have you recognised the support needs of your staff, particularly home workers, at this time?

35 DPOs answered.

Four DPOs talked about the holistic assessment they appear to have conducted on their own organisation to help home workers –

Assesed each person's situation regarding private space to work in, equipment needed, current reasonable adjustments and if others are required, childcare and carers of family member, shielding employee and/or family member, mental health issues of working in isolation. Set up quarterly anonymised engagement surveys and responded to these. Joined NHS Mindful Employer Helpline.

Provided a 512GB tablet and data sim to an existing member of staff; got the two new staff to apply for ATW funding. Enabled staff to varying their hours somewhat, according to their needs. Now bringing them in once a week (max 2 people in office) to address the isolation some expressed. Also all the usual PPE, providing perspex sheets round desks, etc.

Completed individual H&S assessments, bought office equipment and IT equipment, done tea breaks and social events weekly, organised monthly reflective practice sessions, set up a buddy system, training for 3 staff in MHFA and all staff in mental health awareness.

We try to build in regular contact with each other. We have increased supervision time recognising the need to replace what would have happened in a more relaxed way in the office, also client issues involving more stress. Incorporate some chat time in meetings , particularly for those who live alone and are isolated as a result. Managing some Covid safe face to face whenever possible. Staff Whats app group including Covid Happy pictures eg new puppies, grandchildren, scenic photography etc

This depth of understanding of the range of issues faced by DPO home working staff is impressive, and demonstrates some of the added value that working for a DPO can being to staff members.

Nine of the DPOs discussed the need for Wellbeing support for their staff –

> Co-Chairs have reached out to volunteers to provide any support needed. Management team meeting more regularly.

Several of these DPOs talked about the extra support required for good mental health of staff working from home –

> We have funding in place for staff to receive counselling. Increased number of Zoom staff meetings and regular catch ups. Some staff members have really struggled especially those who have also been shielding.

> People who have access to work in place have made arrangements to have PAs in their homes. We recognise effects on wellbeing , so have invested a lot in team and peer support, with regular informal meetings and 'keeping in touch' activities with the whole organisation. We also commissioned Bath Mind to do a whole team wellbeing session

For many disabled people their work with a DPO might be their main route to social contact, especially those who are living alone. Working from home can lead to increased feelings of isolation and social exclusion. Some DPOs recognise this and put mechanisms in place to support these people –

> We have done many different support systems to help welfair, including staff lunches online and weekly welfair meetings

Key to this support for many DPOs is regular contact –

> Regular commuunication. Maintaining informal/social contact between staff.

One DPO recognised their role in supporting their staff –

> supportive meeting

All this support for staff takes place through a range of apps and software –

> Regular contact, Whats App groups, Zoom

> Set up whatsapp group to keep connected. Shared wellbeing resources. Developing future online resources.

Above all else it seems the regularity of personal and social support serves to bridge the gap between the individual and the 'outside world'. While DPOs clearly have this role for their clients it is interesting to see they also take this responsibility on board for their staff.

Seven of the DPOs that answered this question talked about the importance of regular team meetings to maintain this support –

> We regularly survey all staff about home working. All teams meet virtually on a daily basis. Meeting people's access and other needs which arise from homeworking is a key discussion point in monthly one-to-ones

Of course in an office environment 'daily meetings' take place as a matter of course, either formally to discuss the work taking place, or informally over a cup of coffee or during a lunch break. This informal 'work' has been much missed during the pandemic and has the potential to have one of the biggest negative impacts on DPO workings, and is something that requires conscious effort to maintain when home working –

Regular team meetings have been used. Staff are in constant contact with each other. Trustees and management have recognized that homw workers may have others at home to whom they have responsibilities and have been flexible in their expectations regarding home working.

DPOs appear to understand the value of their workers in a range of different ways, from the valuable work they are paid to do, to the value of maintaining positive physical and mental health as far as possible –

Regular virtual team meetings and catch ups, encouragement to take more breaks, introduce flexibility of work patterns.

Zoom seems to have become a staple for the way DPOs work, both internally with staff as well as externally with clients –

very regular staff meetings via zoom, offering counselling services

These staff meetings will help maintain staff morale, as well as to monitor the projects that are not working so well during this crisis –

yes, some of the projects couldn't meet the targets, for example, employment support, work placements. we have a regular staff meeting every week that helps a lot

Five of the DPOs talked about the tech that is required to facilitate this new working environment –

Puchased new tech, regular catch ups, use of remote systems like Zoom.

This will have created additional costs for DPOs, though there were funding streams available for those lucky enough to secure them. The use of relevant tech will also require "skills audits" for staff to ensure they are able to get the most from the new equipment.

There are also, of course, a range of other costs associated with this equipment and remote working –

We have paid mobile phone bills for staff and for additional internet costs as required. We have also asked all staff if they need any reasonable adjustments to work from home. Two staff are shielding and have been able to work from home for the duration of the pandemic.

Six DPOs discussed the need for "maintaining good communication" when staff are remote working –

As a small team we constantly communicate and any needs are identified before they become an issue.

By ringing them in between and giving them relevant information.

This depth of communication recognises the 'gaps' in human contact that are created by working remotely.

At least two DPOs described how they had changed their organisational processes to accommodate the needs of home working –

Moved staff meetings to weekly (previously monthly) All staff have dedicated work mobiles and computers

Risk Assessment drawn up and 'revisited'.

Above all else, throughout these DPO questionnaires, there is a recognition of the need for all support to their staff members to be tailored to meet individual needs –

> Flexibility with working hours to accommodate home schooling/other commitments and the ability to work from the office if any home workers were feeling isolated

One DPO stated that –

> all homeworking staff are paid a non taxable allowance towards additional utility costs

While one said –

> I am the only paid staff member. No support has been mentioned by trustees.

Home Working Systems

31 DPOs answered the following question –

> What systems have you put in place to enable staff to work from home?

12 DPOs talked about the systems they had put in place.

The software that these DPOs listed as useful are as follows –

- Zoom
- BT One Phone
- Podio CRM
- Google suites
- Google forms
- more use of social media
- our website
- mailchimp
- remote email
- drop box
- MS 365.

Many of these DPOs, throughout this questionnaire, have described how –

> all phone and internet systems work from home the same as they would in office setting

> We have set it up that all staff can remote in to their work stations which gives them the same access to all systems and documents as if they were in the office. Because of the nature of the work some staff have to visit the office daily so we have a rota in place to avoid contact between them.

This obviously makes remote and homeworking more viable, and going to the office much safer.

Two DPOs described how they had updated their organisational policies –

> Homeworking policy, updated expenses policy and process, admin processes for staff going into the office

> refresher cyber security training. Covid Health & Safety Policy and Risk Assessment

One DPO said they had –

upgraded secure ICT system and purchased new phone system that can be operated by lap top or handset. Tech 'savvy' team members helping other team members use new systems. Supported customers to download and use Skype or Zoom and take part in online meetings and PA interviews.

It is also important to remember the basic issues –

changed phone message, developed website

One DPO also mentioned their wellbeing group and other staffing issues here –

Video conferencing, daily meetings, supplying all access equipment that was available in the office, wellbeing group

11 DPOs talked about technology in this question –

Ensuring everyone had laptop of similar to work on at home, provision of mobile phones, some staff have duplicated AtW equipment

This range of kit will amount to a considerable expense for the organisations. Many DPOs, particularly the smaller ones, operate with little or no income, and for some this extra expense will have been too much.

The key equipment mentioned by these DPOs is –

- Laptops
- Mobile phones
- Sharepoint folders
- Printers
- Copiers
- Scanners.

"Regular meetings" take place between staff, including one-to-one and group/team meetings.

Paramount in all this is ensuring that –

Provision of secure IT and storage systems have been made.

Clients/Customers, staff and volunteers need to be certain that the new ways of working maintain security and confidentiality.

One DPO said

Agreed roles around referrals and managing workload.

Clarity and structure are important within organisations at all times, but especially if working remotely.

Six DPOs stated how 'normal' home and remote working already are for their organisations -

just expanded what we were already doing re flexible/home working in discussion with staff

Nothing has changed, already doing this.

the systems were mainly already in place

By far the most mentioned software here was Zoom –

daily zoom meeting to ensure staff are supported both with work but also the social aspect of work.

Conclusions

The key recurring themes throughout the DPO responses in relation to their staff, not surprisingly, are those relating to remote working, including staff wellbeing, and the systems/technology required. The questionnaire responses reinforce the ideas of the flexibility and fluidity of these organisations during this time of extreme pressure.

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[i] 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.