

The Connection Covid-19 Client Consultation

The Connection's Covid-19 Client Consultation took place over a period of two weeks in September and October 2020. We received a total of 76 responses, 61% of the respondents were current clients of The Connection. Case workers supported their clients to complete the questions either over the phone, online or on paper. In addition to this we ran five outreach shifts where two members of staff and a member of the Client Advisory Panel with lived experience spoke to people experiencing homelessness across Westminster. A member of the Leadership Team and a member of the Enterprise and Employment Team joined for one shift.

The data captures the perspectives of an array of people, some who are long standing clients of The Connection, some who are new to the service, some who have been sleeping outside for years with very limited contact with services and several who were newly homeless. Although we did capture the voice of some women and non-English speakers, they are underrepresented in the findings. The survey was translated into Polish, Spanish and Romanian but we did not receive any responses to our translated survey.

We identified two key groups in the data - those who were currently sleeping rough or had very temporary accommodation arrangements (e.g. sofa surfing) (**36%**) and those who were either in short or long term accommodation (**64%**). We have drawn comparisons between these two groups in parts of our analysis.

The Impact of the Pandemic

'I lost my job as a chef and today have lost my accommodation. This is my first night out.'

– A man who lost his hospitality job during the pandemic.

The four main ways the pandemic has affected the lives of the people we spoke to are:

- Reduced access to services such as day centres, libraries and job centres.
- Negative impact on mental health such as increased loneliness and isolation.
- Difficulties accessing NHS support and lack of face to face contact.
- Unemployment either through losing a job and/or being unable to find work.

People reported being unable to access basic services such as food, showers and laundry. Having little or no access to the internet left people unable to maintain their Universal Credit claims. The isolation people felt seemed to be compounded by being unable to access groups, activities, volunteering and employment support. Current social distancing measures add to the homeless community's ostracisation as library spaces need to be booked online, businesses refuse to accept cash payments and, as one person highlighted, *'you need a smart phone just to go to the pub'*.

'Made me more withdrawn and isolated. I don't have the art room to go to and have no routine or structure in my day. I don't meet people. I have no space to socialise or places to go to meet others.'

– A former client living in housing association accommodation.

'There's zero activities, just searching for food like a pigeon or a rat.'

– A former client who is currently rough sleeping.

Two out of the 76 people spoke about the pandemic impacting them in a positive way as they had been moved into accommodation.

“I was rough sleeping then I went into a hotel and now I am in housing.”

What services are needed now?

We asked people what services they felt are required now that we have come out of lockdown but are still in the midst of the pandemic. The table below shows how people who were rough sleeping and people who were accommodated prioritised the services they feel they need the most now:

	Rough Sleeping	Accommodated
1	Showers	Mental Health Support
2	Housing Support	Internet Access
3	Laundry	Physical Health and NHS
4	Food	Groups and Activities
5	Internet Access	Volunteering Opportunities
6	Employment Advice	Housing Support
7	Physical Health and NHS	Food
8	Volunteering Opportunities	Employment Advice
9	Tenancy Support	Laundry
10	Mental Health Support	Showers
11	Immigration Advice	Drug and Alcohol Support
12	Drug and Alcohol Support	Immigration Advice

A number of people mentioned the need for support for people once they have been housed in order to prevent them from developing mental health difficulties and/or returning to the streets. One client described how important that support can be:

“It seemed like all I needed was housing and a job. When I got housed I became depressed, isolated more other issues came out which were not expected drinking more, & depression. I then needed a lot of help to get me back on track.”

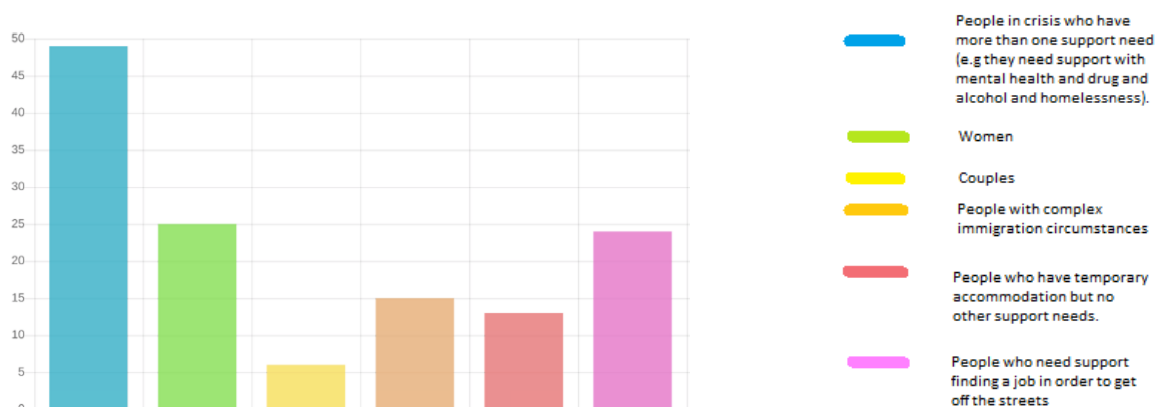
Some people talked of the benefits of homelessness organisations working together to provide support to more people. During the pandemic organisations such as St Mungo’s, Westminster and The Connection worked together to ensure everyone was provided with hotel accommodation for the nationwide lockdown. Partnership working was seen as a way forward by some respondents whilst others raised concerns about its effectiveness based on negative past experiences.

“Look at different aspects since the pandemic. Everything has changed so the day centres must change too. If you divide the work between the day centres it will work better for everyone.”

“I would get confused which day I was supposed to be at different places depends on how long I would have to travel.”

Who is most in need of our support?

‘Being homeless you're not a name, you're just a statistic. More support is needed.’



When asked to prioritise the groups of people who are most in need of support, the majority of respondents felt we should support people in crisis who have more than one support need. Women and people who need support finding a job to get off the street were voted in second and third. A number of people felt that support for migrants was a pressing need that should be addressed now in the light of the looming Brexit deadline:

“Immigration is a massive issue, especially come December because of Brexit. Immigration is a more complex issue. Once you deal with immigration you can move forwards.”

Two people highlighted the importance of supporting people with disabilities and people from the LGBTQ+ community who ‘are ostracized in the homeless community’. Notably, 10 people did not believe we could prioritise certain groups, ‘you can’t really choose. All people need help’.

The table below shows how people who were rough sleeping and people who were accommodated prioritised those who are most in need of support:

	Rough Sleeping	Accommodated
1	People in crisis who have more than one support need	People in crisis who have more than one support need
2	Women	People who need support finding a job in order to get off the streets
3	People who need support finding a job in order to get off the streets	People who have temporary accommodation but no other support needs
4	People with complicated immigration circumstances	Women
5	People who have temporary accommodation but no other support needs	People with complicated immigration circumstances
6	Couples	Couples

Conclusion

The pandemic has affected everyone in different ways. For the vast majority of homeless people in Westminster, the isolation and lack of access to services during the pandemic has had a significant impact on both their physical and mental health. However, for some people we spoke to the move to temporary hotel accommodation has enabled them to turn their lives around.

Many of our findings are reflected in research conducted by Groundswell during the pandemic from April to August 2020. The fortnightly briefings published on their website (groundswell.org.uk) capture the voices of people experiencing homelessness during Covid-19 as well as the staff working to support them. In their second briefing from 4th May they state: “Early insights show that some people’s essential needs are not getting met by the current responses to COVID-19. This includes insufficient income, lack of adequate, nutritious food and the significant reduction in access to non-COVID-19 medical support for those with a raft of existing health conditions”¹. Our findings show that these issues are ongoing in Westminster and highlight the need for basic services right now.

Whilst a significant number of people did not feel it was possible to prioritise certain groups of people, when pushed to consider who the most vulnerable groups were the majority felt that people in crisis with more than one support need would be most in need of support post lockdown. There was some recognition that people would need support finding jobs but also that there would be a significant lack of jobs available. Women were identified as a particularly vulnerable group.

These findings have helped us scratch the surface of people’s experiences during the first nationwide lock down and give an indication of the types of services that are needed now. They provide a basis from which we will work to delve deeper into our clients’ needs both in the immediate and long term future.

¹ <https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Fortnightly-Briefing-2-4.05.20.pdf>