



## **Supporting our clients**

*The impact of COVID 19 on refugees and those from refugee background in London*

**May 2020**

## Disproportionately affected employment levels

36% of respondents reported being furloughed compared to 27% across the UK\*.

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**45%**

of respondents reported that their needs had changed as a result of Covid-19

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**82%**

of respondents cited support with employment, higher education, training or English classes as one of their three most important needs

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## Young people have the lowest levels of digital access

Respondents above 36 years old were much more likely to report having a laptop (71%) than younger respondents (44%).

## Limited access to a remote, digitalised, workplace and service provision

54% of respondents reported access to a laptop, compared to 88% of the UK population having a PC and 67% having a laptop\*\*.

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**32%**

of respondents reported who were in work prior to the crisis, are now unemployed as a result of Covid-19.

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### The priority of needs were:

- Employment information, advice and guidance;
- financial support
- English classes
- information provision;
- support with digital access;
- relief of social isolation.

Respondents showed an increase in prioritisation of **training courses** and **housing support** when asked about future needs.

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Only  
**43%**

of clients have access to both a laptop and Wi-Fi in their home and most referral partner key informants were delivering the majority of their support over the phone.

## Introduction

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 England went into lockdown in response to the growing number of Covid-19 cases in the UK. As for much of the population, the lives and needs of people of refugee background underwent massive changes. Many refugee integration charities have adapted their services to deliver remotely to respond to continuing and emerging needs, while others were forced to suspend delivery.

Breaking Barriers<sup>1</sup> is a refugee integration charity with a vision that all people of refugee background in London are able to fulfil their potential and integrate into their new home through employment that matches their skills, experience, and aspirations. Prior to Covid-19, the charity had approximately 300 active clients<sup>2</sup>, all of whom were based in London and receiving employment, education, training, or volunteering support and/or education classes (English or IT). To better understand the changed needs of people of refugee background as a result of Covid-19, Breaking Barriers conducted a Needs Assessment of their active clients.

The assessment combined a quantitative survey with qualitative key informant (KI) interviews.

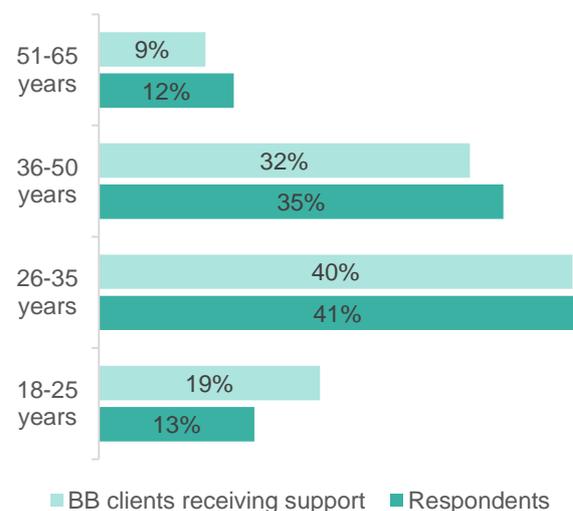
## Methodology

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey, disseminated via email. The survey was translated into five languages (Somali, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, and Tigrinya)

Qualitative data was collected through KI interviews conducted over the phone with referral partners and clients who are members of our Ambassador Council (an advisory group for the charity). Four referral partners and three clients were interviewed.

Over the course of three weeks in May 2020, the survey was sent to 339 people and had 113 respondents (33%).<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows that the age distribution of respondents closely mirrors that of the surveyed population, indicating only limited bias in responses by age group.

Figure 1: Respondents by age range compared to survey recipients



<sup>1</sup> <https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/>

\* ONS, Furloughing of workers across UK businesses, 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 5<sup>th</sup> April.

<sup>2</sup> 'Client' is the term used throughout this document to refer to the service users of Breaking Barriers and other charities.

<sup>3</sup> This is a little over the number of respondents we expected from a sample of this size given that it was sent out via email and no incentive for responding was provided.

\*\* Statista.com

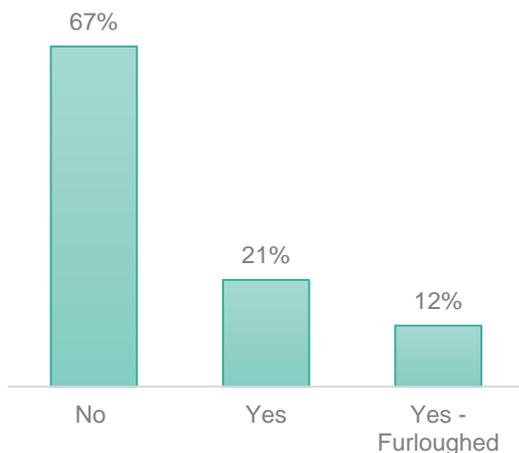
## Findings

### Employment

36% of respondents in employment were furloughed at the time of the assessment. This indicates that the proportion of our clients being furloughed is higher than the estimate for the UK (27% in April)<sup>4</sup>.

22% of the respondents not in work at the point of the survey say that they had lost employment due to Covid-19. When respondents that lost work due to Covid-19 are grouped with currently employed clients, the survey shows that 32% of respondents that were in work prior to the crisis are now unemployed as a result of Covid-19. Unemployment rates for the UK as a whole are expected to increase from 4% to 10% as a result of Covid-19<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, loss of employment due to Covid-19 is potentially substantially higher for people of refugee background than for the UK as a whole.

Figure 2: Respondents in employment



### Current Support Needs

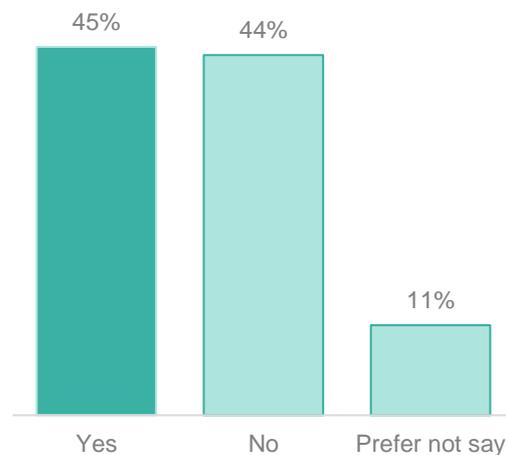
When interpreting these results, it is important to note that responses may be skewed by respondents' knowledge of Breaking Barriers' programmes (e.g. respondents may have been

<sup>4</sup> ONS, Furloughing of workers across UK businesses, 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 5<sup>th</sup> April.

<sup>5</sup> Statista.com

more likely to cite employment information, advice and guidance (IAG)<sup>6</sup> as a need than welfare support because they know this is an area Breaking Barriers has existing programmes to support with); however, the proportion of respondents citing financial support as an important need implies that any bias was small.

Figure 3: Has the respondents support needs changed as a result of Covid-19?



45% of respondents said that their support needs had changed as a result of Covid-19. Results on the primary needs of people from a refugee background differed between the qualitative and quantitative assessment methods, highlighting the importance of conducting both. The difference in results is likely due to bias caused by the response options given by the survey, survey recipients knowledge of the support that Breaking Barriers is able to provide them, and poor accessibility of the survey to people with low levels of computer literacy or limited internet access.

All KIs reported that the needs of people from a refugee background have changed as a result of Covid-19. The most cited emerging needs were:

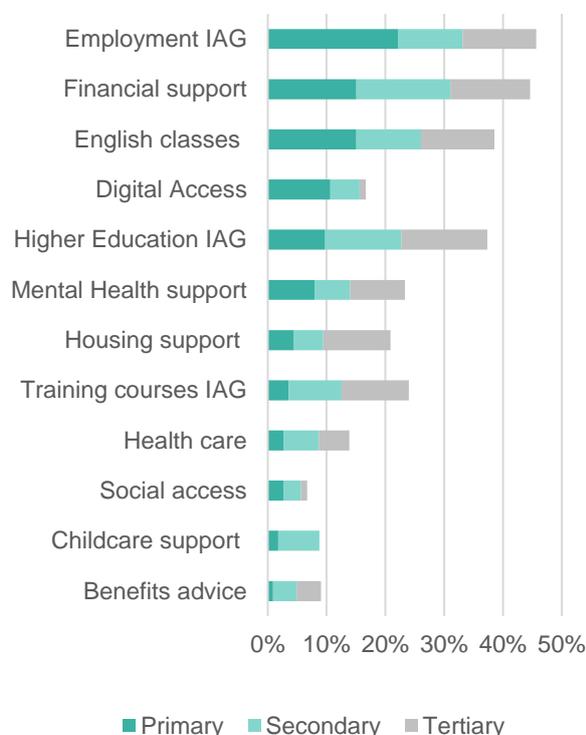
<sup>6</sup> IAG is a bespoke form of delivering employment advice. At Breaking Barriers IAG appointments are 1:1 support sessions where the client can receive advice on anything related to employment (e.g. CVs, job searching, cover letters)

- **Digital access** both in terms of distribution of devices and training in computer literacy.
- **Information provision:** on government advice and guidelines relating to Covid-19.
- **Social isolation** and the mental health problems and loneliness arising from it.
- **Financial pressures** with the price of many essential items increasing and stocks being low.

In the survey the most commonly cited first, second, or third priority support needs were (Figure 4):

- Employment IAG
- Financial support
- English classes

Figure 4: First, second and third most important support needs



Not all the results in this part of the survey are intuitive. Therefore, we have added further context to selected findings.

**Digital access:** Although support with digital access was the 4<sup>th</sup> most cited primary need, it was only cited by 16% of respondents as one of their three most important needs. In contrast, all referral partners KIs and the majority client KIs cited digital access as a major barrier to providing remote support to people of refugee background. All were conducting the majority of their delivery over the phone rather than through video conferencing technologies, due to the restricted access to laptops and WiFi of their clients.

Discrepancies in responses could be for a variety of reasons: respondents may not consider accessing charity services provided through technology as one of their primary needs, different interpretations of digital access, and respondents having higher levels of digital access than average (See the “Access to Technology” section for further details on levels of digital access).

**Mental wellbeing:** All KIs stated that people of refugee background are experiencing increased social isolation as a result of Covid-19. All referral partners interviewed are assuming, or experiencing directly, that this is resulting in people of refugee background having new, or exacerbated existing, mental health problems. Several are conducting regular welfare check-in calls with their clients to provide a consistent human touch point and space for people to voice their concerns.

Research on the relationship between mental health and unemployment also indicates that there are likely to be high levels of mental health problems among people of refugee background who have higher rates of unemployment than the general population. A meta-analysis has linked unemployment to symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety, and decreases in subjective wellbeing and self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> Covid-19 is thought to be increasing number of people experiencing mental health problems

<sup>7</sup> Paul KI, Moser K. Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses. J Vocat Behav. 2009

across the country, especially for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

Given KI responses and external research, the needs assessment results are showing a surprisingly low demand for social access (6%) and mental health support (19%). However, mental health needs are consistently under-reported and people may feel other types of support are more urgent or important for improving mental health (e.g. employment support, financial support, and English classes) than social access.

**Employability support:** Here employability support is defined as services that support with increasing access to employment, higher education, training, and volunteering, or English classes. 82% of respondents cited at least one of these employability support areas as one of their top three most important needs, indicating that although needs have changed as a result of Covid-19, the majority still have a desire to receive training or employment related support.

Referral partners have reported a reduction in clients actively seeking employment support, however, this is likely to be in part a response to the substantially reduced labour market and fears of potential health repercussions resulting from many of the forms of work available at this time.

However, the vast majority of KIs felt that Breaking Barriers' services that focused on upskilling clients would be vital for ensuring that levels of confidence and motivation to achieve goals does not decrease during this time of limited opportunities. Many felt that services providing training and volunteering opportunities require additional focus.

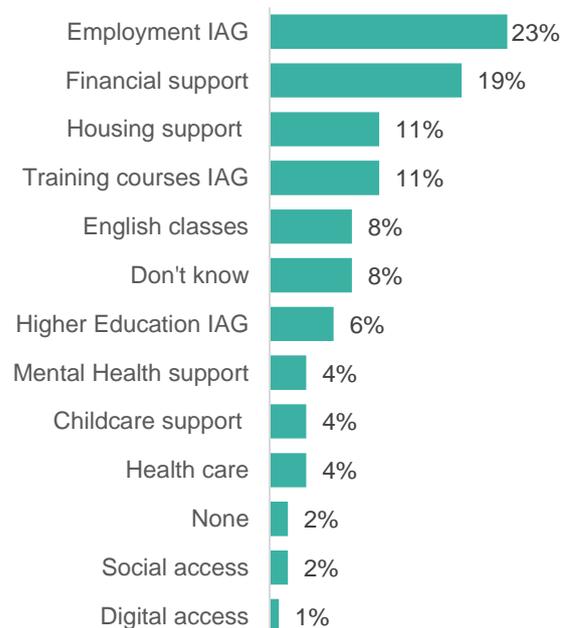
### Anticipated Support Needs

When asked to predict their primary need in 3-6 months (Figure 5), Employment IAG remains the most commonly cited primary need (20%-25%). However, overall predicted needs for 3-6

months' time vary quite a bit from current primary needs.

There is a sharp decrease in prioritisation of digital access, mental health, and English support, indicating that respondents are expecting to be able to access services face to face by this time. While an increase prioritisation can be seen for training courses and housing support.

Figure 5: Predicted primary need in 3-6 months' time

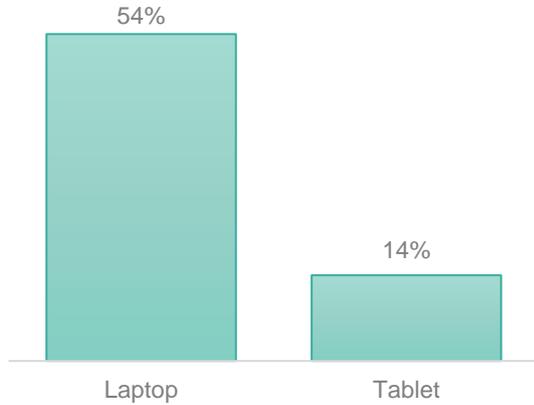


### Access to Technology

Referral partner KIs revealed that access to the internet and technology is a significant barrier to people of refugee background accessing charity services, with many charities providing the bulk of their support via phone and seeing reduced participation in activities held on video conferencing platforms. The survey responses supported this finding, with only 54% of respondents reporting having access to a laptop (Figure 6) and 58% reporting having access to a laptop and or a tablet.

<sup>8</sup> Mental Health Foundation, The COVID-19 pandemic, financial inequality and mental health, 2020

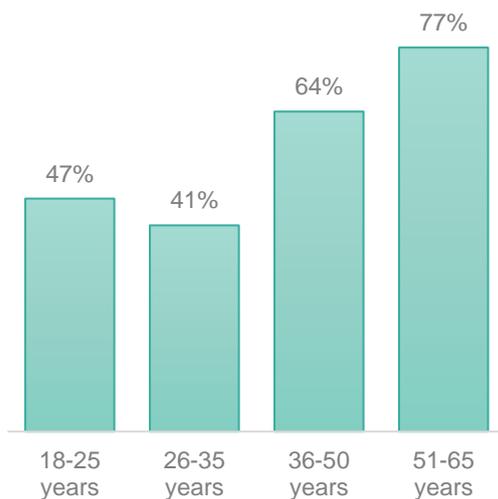
Figure 6: Access to technology



This is substantially lower than the estimate for the whole UK population, for whom it is estimated that 88% own a PC and 67% own a laptop<sup>9</sup>.

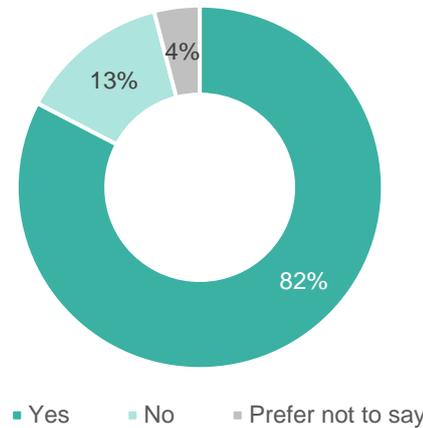
One referral partner reported that access to laptops has been noticeably better for their older clients who have family in the UK, than for younger clients who live alone. Results from our survey indicate a similar trend (Figure 7).

Figure 7: % of respondents with access to a laptop, by age



It is important to consider that many respondents reporting access to a laptop will be sharing that laptop with several family members and therefore access will be intermittent.

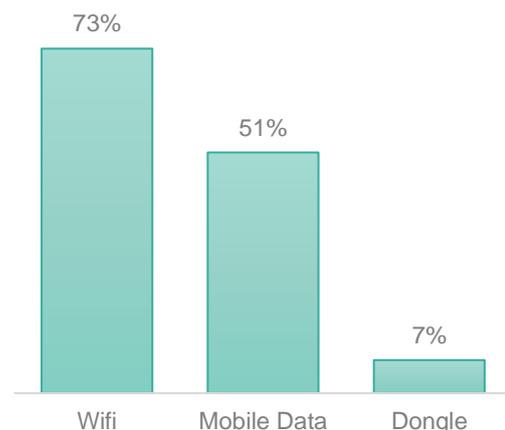
Figure 8: Respondents with access to internet in their homes



Positively, 82% of respondents had access to internet in their homes (Figure 8), and for these respondents the main source of internet was WiFi (Figure 9). Overall, only 60% of respondents reported access to WiFi in their home.

It is likely that survey recipients without access to internet in their homes were less likely to respond, and therefore access to WiFi figures here are artificially inflated.

Figure 9: For respondents with access to internet in their homes, the source(s) of internet available



Only 43% of respondents have access to both a laptop and Wi-Fi in their home. Of the remaining 11% of respondents with laptops, 9%

<sup>9</sup> Statista.com

have access to other forms of internet in their home (mobile data or dongle), and 2% have no access to internet in their home. These findings indicate that people of refugee background now face additional barriers to accessing employment and education, which are likely to have an increased reliance on digital access in the foreseeable future.

Many people with high levels of access to internet and technology, will not be confident using all aspects of a computer and therefore still may not be able to access charity services on video conferencing platforms without digital access support. One referral partner reported that distribution of technology to clients did not increase participation and this was assumed to be due to a lack of ability to use the relevant features.

It is important to note, that this survey was distributed by a link sent to Breaking Barriers' clients email; therefore, clients with very poor digital access and/or low levels of computer literacy are less likely to have answered the questionnaire than people with high digital access and good computer literacy.

## Conclusion

This assessment shows that the needs of people of refugee background have changed as a result of Covid-19. Many of the current needs of people of a refugee background are not being met due to how unprecedented and rapid the effects of Covid-19 have been, and the difficulties of meeting emerging needs through remote delivery.

With 32% of respondents who were in work at the start of the crisis losing their employment as a result of Covid-19 and 36% of respondents currently in work being furloughed, these findings indicate that people of refugee background are being hit disproportionately hard by the Covid-19 crisis. Further, we know that many of our client base come from low income

households and so are having increased expenditure on groceries due to stock shortages in supermarkets<sup>10</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that a high proportion of respondents highlighted employment and financial support as two of their most important needs.

Although in the quantitative survey digital access support was only cited as a priority need by 16% of clients, the finding that 57% of respondents do not have access to WiFi and a laptop suggests that people of refugee background have limited access to remote support services and an increasingly digitalised workplace. This new barrier is worst for young people (18-36 years) who have the lowest levels of access to technology and is likely to be exacerbated further by poor computer literacy resulting from a lack of regular access to computers.

Although the charity sector is doing its best to ensure accessibility to services for all, unless access to technology substantially improves for people of refugee background this marginalised group is likely to be disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 crisis in the long-term with even higher levels of unemployment and lower levels of education. To avoid a repetition of the 2008 recession, where overall BAME people experienced the negative effects more acutely than white people<sup>11</sup>, it is important that the sector works to improve access to support service, education.

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<sup>10</sup> A Which? Study found that 39% said it was because they were having to buy more-expensive brands or types of products, due to lack of choice.

<sup>11</sup> Iser (2015) The impact of the recession on the UK's ethnic minority groups



## Referral Partners Interviewed:

RefuAid  
Young Roots  
Helen Bamber  
Renaissi (RISE programme, funded by ESF  
and the National Lottery Community Fund)

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