

Heseltine Institute Blog Series

A perspective of Households into Work, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

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For me, as I'm sure it has been for many of you the last six weeks have been a challenge. I've found myself thinking through elements of my everyday life much more than I used to do for example grocery shopping has changed from popping into the shops on the way home to a well-planned once a week trip, reconciling myself to purchasing what's available rather than what I want. I think a bit more about my own health that of my family and for the first time in a while I've started to feel uncertain about what the future may look like.

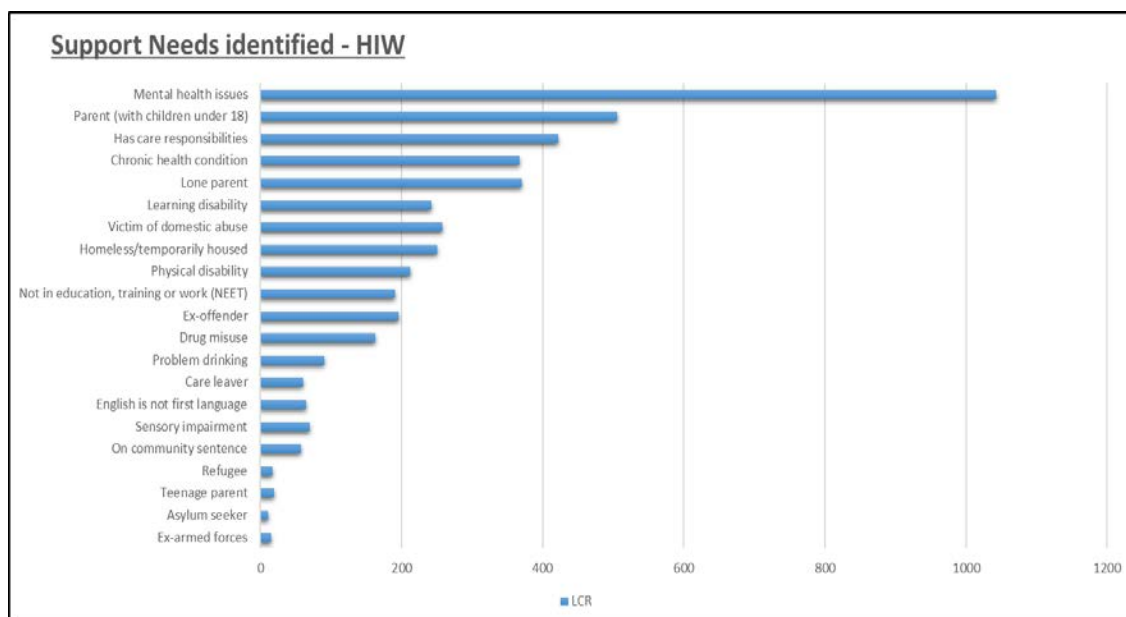
Despite these uncertainties I feel very lucky to have a home where I am comfortable, I can keep my cupboards stocked, I can put the heating on when I need to, I don't have to think through how I am going to do the household washing and I have access to digital resources to stay in touch with friends and family.

I am aware that these seem like very simple needs but at this time when it's so important to stay at home to protect yourselves and others from serious illness, imagine if your weren't able to be comfortable at home because you had to access a food bank, you couldn't afford to top the gas or electric meter up or you didn't have a working cooker?

In the last eighteen months my research on the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's (LCRCA) [Households into Work Programme](#) (HIW) has connected me with people in the Liverpool City Region for whom this type of hardship was and indeed for some of remains a reality. I have always believed that Households on the HIW programme have important stories to tell about the impacts of poverty but now with the publication of figures from the [Office of National Statistics](#) (ONS) indicating that despite the pronouncement by the Foreign Secretary the "virus is a leveller with the Prime Minister laid low" you are twice as likely to die from COVID-19 if you live in a deprived area, their stories have become even more significant.

Households into Work Background

From its inception HIW aimed to be different from other labour activation programmes, it wasn't seeking to work with those people who were "work ready" who may be able to move into employment with limited support or those who were well supported by other provision. It tried to engage those whose circumstances had pushed them to the edge of the labour market, their potential perhaps hindered by poor physical or mental health, the responsibilities of caring for others or maybe previous experience of addiction or abuse. The programme data shown below illustrates the circumstances of the participant group.



Figures provided by Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Though the data does not give a breakdown of specific issues, interviews with the Employment Advocates and Households indicate that participants have a wide range of mental and physical health issues including many of the underlying conditions which Public Health England have identified as making individuals vulnerable to COVID-19.

The programme recognised that the circumstances of one person were either reflective of or impacting upon others within the households, so for changes to be sustainable each participant known as a Householder was asked to invite others within their household to register on the programme so they could undertake the journey of change together, over the course of the pilot phase the definition of household grew wider to include those who may not live under the same roof but had a significant presence in each other's lives.

For twelve months the Households worked in partnership with an Employment Advocate, it was an opportunity to try new things, share experiences and take steps to overcome issues which had taken root in their lives. There was no fear of judgement or being punished for failing, if something didn't work they could try a different approach.

Over the course of my interviews I heard stories of resilience, personal renewal and hope for a better life. I learnt about what it was like to try to manage on benefits, the difficult daily choices that people have to make and the fear of not having the resources available to feed the family.

When we submitted our draft report about the programme to the Combined Authority in May 2019, we wrote the following about the Household Budget which was a resource to be used by the Employment Advocates to help stabilise the Households while they progressed towards the labour market.

"Though all costs which have been incurred to date are eligible under the programme terms and conditions, there may be some legitimate concern that that items purchased to support core living costs including fuel vouchers, food, basic hygiene and clothing should be provided from elsewhere within the benefits system."

We wrote this not because we thought the expenditure was in any way frivolous but to raise the issue that budget transactions and the interviews with the Households told us that without this resource many of those on the programme would have gone without the necessities required to maintain the most basic standard of living.

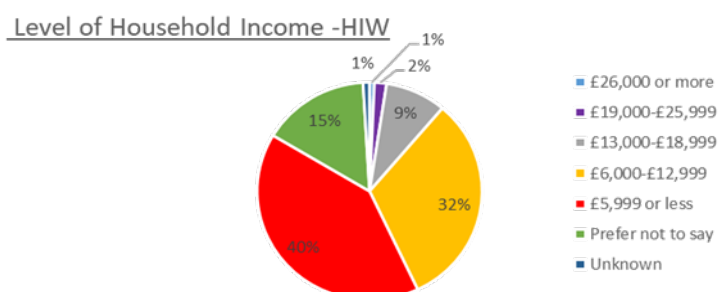
Examples of costs incurred included a second-hand cooker for a family whose cooker had been condemned, beds and bedding for a family, mobile phone top up to enable clients to remain compliant with Universal Credit and fuel vouchers as a member of a household had not received any hours from the agency they were registered with.

One interviewee told me the following about her own experience of trying to look after a family of five on her husband's job seekers allowance, when they joined the programme they had only basic food preparation facilities and no fridge:

"We have three kids and we were struggling with clothes for them, the house was empty, totally empty, we rent an empty house, and the children centre was worried that everything is fine and then they've just asked me if I would like to take part with this project and that was like, they saved us"

For this family the programme was a life line, within the first few months the father was able to get back into employment, the mother started training and she was volunteering with a charity.

I remember, after hearing the Households stories and seeing the programme data, thinking about the contradiction of how while we recognise that the only way out of poverty is by securing employment our society expects people who don't have a bed, cooker or clothes for interviews to be able to achieve this without support.



Figures provided by Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Now during the pandemic I wonder how people with such scarce resources and who may also have chronic health conditions can protect themselves against a virus which is circulating within communities. It's shocking to think that perhaps this scarcity of resource may be a contributing factor to the higher death rates from COVID-19 in areas which have higher levels of deprivation. The figures from the ONS showed that for deaths involving COVID -19 occurring between 1 March and 17 April 2020, the rate for the least deprived area was 25.3 deaths per 100,000 population compared to 55.1 deaths per 100,000 population in the most deprived areas.

What next?

In the next few weeks as previously planned I'll be reconnecting with the Households interviewed last year, our face to face interviews replaced by phone calls.

While the purpose of these interviews is to track their progress since completing the programme the responses will undoubtedly be coloured by the pandemic, perhaps some of the participants will have been furloughed or may well be one of the key workers who has been keeping the country going during one of the most challenging periods in history. I will be interested to hear about their experiences of home schooling, of support they have received or given via the voluntary sector networks in the region.

Going forward things will continue to change for all us, the numbers of us who are economically vulnerable will grow as the economy readjusts and we do not yet know how those with conditions that have required shielding will be supported in the future. In the absence of a vaccine what steps can be taken to restore this group back their rightful place in society.

Back in the 1930s when the economist Keynes was thinking about how the economic future for that generations Grandchildren might look he used the phrase "painfulness of readjustment between one economic period and another". For me this resonates with what we are experiencing now, as this pandemic continues to exposes the fragility of the economic growth we have enjoyed, many more of us will have to make claims for financial support from the state. Some of these claims will be made by people who have never had to seek this type of support before.

This poses questions as to what the future of the welfare state may look like, though the government has announced some financial support already including the Job Retention Scheme and the increase to Universal Credit we don't yet know what shape future labour market interventions will take. How will the needs of individuals for whom HIW was designed for be balanced alongside those of first time claimants or those who conditions which require shielding?

Before the pandemic took hold and disrupted our plans, a next step in our project was to bring together those organisations from both the public and third sector which were delivering services to and engaging with HIW clients. The plan was to explore the potential of linking together and using their collective assets to sustain the potentially transformational changes made by the programme participants and allow them to translate their learning back into the wider community.

Our thoughts on this were partly inspired by the work of UCLs Institute for Global Prosperity particularly report ["Social prosperity for the future: A proposal for Universal Basic Services"](#). Which sets out some ideas about how to deliver quality of life for the UK, improve public services in ways that are affordable, and link radical policy initiatives to improved social integration and cohesion.

As we begin to acknowledge the breadth and depth of the impacts of the pandemic on the UK with many more of us being vulnerable to economic changes and poor health, the concept of Universal Basic Services might provide the cornerstone to rebuild a better Britain. One where life opportunities are not defined by the circumstances or the deprivation of the area where you were born.

Heseltine Institute Blog Series

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

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About the author

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Belinda is an Industrial Strategy Fellow at Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place. Belinda joined the Heseltine Institute on a two year secondment from the University of Liverpool's Research Partnerships and Innovation Department. During her secondment she has been working on an interim evaluation of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Household into Work Programme (HiW).

Prior to joining the University of Liverpool in 2010, Belinda worked for Liverpool City Council Regeneration Portfolio. During her time in the city council Belinda worked on a number of regeneration programmes including the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Housing Market Renewal Fund. Belinda is a graduate of the Liverpool John Mores University, where she studied Urban Renewal.

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