

Written evidence submitted by Unseen

Overview Unseen

Unseen is a national UK-wide modern slavery charity with one mission: to end slavery. We seek to do this by supporting survivors, equipping stakeholders and influencing systemic change.

- We provide direct survivor support services to men, women and children through safe house accommodation and outreach services. We also provide free advice and support to victims, frontline professionals and the general public via the UK's Modern Slavery Helpline available 24/7, 365 days a year.
- We equip stakeholders through the provision of training, advice and resources. We train around 2,000 front-line personnel per year.
- We influence systemic change by working closely with the UK and overseas governments.

What has been the immediate impact of COVID-19 on the sector?

- £4.3billion loss in fundraising income across the charity sector in the next 12 weeks (now 3-4 weeks in)
- Community fundraising, events fundraising, voluntary donations, and corporate fundraising all heavily impacted plunging charities into financial crisis
- Increased vulnerability and isolation of clients coupled with a reduction in the charity sectors capacity to support
- Job Retention Scheme not being appropriate for the majority of charity teams if they are on the frontline and continuing to offer needed services to vulnerable people.
- Increase in service demand, decrease in funding and staff availability

Impact of COVID-19 on Unseen

The implications of COVID-19 for the people we support cannot be overestimated. Many are vulnerable because of the exploitation they have experienced and as a result, rely on a range of services to support their mental and physical health and their recovery. Their experiences will make this unprecedented time more difficult to cope with.

We are concerned that our client group, who often rely on our face to face services are currently unable to access the support they need, from our services or other support agencies. We have had to temporarily change the way we work so that we can ensure people's immediate safety. Our services are a lifeline to the people we support and our teams are working hard to be innovative in the way they maintain contact. We do however realise that those we support will be increasingly vulnerable and isolated at this time, as our own ability to provide support decreases and other agencies around us are shutting or no longer offering services.

Support Services

Clients:

- **Services clients would usually access are not available and therefore Unseen is increasingly the only service available.** Mental Health service provision has declined; no education, training, volunteering opportunities; lack of activities available in community is very hard and isolation is a big risk for victims of trafficking
- **COVID-19 does not negate all support needs they had ahead of a pandemic but is highlighting even further.** Risk is heightened as our usual way of working is compromised, and access to other services are impacted putting more of a strain on teams and clients.
- **Clients are unable to afford, or access Wi-Fi and data packages** so cannot use technology to maintain contact. In some cases, technology is there but it is not simple for this group to access.
- **Client transfers:** The recent policy change from Government means that individuals will not be required to move out of service during this time. This is an incredibly positive step. However how we manage move-ons and transfers at this time should clients need to move for their own and others health and safety is unclear.
- **Victims yet to be identified:** We are especially concerned for people who are victims of trafficking and slavery that may be still in situations of exploitation. Their place of work may have been shut down, but this does not mean exploiters will not be using other avenues and opportunities using people as commodities. For those who are unable to leave their situation of exploitation or social distance, we are concerned their situation will be amplified. As the normal services and agencies who would usually find and identify potential victims move their focus to Covid19-related activity, victims will be increasingly forgotten about and remain stuck in their situations of exploitation.
- **Modern Slavery Helpline is still providing services.** Calls from the public are down but calls from frontline agencies are up and cases are increasingly complex, especially those relating to victims and potential victims. Submissions via the web and app remain constant.

Staff Teams:

- **Crisis management mode** is damaging to staff, clients and whole sector – funding announcements from Government are unclear as to whether we can access these as we are not providing ‘Covid19 specific’ activities – as a result we have had to change our way of working to continue provision of services to vulnerable people during this difficult time.
- **Huge impact on staff: Staff shifts have been lengthened.** Number of staff on site has had to be reduced to keep as many staff as possible healthy for as long as possible. Increased lone working and mounting pressure on staff members.
- **Frontline teams in safe houses cannot get Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).** There has been guidance released specifically for safe houses, but it states PPE is not needed currently. We disagree with this assessment. Staff are nervous about going to and from safe accommodation and back to households and potentially carrying or spreading the virus.
- **Furlough** Unseen has had to furlough the majority of back office staff to preserve frontline teams and the helpline. The direct impact is acutely felt as this prevents us from fully being able to support those still working and providing front-line services.

Funding:

- At least a £215,000 immediate loss in income, likely to increase over the weeks and months and can see little opportunity to recover this income yet costs remain broadly the same.

- The potential loss of income on contracts should we be unable to meet contractual obligations as a result of the Covid19 crisis
- Had to put staff on furlough which impacts our ability to meet demand on our services and raise funding to mitigate the significant funding losses we will experience.

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

- Funders stepped up with good intentions to help with the financial crisis' that charities are facing however the vast majority of funds are focusing on small organisations with an income of under £1million e.g. CAF funding, NET going to community foundations giving small grants, Lloyds Bank Foundation, gov announcement to focus on small and medium sized charities. When your charity is faced with six and seven figure losses, a grant pot (which is highly competitive) for £5k is not going to touch the sides in terms of saving larger charities.
- It's unhelpful to aggregate charities by their level of income in the first place. Income level indicates the level of service provision you are delivering **NOT** your financial buoyancy. Bigger charities raise more money because they have more services to deliver. It would be far more effective and equitable if funders looked at evidence of service need and evidence of financial need when assessing whether they should support a charity through the crisis.

For example, a £50,000 income charity may get all its funding from trusts, an income stream which has remained stable throughout the crisis. A £10million charity may get £5million income from charity shops and another £5million from fundraising events in the community. During the crisis, they will see their income being decimated and will be in far greater financial need than most small organisations, however the former can apply for funding.

- Another key issue exists with the support available. It only provides funding for organisations providing a direct response to coronavirus, i.e. an increase in demand as a result of it, rather than providing any relief for organisations who have seen a drop in income but due to the nature of their charitable work CV-19 has not changed demand on their services. E.g. cancer charities, environmental charities, international charities, those working with vulnerable people unrelated to CV-19.
- Most of the funding pots are not only restricted by income level, the projects/ charities must also be local. This again, completely side-lines national charities who cannot apply for funding despite them having established functional infrastructure, capacity and impact across the UK.
- Unseen specific – we are having regular conference calls to feed the issues we are facing on the ground into the necessary Government department (predominantly the Home Office). The willingness to support frontline services is present but the advice given specifically concerning safe working practices and PPE requirements show a lack of understanding of the services being delivered and what providers need to keep their staff and clients safe. The conference call forums allow Unseen to discuss these issues however changes are slow, and the sense of urgency appears lacking from the various departments involved (Modern Slavery Unit – Home Office).

What will the likely long-term impacts of COVID-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

- There are many services which are vital during 'normal times' who are at risk of closure because most of the funding is being directed towards charities responding to the crisis and there is very little left for those working in other areas. For this reason, there needs to be a specific relief fund for charities (including larger and national organisations) who can prove the need for ongoing services during the crisis but who may not be responding directly to the coronavirus. Otherwise, when this is all over, we will see a charity desert with a second wave of need across the UK as essential services will have fallen by the wayside.
- Charities need relief to be provided to deal with financial losses on top of funding to deal with COVID-19 itself. Charities should be asked to evidence service demand and financial losses and emergency funding should be based upon this, rather than on income level/ being local/ just based on COVID-19 response.
- At a time when charities are wanting to mobilise their workforce to support the vulnerable, the reality is that in order to survive the financial catastrophe many will mothball their workforce through the Job Retention Scheme (JRS). What would have been smart would have been to allow the JRS to be used by charities but allow furloughed staff to 'volunteer' for their own charities. This would have enabled charities to maintain capacity – especially in back office and admin functions which are often the even more hidden support of frontline services as well as deploy frontline services to meet increasing demands and needs.
- For those workers who have been furloughed the sector may struggle to bring them back into their organisations once COVID-19 is over – the funding shortfalls will not just have an immediate impact but will change the sector for the next few years as infrastructure, jobs and services will need restructuring and rebuilding to match demand and funding available.
- It feels that there is a lack of recognition within government decision-making that the sector is vital to the COVID-19 response effort, providing lots of critical services. The sector is inter-related and it is normal practice for several services to co-work cases and offer elements of the support individuals require. With the reduction in services and the potential of no-one being able to fill the gaps left behind the remaining charities and those they support will be unable to deliver quality or holistic support.

What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with COVID-19?

- In times of crisis, fast responses are critical. Many charities cannot weather significant losses for weeks or months. Process and infrastructure could be built to agree and administer crisis funding more quickly in the future.
- Consultancy with charities on their needs in times of crisis to ensure needs are being met. On-going consultations to ensure needs gaps are picked up and addressed.
- Basing responses on evidence of need and service demand, not excluding certain charitable causes and ensuring that larger organisations can also access funding.

- There has to be the acknowledgment and understanding that a 'one size fits all approach' will not be appropriate for the charity sector – some charities have been able to use the JRS effectively and press pause on their operations until COVID-19 has passed, some are seeing increased demand on services because of the crisis, and others still are needing to prepare for an increase in service provision as other services fail and close, and clients are funnelled towards them. Vulnerability and people accessing charity support do not come in neat packages and neither can our response to this situation. To have an appropriate response the needs of the sector must be properly understood.
- Planning for what the sector should look like and needs to look like post COVID-19 should be considered so that continuity strategies can be put into place sooner rather than later. The assumption being that post COVID-19 vulnerable population groups and their needs are likely to increase not decrease and we have to have a response ready to support this.

How might the sector evolve after COVID-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

- Reserves positions for charities need to be reviewed. Reserves have precluded some charities from being able to access funding and during this crisis have placed them in immediate crisis. Others with reserves may or may not get through this crisis but will then be in a much more vulnerable position. Reserves will have been depleted, the economics of the post-crisis world will mean it will take far longer to replenish reserves whilst demand for services will be either returning to previous levels or increasing. Note: if a second wave of crisis hits in a short time frame after this crisis then we could potentially face an even bigger impact on the third sector.
- Mergers and acquisitions are likely to be a reality post crisis for services to survive and deliver to beneficiaries. This may streamline charitable services and be a way to utilise resources effectively but may also reduce the overall quality and specialisms offered by the sector.
- We will require not only a sector evolution but a societal one – we must ensure that the vulnerable among us continue to have access to the support and services they need. The charity sector and society can offer them real options and the support they need to entertain choice and the belief that life can be different. People must be offered pathways and routes to something different and a helping hand to get there when they are ready to start on this venture.