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Scotland's Money Charity

COVID-19's Impact on Adviser Wellbeing: a spotlight analysis

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Introduction

Launched in April, Money Advice Scotland's new Adviser Wellbeing Project builds upon research we published in March which suggested that the sector is facing a wellbeing crisis, with high stress levels and few means of support. Our project has twin aims to address these concerns; training for both advisers and managers, and tracker research which follows the wellbeing of advisers through the year, culminating in a wellbeing index. The first round of tracker research was launched in June, and the results created a baseline which will be built upon in further surveys and help create a nuanced picture of adviser wellbeing in the index. The survey was open to all in the free-to-client money advice sector in Scotland, and had 157 respondents, primarily advisers (73%) and managers (11%).

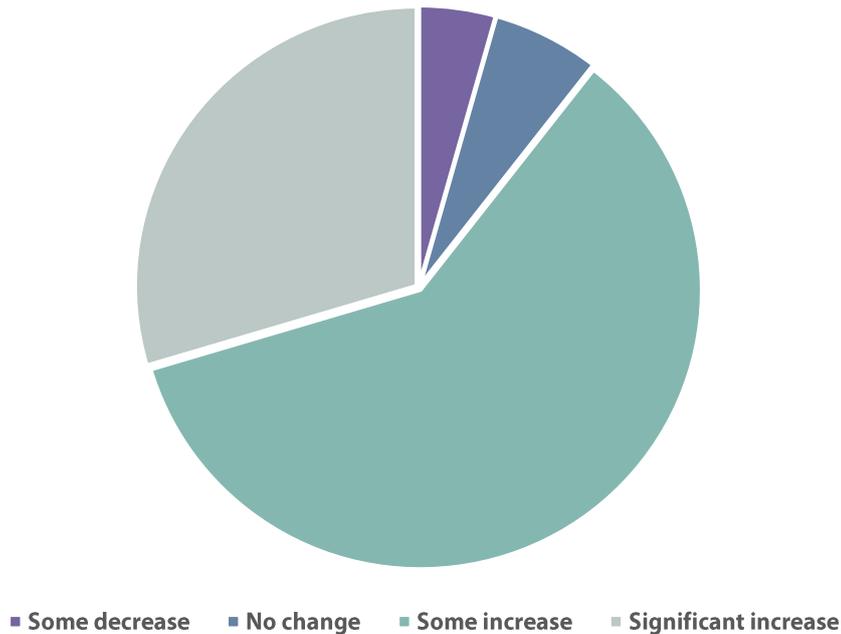
Among other questions, we asked advisers to predict whether there would be a change in their stress levels over the next twelve months, and to describe the primary factors which informed their answers. The answers to these questions offered some of the most compelling results to come out of the survey. Nine out of ten advisers anticipate an increase in workplace stress over the next twelve months.

We also wanted to get a sense of the early impact of coronavirus on advisers, both in terms of their immediate circumstances and future conditions, so we asked them how far they agreed with various statements related to coronavirus measures. The results of the coronavirus questions were strongly interlinked with the stressors which advisers reported anticipating over the next twelve months.

Workplace Stress

In total, nine out of ten advisers predicted an increase in stress levels over the next 12 months. This new figure represents a significant upsurge on earlier indicators. By contrast, in 2019, 54% of advisers were not confident that they would not experience an increase in stress levels over the next twelve months.¹ The jump in advisers anticipating or fearing an increase in stress levels paints a pessimistic picture of the future wellbeing of advisers and means that we must act soon to ensure adequate support is available.

Figure 1: Predicted changes in stress levels over next 12 months



Just as powerful as the increase in predicted stress levels, were the stated reasons for the increase. Three quarters of answers were related to concerns about COVID-19. These concerns fell into three broad categories:

- 1) **Capacity and workload:** the volume of work advisers contend with in services which were often already overstretched before COVID-19
- 2) **Vulnerability and complexity:** the complexity of that work, including a more vulnerable client base
- 3) **Work environments:** the circumstances of advisers' work, including conflicting concerns about the safety and stress of returning to the office versus the isolation and lowered efficiency of working from home

¹ A. Fleming & D. Hilferty (2020). *Adviser Perspectives on a Workforce Strategy*. Glasgow: Money Advice Scotland

Capacity and Workload

64% of respondents said that the level of capacity within their service to meet demand harmed their wellbeing. The expected influx of people seeking advice because they lost their jobs or went into debt as a result of lockdown conditions is preying on the minds of staff whose services were often already working with inadequate capacity before March. Indeed, half of advisers disagreed that their organisation is well-equipped to deal with an increase in demand related to COVID-19. Given how many advisers have already had their wellbeing harmed by a lack of capacity, this new pressure can only exacerbate the issue.

“We have always been a busy service so I am concerned about how we will manage a surge in cases.”

“The knock-on effects of the coronavirus will see a demand for additional services which are stretched already.”

Even before the onset of COVID-19, demand for advice far outstripped supply following years of decreased funding for many organisations. With limited ability to build capacity, including providing adequate numbers of experienced staff and managers, organisations are now less resilient and less equipped to face an unprecedented spike in demand.

“Increase in clients seeking assistance, not enough colleagues to assist, not enough support from management, not enough support from colleagues...”

“We are currently understaffed and staff still need to be trained on dealing with cases. I expect the demand for money advice is going to increase dramatically and I don't think we will have enough staff and time to give everyone all the help that they need”

Even respondents who felt their organisation was well-equipped to cope with an increase in demand (39%) expressed concern about workload. Three quarters of comments cited workload as a primary predicted stressor. Advisers are particularly concerned that they may be expected to deal with COVID-19 related demand, without an increase in staffing levels or other changes to make this manageable.

As with the profound increase in predicted stress levels, the economic and social effects of COVID-19 have put pressure on areas of the advice sector where there were already cracks, forcing advisers to deal with similar issues in a new and even less predictable context. Given that it was already a major stress factor, added strain on capacity is a further risk to wellbeing, which can have profound impact throughout a service.

“Level of demand of cases to come through the door as restrictions lift. Impact on my staff who then may not manage to cope with the levels and go off sick. Not likely to be able to recruit to meet demand due to budget constraints. Will go back to having the same level of caseload as my own staff and then affecting my ability to support and develop them.”

One pre-existing issue which is cast in a new and more urgent light as a result of COVID-19 is advisers' concern for their jobs. Short funding cycles and job insecurity were identified in our earlier research as a major stressor, and now almost half of advisers said they were more

concerned about the future of their jobs than they were before the onset of COVID-19. Funding, already unpredictable, has become even more uncertain, and advisers facing the end of a contract would be entering an ever more difficult and competitive job market.

“Lack of funding due to diversion to other areas”

“I expect an increased workload: when current payment holidays from creditors end, furlough scheme ends alongside possible increase of redundancies [within my organisation] I would expect stress levels to increase as workload increases”

Advisers will also have to juggle more types of client. Their existing workload has been fraught with delays due to the closure of courts and other organisations as well as the complications of moving to a remote model. Now, they must also prepare to integrate a potentially very high number of new, high priority cases into their workflow without this affecting the service for existing clients.

Vulnerability and complexity

In addition to concerns about the sheer volume of cases, adding untenable pressure to agencies often already working at capacity, one in five respondents also expressed concern about the types of cases they would be dealing with. Mental health, vulnerability or stress levels of clients dealing with COVID-related money problems were frequently cited in terms of creating more complex cases and more stress for advisers.

“Due to COVID-19 impacting on mental health and money advice, our service has been in demand which is ever-increasing. I am concerned that demand will increase and we will not have the staff to deal with it. Given the complexities of cases which we deal with before you add mental health into the mix, the level of expertise required from our advisers is higher.”

A further type of complexity is that many of the clients who may be seeking help will come with issues unique or at least more common to COVID-19. These clients may have gone from financial stability to an unmanageable situation practically overnight, or their previously precarious circumstances may now be rendered impossible. Isolation may mean that people with pre-existing mental health conditions have not been able to get support they rely on, or, as has been much discussed, people have experienced mental ill-health due to the stress of isolation and other changes caused by COVID-19. This means that people seeking money advice are more likely to be experiencing unsupported mental health issues, which can exacerbate money worries for the client and make the case more complex and stressful for advisers.

“I feel that people will come to us looking for miracles and given the current benefit situation and options available I don't think we are going to be able to resolve their problems how they would like. I fear we will be under a lot of stress and our clients will be at a really low point in their lives.”

“More clients will be under emotional duress due to [changes in circumstance] as a result of COVID-19. Under normal circumstances the majority of clients have spent a

while going down the slippery slope of increasing debt - now many people will be resentful that they have been plunged into debt due to unavoidable circumstances.”

“Increase in mental health concerns from client group making budgeting and money management advice more complex and possibly less successful. Increase in student evictions, homelessness, serious debts.”

A final issue related both to types of cases and our third and final factor, work environments, is the needs and safety of both advisers and vulnerable clients. Vulnerable clients can need more support, which respondents mentioned was more difficult without face-to-face meetings. Indeed, our previous research found that 65% of clients preferred face-to-face contact with advisers.

“processes difficult for vulnerable clients to navigate/negotiate/understand, digital migration not easy for clients to navigate, these changes stop clients from progressing/falling through the net type scenario etc.”

This and all of the other pressures mentioned above: increasingly complex cases; clients with vulnerabilities or mental health issues; and previously rare case types becoming more common, on top of workload pressures, can put advisers themselves in positions where they are as vulnerable, anxious and stressed as the clients they are helping.

“Whether I’ll be able to go back to work in the office environment due to underlying health conditions.”

“Stress of stressed-out clients”

“Worry that I won’t be able to help clients enough”

Work environments

When asked about their current circumstances, a small majority of advisers felt sufficiently supported in terms of management and equipment, but this support did not completely deal with the stresses associated with remote working. 60% of advisers agreed that their manager provided adequate support for effective remote working, while a quarter did not feel sufficiently supported. The number of respondents who agreed they had adequate equipment for home working was slightly higher at 64%, with another significant minority – 29% - disagreeing. Despite this small majority of respondents feeling adequately supported by their organisations, 60% agreed that they felt isolated from their workplace due to changes related to COVID-19, and 61% said they found these changes stressful.

When looking to the future, concerns about working environment, either returning to the office or continuing to work remotely, was the second most mentioned stressor after demand. While some comments noted concern about returning to office-based work, about twice as many mentioned continued remote working as a stressor. Those worried about returning chiefly cited concerns about safety and the complications of needing to socially distance, as well as the uncertainties around what the conditions of face-to-face working might be. Advisers are often worried about clients – our previous research showed almost half of advisers found it difficult to switch off outside of work hours. Now advisers must also worry about the physical risk of coronavirus, as well as clients’ financial and mental wellbeing.

“...I believe I will find it very stressful to [work face-to-face] while maintaining social distancing etc. - I don't think I will feel safe and I have doubts about how safe our clients will be.”

“[There is an] unknown quantity as to what the working environment will be”

Advisers who predicted continued remote working as a main stressor primarily discussed concerns such as isolation, communication issues with their managers, colleagues, creditors or clients, and technical difficulties. Particularly where communication difficulties were raised, advisers often also expressed concern about the quality of the service they could offer. 86% of advisers identified administration and bureaucracy as having harmed their wellbeing in the last twelve months. The demands and challenges of adapting to a new working model have added to this type of work, without the support of an on-hand team to share tips or commiserate with.

“Currently as there is no work huddle or break gossip vital information is not being shared effectively as it would have if there was an office environment.”

“Seeing and talking face to face with work colleagues will be missed as this plays a major part in keeping stress levels to a minimum”

“How to obtain information/evidence from clients who do not have access to technology or do not have capabilities to provide it without one to one assistance.”

Summary

COVID-19 has not brought many new issues to the money advice sector, but it has brought the struggles it was already facing - high stress, overstretched capacity, increasingly complex cases and uncertain future funding – into ever-sharper relief, and has often put them into new, unfamiliar and urgent context. The term ‘tsunami’ is often used to refer to the predicted onslaught of new clients, suggesting that, like a natural disaster, the situation is unavoidable. However, with funding and support to build capacity in advice organisations, it would be possible to prevent the profound negative impact a rise in demand is expected to have on adviser wellbeing.

It is more pressing than ever to address the issues facing advice organisations and to provide support for advisers while campaigning for meaningful change to these conditions. Our tracker research will continue to build a picture of wellbeing in the sector, culminating in a wellbeing index which will lay out recommendations to address factors affecting wellbeing. Our upcoming training programme aims to equip advisers and managers with strategies and resources to support their wellbeing.

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