Physical to virtual
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Physical to virtual: challenges & opportunities for a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative

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Physical to virtual: challenges & opportunities for a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative

Abstract

Purpose
This paper explores challenges and opportunities of shifting from physical to virtual employment support delivery prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. It investigates associated changes in the nature and balance of support and implications for beneficiary engagement with programmes and job search.

Design/methodology/approach
The study draws on longitudinal interviews conducted with beneficiaries and delivery providers from a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative in an English region with a strong manufacturing heritage between 2019 and 2021. The initiative established prior to the Covid-19 pandemic involved a strong physical presence locally but switched to virtual delivery during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Findings
Moving long-term to an entirely virtual model would likely benefit some beneficiaries closer to or already in employment. Conversely, others, particularly lone parents, those further from employment, some older people and those without computer/internet access and/or digital skills are likely to struggle to navigate virtual systems. The study emphasises the importance of blending the benefits of virtual delivery with aspects of place-based physical support.

Originality/value
Previous studies of neighbourhood-based employment policies indicate the benefits of localised face-to-face support for transforming communities. These were conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the more widespread growth of virtual employment support. This study fills a gap regarding understanding the challenges and opportunities for different groups of beneficiaries when opportunities for physical encounters decline abruptly and support moves virtually.

Keywords: virtual, face-to-face, employment support, delivery models, unemployment, neighbourhood

Introduction

Previous studies of neighbourhood-based employment policies indicate the benefits of localised face-to-face support for transforming communities. However, they were conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the more widespread shift to virtual employment support where provision is delivered via phone, email or online rather than face-to-face. A gap exists regarding a comprehensive appreciation of the challenges and opportunities for sub-groups of beneficiaries when support moves from physical (face-to-face) to virtual delivery. The pandemic adds impetus to better understanding the role of virtual employment support in neighbourhood-based programmes, especially given the likely increased emphasis on cost considerations going forward and the accelerating trend towards greater use of e-services.

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of shifting from physical to virtual employment support delivery prompted by the pandemic. The unanticipated and unplanned nature of the alteration to delivering services virtually makes the circumstances unusual, throwing the gains and losses when services become virtual into unusually sharp relief. The paper investigates changes in the nature and balance of support when delivery providers operate virtually and implications for beneficiary engagement with programmes and job search.
engagement and job search. It draws on evidence from the evaluation of a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative in an English region as a lens through which to examine broader themes.

The voluntary initiative was delivered by national welfare-to-work providers, national and local employment and skills providers, and further education colleges. The analysis provides insights into how organisations with different experiences of employment support and varying resources on which to draw, responded to the changing environment posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The initiative initially prioritised ‘visibility’ in the local community and face-to-face relationships prior to a sudden shift to virtual delivery during Covid-19 lockdown, before reintroducing some physical provision. Future policy issues are analysed from beneficiary and delivery provider perspectives in this extreme case through longitudinal interviews.

The paper stresses the importance of ‘mindsets’ and perceptions of opportunities. Building on Galster and Killen (1995), Green et al., (2005); Green and White (2007) and Ritchie et al., (2005), it emphasises how ‘subjective’ values, aspirations and preferences influence individuals’ choices regarding whether and where to work and that these decisions are constrained by the ‘objective’ spatial opportunities for individuals in deprived neighbourhoods.

The context section, introduces neighbourhood-based employment policy, charts a shift to e-services (especially in employment support programmes) for some beneficiaries and identifies the gap the paper seeks to fill. Next, an overview of the initiative, and the methodological approach adopted, is provided. The findings section outlines and explains the impact of Covid-19 on delivery and considers the associated benefits and challenges from longitudinal provider and beneficiary perspectives. Finally, the discussion outlines the key contributions of the paper, especially for future policy. It suggests that virtual delivery offers improved support for certain individuals but that risks exist for others if support moves to an entirely virtual model.

Context

Neighbourhood-based employment policy is a place-based approach to employment support in low-income geographically defined neighbourhoods typically characterised by labour market disadvantage. Geographical saturation models use social networks and wider community engagement to promote participation in employment for all residents; making face-to-face support visible in the community (Nathan, 2018). Examples include the Jobs Plus Model (a US programme responding to high levels of worklessness in public housing) (Bloom et al., 2005) and the New Deal for Communities area regeneration programme in England (Batty et al., 2010).

Existing literature highlights the potential of neighbourhood-based employment policy for transforming communities (Nathan, 2018; Wilson and McCallum, 2018) by using local intelligence to focus resources where, and on whom, they are needed most, and emphasising the role of community social capital. Where fully implemented, under Jobs-Plus average earnings among residents increased by 16% relative to a control group. These gains persisted over a 7-year period (Wilson and McCallum, 2018).
Recent years have seen a general shift to e-services, notably for beneficiaries most able to ‘self-serve’. For example, much careers support in England has moved online, with face-to-face support restricted to those most in need (Bimrose et al., 2011; Hooley and Watts, 2011). The careers literature highlights the impact of this shift for young people whereas the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) literature focuses more on the experiences of adults. Both identify challenges with the move to greater online provision. Digital technology applications can support cost-effective career development service delivery, but effectiveness depends on proficiency of practitioners and clients using them (Moore and Czerwinska, 2019). However, concerns have been expressed about the quantity and quality of online IAG delivered in some local areas (Huband-Thompson et al., 2021), while a review of careers websites highlights the need for them to be embedded in broader support (Vigurs et al., 2017).

Use of e-services within Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) in the UK has increased (Caswell et al., 2010; Martin, 2015; Van Bekkum, 2021), with digital systems seen as improving focus on user needs, cost efficiency and consistency. Increased digitalisation in ALMP has occurred alongside marketisation and efforts to drive innovation, efficiency, and personalisation of employment services (Considine et al., 2020). However, Bovens and Zouridis (2002) suggest that growing use of information and communication technologies in large welfare state executive public agencies is facilitating a move to system-level bureaucracies (p. 174).

Challenges to increased take-up of e-government services include access to electronic infrastructure, awareness and integration of services, and trust therein (OECD, 2009). Although developing more “user-centred” e-services was central to welfare-to-work reforms in countries including Australia and Canada, surveys of frontline staff have found “little evidence” of increased personalisation (Considine et al., 2020). Research indicates that “digital services disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable members of the community” due to the cost, digital and literacy skills and digital infrastructure required for access (O’Sullivan and Walker, 2018). The OECD (2009) recommends “flexibility” when using digital platforms with disadvantaged jobseekers. Up-front investment in efficient, user-friendly online platforms is needed; Public Employment Services (PES) staff require appropriate training and a clear multi-channel strategy based on user needs is essential (European Commission, n.d.).

Better connecting out-of-work individuals to jobs through ALMPs is crucial to “an equitable and sustained recovery from the COVID-19 crisis” (OECD, 2021b). The likely increased cost-considerations regarding project design on emerging from the pandemic emphasise the importance of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of adopting virtual rather than physical models from beneficiary and provider perspectives.

Internationally, an OECD/European Commission survey on measures to mitigate (long-term) unemployment increases demonstrates digital support has become a more important component of PES: “The strides made in extending remote and digital access by PES in less than one year, almost surpasses the totality of digital access that was built up prior to the pandemic.” This is positioned as making services “leaner and more efficient” (OECD, 2021b, p. 6). Whether individuals without digital skills and internet access are receiving support is crucial.

Existing research focuses on large-scale studies of mandatory programmes with a national footprint delivered by PES or large employment agencies/services. Buffat (2013) examines the impacts of e-
government technologies on street-level bureaucracies distinguishing between the ‘curtailment thesis’, where technology reduces frontline worker discretion and the ‘enablement thesis’ where technologies facilitate action. In a voluntary programme emphasising a personalised approach there is considerable scope for employment coaches to act proactively as street level bureaucrats. Virtual resources enable delivery staff (and participants who can access/benefit from them) to access more resources, corresponding to Buffat’s ‘enablement thesis’.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature regarding challenges and opportunities of neighbourhood-based voluntary employment support models switching from physical face-to-face to virtual support. Key questions are:

1. How does a voluntary neighbourhood-based initiative respond to the needs of different job seekers (e.g., digital skills, mental health, length of time unemployed, language support needs) through face-to-face and virtual support?
2. Given the rapid shift to virtual delivery during Covid-19, what insights can be gained regarding which aspects of virtual delivery should be retained, from delivery provider and beneficiary perspectives?

While the findings are not unexpected, the paper draws various aspects together and represents the first review of the benefits and challenges of physical and virtual support in a context where there has been an abrupt change in programme. This study is important as a base to those preparing more theoretically based contributions. The paper is of broader relevance to policymakers engaged in designing and evaluating employment support programmes. More specifically, the potential for employment support initiatives of this nature offered by recent English devolution policy underlines the relevance of the findings to regional policymakers.

The paper discusses issues of general relevance to scholars and policymakers concerned with employment support relating to individuals’ employment and job search perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. The theory of planned behaviour (Von Hooft, 2016) suggests behavioural intentions are influenced by perceptions of the likelihood of the expected outcome and subjective evaluation of associated risks, compared to the benefits of that outcome (Ajzen, 1991). Ritchie et al., (2005) hypothesise that choices regarding whether and where to work are based on ‘subjective’ values and aspirations. Shaped by social experiences (e.g. community norms, peer group pressures), subjective factors are likely to influence people’s decision-making about jobs over and above objective physical constraints (Green and White, 2007; Green et al., 2005). Subjective opportunity structures (Galster and Killen, 1995) may curtail action to access employment and/or progress when in employment. Hence they are important in neighbourhood-focused employment support programmes. This paper considers whether Covid-19 adds an additional dimension to these structures through attitudes towards jobs and, consequently, engagement in employment support initiatives.

Overview of Initiative

The three-year intervention commenced in 2018 in a tight labour market context. It followed previous short-term interventions. Designed to tackle longstanding ‘cultures of worklessness’, the initiative operated in selected ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, including inner-city and outer estates, in a metropolitan region outside London with a manufacturing history. The demographic makeup varied across the neighbourhoods in terms of ethnicity and, to some extent, age structure. Job opportunities
differed across the neighbourhoods with travel tending to be a bigger barrier in the outer-city areas. Typical clients varied. Some common groups within a heterogenous client group included younger people who were highly qualified but had experienced difficulties entering employment, lone mothers, people in low-paid work who wanted to progress, and older men often with health conditions that limited their ability to work. Some neighbourhoods included a high number of Muslim women with young children.

The initiative, inspired partly by the Jobs-Plus programme (Wilson and McCallum, 2018), aimed to offer the potential for increased earnings, well-being, financial inclusion, and improved quality and sustainability of employment, health, and essential skills, through personalised support and action planning offered via a key worker employed by delivery providers. Working age residents and people with connections to the neighbourhood were eligible to participate. The initiative involved voluntary participation and featured a payment by results funding model, with payments attached to milestones for several beneficiary groups, including the long- and short-term unemployed and those in low-paid employment seeking to increase their pay/hours of work. It was designed to promote relational neighbourhood-focused learning.

The initiative was intended to be delivered face-to-face in tandem with promoting physical visibility in the local area. No specific focus on virtual delivery existed at the outset; rather the emphasis was on promoting physical visibility locally and building neighbourhood social capital. Providers prioritised building a visible physical presence at neighbourhood community venues. They focused on building relationships with local partners, including spending time co-located at different venues — enabling cross-referral to deliver wrap-around support (e.g. addressing debt issues). Examples of physical delivery included working with and through community organisations, Council services, libraries, places of worship, food banks and training/employment providers to reach beneficiaries, plus presence at community events, and recruiting residents in employment at supermarkets and leisure centres.

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred during the initiative’s second year. Delivery providers shifted rapidly to virtual delivery due to social distancing restrictions. This included moving from face-to-face meetings to phone, text and web support, expanding online workshops (e.g., mental health awareness, employability skills) and sending regular generic job alerts emails to beneficiaries. Covid-19 considerably changed the delivery context for the initiative, impacting on the availability, and types of job opportunities. Some beneficiaries saw employment offers withdrawn, while additional opportunities emerged in certain sectors (e.g., care, environmental cleansing). Some providers returned to face-to-face delivery as the various lockdowns imposed were lifted, but at varying speeds and extents.

Methodology

This paper draws on a process evaluation of an innovative, place-based employment support initiative operational across several different geographically defined neighbourhoods, as outlined above. The evaluation included analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with commissioners, delivery providers, and beneficiaries over the three-year initiative, and evaluation of management information (MI) returns by providers, immersive visits and focus groups (Table 1). The study involved repeated cross sections and some longitudinal interviews. Qualitative methods enable analysis “of the quality rather than the quantity of experiences”, allowing meanings, and processes to be studied, (Oakley, 2019, p.19). They were adopted here to understand the depth, nuance and complexity of experiences commissioning, delivering and participating in the initiative.
Semi-structured interviews were adopted to provide the flexibility required to keep an open mind on possible outcomes and enable interviewers to ask in-depth follow-up questions. Providers from each delivery provider were interviewed. Beneficiaries were purposely sampled via providers to ensure representation across the neighbourhoods, different stages of support, and a range of demographic characteristics. Interviews took place in person and, during the pandemic, via phone.

Interviews were analysed thematically, allowing researchers “to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.81). This approach was useful for understanding beneficiaries’ and providers’ perceptions of the opportunities, benefits, and challenges of moving from physical to virtual employment support. Pseudonyms are used to protect beneficiary identity. The research received ethical approval from the evaluators’ ethics committee.

Immersive visits were only possible during the first year of the evaluation as lockdown meant they could not be conducted in the same way in subsequent years. They were valuable in observing interactions between staff and beneficiaries, with the latter highlighting how they valued the voluntary nature of the initiative. They enabled the evaluators to see how co-location of key worker support in a community venue alongside craft and fitness classes and nursery provision made some beneficiaries feel more comfortable in discussing challenges and aspirations. Visiting the neighbourhoods provided insights into the volume and nature of community venues, activities advertised and the location of employment establishments. If circumstances had been different, it would have been valuable to conduct further immersive visits to observe changes in key worker-beneficiary interactions.

Findings
Table 2 summarises key issues relating to challenges and opportunities associated with moving from physical to virtual support, necessitated by Covid-19 restrictions, from beneficiary and delivery provider perspectives.

| TABLE 2 |

Beneficiary perspectives

Opportunities of physical delivery: it can be easier for beneficiaries to develop strong relationships with advisers face-to-face. The interviews indicate the importance of face-to-face support for certain subgroups, particularly, lone parents and those further from the labour market. Regular meetings with advisors helped to give people a reason to get “out of the house”, meet other adults and gain confidence for interviews: Nikita, a mother who worked in low-skilled jobs after leaving school and spent several
years out-of-work before finding part-time employment in 2020, stressed the value of meeting face-to-face for reading body language:

“I’d go down so (a) it gets me out of the house, gives me something to do. And (b) it’s more helpful in the sense of me and [advisor name] used to sit on the laptop and she’d show me how to do my CV. […] how to apply for jobs. We had like a little banter whereas over the phone it’s just a bit more formal […] I feel facial expression, body language, body contact make a big difference in having a conversation”.

Some beneficiaries closer to the job market successfully researched online how to build their CV and apply for jobs rather than engaging so much with their advisor as when they had regular face-to-face meetings prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Capability building through virtual support was less successful among individuals facing multiple barriers and those without digital access/skills. Beneficiaries valued advisers accompanying them to key meetings, including job interviews, if they were anxious about finding their way alone.

Challenges of physical delivery: included time taken to arrange face-to-face meetings, and the time and costs incurred travelling to appointments. The convenience of phone/text support was particularly valued by younger and in-work participants. Jennifer explained text support fitted better with her other commitments:

“If it’s a free day, then I really like to meet up in person. But if it’s like a busy day, and I’m having to rush around, and no one can really pick me up or bus can’t take me …, then it’s probably better by text.” (16-24, completing part-time College diploma).

The cost of travelling to provider venues was a barrier to attending appointments for some out-of-work beneficiaries:

“You’re spending your money just to go down there for an appointment when you can do it over the phone for free”. (Ben, 16-24, out-of-work)

Opportunities of virtual delivery: Virtual support can help engage a wider range of beneficiaries, notably younger and in-work individuals. It can also be more convenient for beneficiaries to connect from home and lead to faster and more intensive support. James (aged 25-34, postgraduate educated) indicated face-to-face support is more practical for small tasks, whilst email and phone support can be valuable in facilitating in-depth discussion:

“Time was limited in terms of face-to-face, because […] we cannot really go over time. Well, one of the benefits of email or telephone was that you get as much time as you need from your Employment Advisor.”

In-depth discussion appears important for beneficiaries with different needs (e.g. higher skills levels, disabilities). For some beneficiaries, the switch to online interviews and services during the pandemic represented a steep learning curve: Sean, (55-64) who gained employment following an interview on Microsoft Teams, said “Before the interview, I was scared, more of Teams than the actual interview”. Beneficiaries reported needing to develop new skills given online interviews focus on tone of voice and facial expression to convey confidence. Online courses and meetings helped beneficiaries to apply for jobs online, conduct online interviews and use online meeting software. Hayley, a lone mother aged 35-
44 looking to change profession, had previously found work through phoning employers, sending her CV to them directly and participating in face-to-face interviews. She completed a “really helpful” online retail course: “I can do a lot more things on my phone to refer to my emails, to get things out there …, I’m, a lot more skilled as such for the new systems”. Hayley did not have a reliable laptop, so borrowing one from her provider to complete the course was vital. For keen and motivated beneficiaries, the interviews suggest that virtual support can enable providers to offer a wider range of courses. Hayley exemplifies how online courses can have a transformative impact in boosting confidence and increasing motivation and skills to find work:

“It was the best thing I ever did. It gives me my drive to want better things again, get back out there, it’s given me a bit more confidence to look for work, because obviously my CV is looking that bit more better”.

Virtual support may offer avenues for individuals who are suffering from anxiety or have childcare barriers to continue engaging with providers. Elaine described online support groups as “a really good idea because it keeps you in touch with people and helps you feel like you’re not so isolated” (lone mother, 35-44 out-of-work). Sarah indicated how virtual support can be used alongside face-to-face support to maintain communication:

“sometimes I’m not necessarily having the best day where I feel like I do actually want to see anybody so sometimes it is easiest to just send a quick message just to communicate than seeing somebody face-to-face but I do prefer face-to-face” (lone mother, 35-44 out-of-work)

Virtual/telephone group meetings enabled beneficiaries to connect with others in similar situations. One interviewee attended a weekly catch-up where speakers (e.g. training providers) offered job search advice. This was complemented by a WhatsApp group where individuals shared job opportunities and offered mutual job search support. Such groups offer a model for future support.

Challenges of virtual delivery: Beneficiaries argued that phone, text and web support provided less opportunity for informal chats and reading body language. The interviews also suggest virtual support can be more challenging for beneficiaries with weak English language skills. Opportunities for group support also changed. Clare, a lone mother aged 35-44, attended a weekly craft class run by her provider which helped her mental health. This closed during lockdown. Being stuck in her house left her feeling “horrible”. Switching from physical to virtual support not only removed a reason for the most isolated beneficiaries to leave the house but created issues for individuals with poor digital skills and/or without a computer or internet access. Thomas (55-64), out-of-work since the first lockdown, formerly used computers at a local community centre where his provider ran job search sessions. His contact with the provider decreased considerably as support became virtual due to being unable to afford a computer or the internet. Whilst he can check emails on his phone, he is unable to upload his CV to jobsites. He also had to stop attending a Jobcentre Plus training programme due to lacking computer/internet access. Isolation contributed to him developing depression. Other beneficiaries with internet access on their phone but no computer reported audio-visual difficulties accessing virtual courses.
Some beneficiaries appeared to not want to be a burden when providers are busy and so did not engage with or ask for help from their advisors to the extent they had when meeting physically. This underlines the challenges of a lack of digital skills and access to suitable IT equipment/the internet and associated implications for participation in employment support programmes and job search. Long-term unemployed participants tended to have greater difficulties accessing virtual support.

Delivery provider perspectives

**Opportunities of physical delivery:** most advisors thrived on the face-to-face aspects of their role. Interviewees in managerial positions within provider organisations who had experienced a range of employment support programmes saw particular merit in a place-based physical initiative. At the initiative’s outset they emphasised building a physical presence in the community to raise their profile amongst local residents and build connections for collaborative working. This involved establishing a good network of local partners, including community centres, leisure centres, community cafes, local libraries, schools, residents’ groups, foodbanks and faith-based organisations. They supplemented this activity with local flyers outlining support on offer.

Some delivery providers placed great store on co-locating and/or having a regular physical presence alongside partner organisations. This facilitated serendipitous encounters with potential beneficiaries, enabling them to have exposure to other activities and services available locally. Delivery providers viewed conducting meetings in beneficiaries’ local environment as key to being “relatable” and building trust, stressing this is crucial in disadvantaged areas where various initiatives have “come and gone”. Almost universally they considered that building meaningful relationships with beneficiaries is easier physically, especially for those furthest from the labour market.

**Challenges of physical delivery:** A key challenge of physical delivery in a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative is the time required to establish relationships with community organisations and venues. Fostering integration of, and/or signposting to, the local service offer is integral to neighbourhood-based employment support. Considerable effort needs to be expended in nurturing and maintaining collaborations, while simultaneously seeking new partners. Partnership building tends to be easiest where providers’ and other organisations’ goals coincide in a way that provides positive opportunities for beneficiaries. One example is of a local library advertising the employment support activities offered by a provider, while the provider has a regular presence in the library to meet beneficiaries and provide IT support, increasing the library’s footfall. Another example, emphasised by the immersive visits, is of co-location in a community centre which is a hub for activities, including a parent and toddler group, enhancing potential for serendipitous interactions and beneficiaries’ potential access to various services.

Providers described how many of the face-to-face partnerships they had established locally prior to the Covid-19 pandemic were weakened by many community venues closing during lockdown. These closures meant that regular community outreach sessions had to cease. This highlights some of the challenges of a physical delivery model. Moreover, it is notable that when lockdown restrictions eased the local partnerships most reliant on working from partner venues outside their own organisation’s premises and from buildings owned and/or operated by local authorities or other external organisations had most difficulty in re-establishing face-to-face meetings. Hence, a strong co-location model which
chimed with the initiative’s philosophy was in some ways disadvantageous in the context of the pandemic, albeit being a strength in ‘normal’ circumstances.

Opportunities of virtual delivery: The main opportunity reported during the Covid-19 pandemic was increased use of social media in recruiting potential beneficiaries. Social media offers greater geographical reach than the more conventional fliers, notices and presence at community events and venues that were key ways of raising visibility for a neighbourhood-focused employment support initiative foregrounding face-to-face contacts.

As use of social media became more extensive, some delivery providers sought to use it to recruit particular groups of residents. One example is of a provider reporting success in targeted social media postings during the pandemic that aimed to attract furloughed workers who might be considering a job change. In general, delivery providers enhanced their digital and social media skills during the pandemic – sometimes through recruiting a new staff member. One delivery provider encouraged beneficiaries to engage in online employability sessions and reported positive feedback on this, while more generally providers made greater use of referrals to the growing number of online courses available. However, only those beneficiaries who are open to, and confident in using online training, will benefit from such virtual delivery. Providers emphasised that their experiences following the switch to virtual support reveal that potential beneficiaries who are furthest from the labour market or who might not be necessarily actively considering their employment options are more difficult to engage virtually than physically. Virtual support created easier opportunities for out-of-hours support.

Challenges of virtual delivery: It is possible to distinguish between problems arising due to the nature of the rapid shift to virtual delivery during a short notice pandemic-induced lockdown and more generic issues associated with a shift from physical to virtual service provision. Regarding the former, the pace of change meant that there was very limited time available to plan for this shift; rather it was a reaction to the extreme and unforeseen circumstances of a public health emergency. The fact that the initiative was predicated on a physical presence in the local community meant that the shift to virtual delivery marked an extreme change for advisors who thrived on face-to-face contact, as a contract relationship manager explained:

“The nature of the initiative was very much about being visual in the community and being part of the community. [The move to phone and virtual] took away a bit of the enjoyment”.

Providers with very established physical delivery models involving strong partnerships with other local stakeholders, who had more experience of delivering employment support, and who were in host organisations with more resources on which to draw, tended to find the rapid transition to virtual delivery easier. This suggests that capacity and capability of the provider matters in the shift from physical to virtual delivery.

Generically, for providers a key challenge of virtual delivery was that many beneficiaries “just don’t have the facilities [i.e. a smartphone, a laptop, the internet] to use”. This was more likely for individuals further from the labour market and for those (generally older beneficiaries) with less experience of digital communication. Their plight was compounded by the closure of libraries and community centres where they could have otherwise gone for access to services and advice. Recognising this issue, one provider
organisation resorted to distributing flyers via a local school during the pandemic to try to target harder-to-reach beneficiaries who they were struggling to access via digital recruitment methods.

Other generic challenges of the shift from physical to virtual delivery included greater difficulty in generating cross-referrals between organisations and establishing initial trust-based relationships with beneficiaries. Regarding success in job search, one employment and skills manager considered that a reliance on the internet and virtual job search led to complacency, and pointed to positive outcomes in generating interviews from (pre-internet) tried and tested methods of “cold calling employers” and “walking in with a CV”.

Discussion

This section analyses the implications of the findings, in understanding challenges and opportunities faced by a neighbourhood-based employment support initiative which shifted from physical to virtual delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic. It discusses:

1. Who appears to be benefiting most and least from virtual support?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the initiative for optimising the design of using physical and virtual support in future neighbourhood-based employment support policy?

The delivery providers were unanimous in the need for face-to-face support to embed themselves in localities and establish trusted relationships. Beneficiaries’ reactions were more varied and nuanced depending on whether they appreciated saving time and travel costs, were digitally competent, and had already experienced face-to-face support when the lockdown was imposed. Younger people with higher skills levels were the most enthusiastic about virtual support whilst lone mothers and older men without internet access identified more barriers.

Overall, the beneficiary and provider interviews suggest that, consistent with international analysis of engagement with digital services offered by PES (OECD, 2020), the shift from physical to virtual delivery improved support for some beneficiaries. Individuals closer to or already in employment in particular appear to highly value the convenience offered by virtual support.

The analysis underscores the important role that physical support can play regarding wellbeing and giving beneficiaries a reason to leave home to interact with other adults. The limitations of virtual support in providing opportunities for informal chats and incentives to get out and about are exacerbated for individuals without a computer and internet access and/or digital skills.

Practical implications

Beneficiary and provider experiences reveal several lessons for future policy:

• The importance of employment advisors/course providers lending/providing equipment to overcome computer and internet access issues and ensure the skills/confidence to access
various communications tools. This raises the question of whether employment support programmes need repayment provision for ‘digital’ expenses for beneficiaries.

• How there are limits to virtual support given the importance for some people of leaving their house and meeting face-to-face. It would seem valuable not to overlook the virtues of traditional (non-virtual) methods in recruiting, engaging and supporting disadvantaged beneficiaries, and in job search.

• The findings underscore the likely difficulty of building an entirely virtual employment support initiative given the challenges of building mature relationships virtually. They suggest it is easier to have meaningful relationships between advisors and beneficiaries virtually when relationships are initially established physically. It highlights how provider relationships with local partners have benefited from physical co-location.

• The value in a local/place-based initiative of serendipity through informal meetings, learning from others outside the formality of courses, etc, in encouraging engagement with support offered. Many beneficiaries recruited were not necessarily looking for work when they first engaged with the initiative but saw information in local venues about easily accessible support offered. Serendipity has been identified in previous research involving employer engagement to address workforce development issues. However, Green et al., (2019) note serendipity can be “difficult to replicate in policy design” unless actively pursued through partnerships (p.28). Localised physical support provides opportunities for serendipity.

• How blending physical and virtual support could be key going forward. Flexibility of support emerges from this initiative as an important way for employment advisors to address beneficiaries’ health challenges and support clients (OECD, 2021a). The analysis points to the importance of offering some face-to-face support to help individuals’ well-being. One option for blended support could be face-to-face triage and then delivery in one of several modes depending on beneficiary needs.

• The need to adapt provision to respond to the increase in online interviews by helping beneficiaries to develop greater confidence, and skills for, such interviews.

Figure 1 illustrates a continuum of employment support in a neighbourhood-based programme. It demonstrates benefits and challenges of strict physical and virtual support models. The analysis indicates that a mixed physical/virtual model (i.e. more virtual than prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) may offer the optimal model for most beneficiaries through blending the strengths of the two models and facilitating personal choice. Participants may move back/forward on the continuum of support over time. This suggests a need for policymakers not to be too prescriptive in the ‘beneficiary journey’ and ensure payment points/structures recognise different needs and requirements. This has implications for delivery providers; staff need to be skilled and feel comfortable shifting between physical and virtual delivery.

[FIGURE 1]
Theoretical implications

The limitations of virtual support identified indicate a need to develop Buffat’s (2013) enablement thesis to incorporate how technologies can only facilitate action for beneficiaries who have the means to access and deploy their benefits.

The analysis stresses the importance of mindsets and perceptions of opportunities concerning how participants sought to engage with support offered and seek employment. Beneficiary experiences fit with existing understanding of subjective opportunity structures being a subset of objective opportunity structures. Chiming with Green and White (2007) and Green et al., (2005), social experiences appeared central to how individuals responded to the challenges created by the pandemic. Beneficiaries’ experiences appear to be impacted not only by spatial but also psychic boundaries regarding what they perceived to be “safe” during the pandemic, with Covid-19 creating new boundaries. Beneficiaries’ perceptions of employment prospects and opportunities to engage with advisors face-to-face or virtually depended on their health and the experiences and needs of people around them. Several beneficiaries particularly those with long-term health conditions self-isolated during the pandemic. Self-isolating often limited their initiative engagement. This was exacerbated by a lack of digital connectivity. Whether beneficiaries’ partners continued to work in the pandemic seemed to contribute to whether they also continued to seek work. Several mothers interviewed changed their aspirations and disengaged from the initiative during lockdowns to home-school their children.

Final Remarks

The results of this study are pertinent to policy makers and public service deliverers. This paper helps to fill a gap in understanding challenges and opportunities of support when delivery becomes virtual abruptly. It emphasises how moving to an entirely virtual model would likely lead to a bifurcation of support where certain beneficiaries can engage well and benefit, whilst others are likely to struggle to navigate systems and progress with entering or extending their labour market engagement. It has shown that it is crucial that delivery remains sufficiently flexible to support beneficiaries to overcome spatial and psychic boundaries. It has identified future policy considerations, emphasising the importance of blending the benefits of virtual policy with tried and tested aspects of place-based physical support, highlighting the deeper and more personal nature of advisor-beneficiary engagement and the opportunities for serendipitous encounters and co-location which may enable more holistic support.

As regards limitations, this paper is based on evaluation of a single three-year initiative. It would be useful to examine the shift from physical to virtual employment support with experiences in voluntary programmes elsewhere to extend insight into good practice and operational challenges. How do physical neighbourhood characteristics impact engagement? How is the maturity of local partnerships elsewhere borne out in beneficiary and provider perspectives of the benefits and challenges of physical and remote delivery?

Given current changes in the nature of work and training, future studies could investigate the extent to which new working models (e.g. hybrid working) promote or hinder the ability of beneficiaries to travel to, and of providers to organise, face-to-face support sessions, and identify good practice in how employment support advisors respond to the growing importance of virtual interview skills. To what
extent do shifts in working models require different staff/adviser training? Are different skills needed to actively listen and engage people via different modes? Research examining the shift to telephone careers support emphasised the importance of continuous professional development as new forms of support are developed (Page et al., 2007). Further work could investigate the best way to support beneficiaries to develop online interview confidence and skills. Other research avenues include assessing a blended employment support initiative to review outcomes across beneficiary groups and the cost effectiveness of different approaches.

From a behavioural perspective, the evaluation this paper draws on was conducted during unprecedented change resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Further research is needed into which groups are likely to engage best with virtual support and for whom, physical support needs to be maintained. Virtual support appears to offer limited benefits for some individuals, notably those who lack digital skills/access. By contrast, physical support offers strengths for recruiting and engaging such recipients. Exploring the role of place-based hubs in providing employment support appears important in gaining additional insights into the strengths of localised physical support and how this can be complemented by targeted virtual support.

References


OECD. (2021b), Scaling up policies that connect people with jobs in the recovery from COVID-19, OECD, Paris.


Wilson, T. and McCallum A. (2018), Developing a Jobs-Plus model for the UK, Learning and Work Institute, Brighton.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Type</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local and national stakeholders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider Lead</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery staff and partner</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiary</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26 (10 longitudinal, 16 new starter)</td>
<td>19 (10 longitudinal, 9 new starter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersive visits</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Interviews Conducted: Type and Number*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beneficiary</strong></td>
<td>Strong relationships with advisors fostered through informal chats; easier reading of body language</td>
<td>Time involved in setting up face-to-face meetings</td>
<td>Wider range of beneficiaries reached</td>
<td>Less opportunity for informal chats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving home</td>
<td>Travel time to face-to-face appointments</td>
<td>Greater convenience (no travel)</td>
<td>Less incentive to leave home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take person to venue to relieve anxiety</td>
<td>Travel costs for face-to-face appointments</td>
<td>Faster response to appointments</td>
<td>Only most motivated engage</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhance digital skills</td>
<td>For those who are motivated, a greater range of online courses</td>
<td>Lack of computer &amp; internet access/digital skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Way of supporting individuals anxious about leaving home/with childcare barriers</td>
<td>Greater difficulties for some with weak English language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Connecting with others in similar situation</td>
<td>Beneficiaries not wanting to be a burden when providers are busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More difficult to read body language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provider</strong> (strategic, delivery)</td>
<td>Go to community meeting places to meet people who otherwise would not engage</td>
<td>Time taken to develop relationships with community venues</td>
<td>Increased recruitment via social media</td>
<td>Staff prefer face-to-face contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ad hoc opportunities for recruitment at community venues</td>
<td>Time/effort required to build partner relationships</td>
<td>Increased reach and ability to respond to ‘no shows’</td>
<td>Coping with virtual working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raise local profile at venues, local flyers</td>
<td></td>
<td>More courses online to refer to</td>
<td>Less serendipitous opportunity to refer to other providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easier multi-partner access, cross partnership working</td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhanced development/utilisation of digital/social media skills</td>
<td>(In context of pandemic) Less opportunity for one-to-one training support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater opportunities to refer to other support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(In context of pandemic) More emphasis on well-being; less time for employment support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Harder to cross-refer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building trust</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Opportunities and Challenges of Physical and Virtual Support from Beneficiary and Provider Perspectives**
Physical support in the community

- Strong trust between beneficiaries and advisors fostered through 1-2-1 face-to-face meetings.
- Wide-ranging holistic support for those far from, and closer to, the labour market and those in employment.
- Face-to-face meetings can take time to arrange, be less convenient and more costly.

Physical support in the community with virtual support

- Strong trust between beneficiaries and advisors fostered through face-to-face meetings, particularly when beneficiaries join.
- Wide-ranging, holistic 1-2-1 support for those who are far from, and closer to, employment and those in employment.
- Convenience of virtual support maintained through rapid phone/internet support alongside face-to-face meetings.
- Virtual meetings for those with anxiety/childcare barriers.

Virtual support

- Virtual meetings are convenient/cheaper for beneficiaries.
- Can increase word-of-mouth referral and offer way of engaging those anxious about leaving home.
- Can hinder trust between advisors and beneficiaries.
- Fewer opportunities for informal chats, difficult to read body language.
- Delivery can become ‘narrower’. Success depends on maturity of provider partnerships and where beneficiaries are in their journey.

Figure 1: Continuum of Support