



REFUGEE **GOOD** ACTION **PRACTICE**

CARRY ON ADAPTING

**A research report into
learnings from Covid-19**

April 2022

Report written by Kristin Hulaas Sunde

Learnings from Covid-19:

Carry on adapting

What key challenges did the UK migration sector face during the pandemic's first year? How did we adapt our work most successfully, and what can we learn to best prepare for the future?

This is the first of three reports summing up key learnings from the 12-month [Respond and Adapt Programme](#) (RAP), run by [Migration Exchange](#), [Refugee Action](#) and [NACCOM](#) from April 2020.



Related reports

- [Building a stronger migration sector](#)
- [Inspiring new funding approaches](#)

5 facts: The Respond & Adapt Programme

1. Aimed to help UK migration organisations adapt and keep services running during coronavirus, despite acute financial stress and rising demand.
2. Raised £2.3M+ from 11 funders in March/April 2020.
3. Distributed the funds as unrestricted grants to 130 charities.
4. Funded work on specific emerging issues by specialist organisations, including vaccination, hate crime, and asylum accommodation.
5. Offered extra development support and learning opportunities on topics ranging from leadership to well-being and anti-racism.
6. Created a unique community through the [Information and Data Hub](#), where 300+ organisations now regularly share insights, advice and support.

Common Covid challenges

During the pandemic's first year, [regular surveys](#) revealed key trends across our sector. During the first lockdown in spring 2020, we saw huge increases in food poverty and tech poverty (e.g. a lack of data and devices) among people stuck in the UK immigration system. Many organisations also lacked the digital skills and technology to support people remotely, struggled to manage risk around new ways of working, and faced anxiety about future finances.

When face-to-face services reopened in summer and autumn 2020, loneliness and deteriorating mental health became burning issues, followed by homelessness and safety concerns.

During the lockdown winter of early 2021, adapting services and helping people to access them online remained problematic, along with insufficient, inflexible or insecure funding.

By the time services reopened in the spring of 2021, mental health had emerged as our biggest shared struggle:

- 97% of organisations said people's mental health needs had increased.
- Top employee struggles included fatigue, isolation, overwork and general stress.
- Many lacked resources to deal with caseloads and complex cases.
- Long waiting lists and delays for specialist support made the situation worse.

How did we adapt and cope?

As well as sharing their experiences through surveys, some RAP grantees took part in a dedicated learning workshop in late 2021.

Overall, many said that organisational culture change had given them the confidence and training to work differently. In [one recent survey](#), 81% of respondents said their organisation had adopted a hybrid model during the pandemic, blending online and face-to-face working and services.

This included integrating digital services - for example, successfully moving group community work online, with more people speaking up and collaborating creatively. Useful new online tools included [Digipals](#), [Clockify](#) and Facebook groups. Going digital also opened up new opportunities for organisations with limited resources, such as attending national meetings, building regional coalitions, and expanding work to nearby communities.

A major positive development was more collaboration with [homelessness organisations](#), including sharing data to highlight common challenges, inform planning and influence policy change.

In general, many said increased information sharing helped them to coordinate more effectively with others, [better understand people's needs](#), and to develop their focus, service model and advocacy work accordingly.

Specific support needs

Anti-racism

When the equality charity [Brap](#) offered anti-racism development sessions through RAP, 35 charities took part. Their top learning priorities were understanding institutional discrimination; embedding anti-racist practice in our work; language and terminology; understanding bias and how to be a white ally. [Read reflections on key learnings](#) from these sessions.

Organisational development

For the 13 charities that signed up to the [Lloyds Foundation Enhance programme](#), their top support needs were leadership; clear strategy and planning; systematic monitoring and evaluation; and sustainable finance & fundraising.

Care and well-being

Based on positive feedback from initial Collective Care workshops run by [Act Build Change](#) for 121 people from 39 RAP-funded organisations, well-being sessions ran for another 186 participants throughout 2021.

These focused on joy and celebration; developing accountability and caring relationships; having challenging conversations; managing grief and loss; and rest and recovery.

“It was really nice to be a part of sessions all centred around care, especially working in such intense and stressful conditions,” one participant said. “To acknowledge care as such a huge part of what makes a good leader.

Stronger together

Based on their experiences during the pandemic's first year, organisations taking part in a recent RAP learning workshop recommended the following for individual charities and the wider migration sector:

- **More co-production**, e.g. mapping and connecting small organisations without a governance infrastructure so they can participate more widely and meaningfully.
- **Being mindful of power imbalances** and resource inequality in new collaborations. For example, larger organisations sharing frontline data and evidence with smaller, community-based organisations, creating a budget to fund partnerships, and learning from emerging models such as co-leading with people who have lived experience of seeking asylum.
- **People in the immigration system co-designing** new service approaches. For example, instead of clinical mental health interventions, “creating space to talk about our stories”.
- **Better contingency planning**, including longer-term funding for staff and volunteer mental health support.
- **Reducing workloads** and allowing more time for reflection, away from screens.
- **Training on mental health first aid** and secondary/vicarious trauma.
- **Strengthen policy, advocacy and communications** by collaborating strategically to prepare for emerging issues such as new arrivals from Afghanistan - for example, through [Info Hub calls](#).

By sharing evidence, information and experiences, and supporting each other, we can keep strengthening our sector's ability to adapt and cope beyond the pandemic, and amplify our shared voice, campaigning and impact.