BREAKING BARRIERS

Integrating refugees through employment.

One year later

The impact of Covid-19 on the support needs of refugees and people of refugee background

March 2021

Our research

The objective of this research is to understand how Covid-19 has impacted on refugees and people of refugee background,[1] and their support needs.

This report builds upon Breaking Barriers' previous needs assessment conducted in May 2020.[2]

About Breaking Barriers

Our vision is that every refugee and person of refugee background can fulfil their potential and integrate into their new home through employment that matches their skills, experience, and aspirations.[3]

Our mission is to help refugees and people of refugee background to acquire knowledge, confidence and experience to get stable, fulfilling employment. We give a central role to businesses, involving them directly in finding employment solutions and providing support that get refugees into work.

[1] This includes refugees and those who have had refugee status in the past

[2] Breaking Barriers (2020), 'Supporting our clients — the impact of Covid-19 on refugees and those from refugee background in London'

[3] For more info see: https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/

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01 // Executive summary

The labour market

Challenging labour market conditions, low levels of digital access and literacy and ongoing uncertainty have impacted on the opportunities, experiences and support needs of people of refugee background.

// Nearly one in five respondents to our survey (17%) who were in work prior to the pandemic lost employment, significantly higher than 5% of people who had lost their jobs by October 2020 in the UK overall.[4] Future opportunities for refugees and those of refugee backgrounds are also likely to be lower because of the competitive labour market. According to Indeed, UK job postings over this period have been significantly lower than in previous years with some sectors employing people of refugee background, such as accommodation and food services and arts and entertainment and recreation, experiencing particularly large falls in vacancies.[5]

// Even for clients in employment, being at work has sometimes been difficult. Uncertainty has made even those with employment feel less secure and financially stable, and for those in key worker roles, workplace experiences have become more challenging.

Digital access and literacy

Digitalisation of activities has made access to digital equipment and digital literacy increasingly important.

// Despite the efforts of the sector, the proportion of refugees and people of refugee background who have access to digital equipment remains significantly lower than for the UK population. 58% of survey respondents had access to a laptop and 37% of respondents report only having access to a mobile or smart phone, compared to 88% of UK households who have access to a home computer and 63% with access to a laptop.[6] This shows a large number of people of refugee background are very limited in their ability to receive support, access services, and achieve goals, exacerbating existing barriers they face. In the absence of this digital equipment, they require more intensive support to achieve their goals.

// Digital literacy is also a barrier for refugees and people of refugee background in the current climate. 26% of survey respondents self-report low levels of digital literacy,[7] compared to 22% of the whole UK population (including those above working age) who lack basic digital skills for everyday life.[8]

[4] Centre for Economic Performance (2020), Generation Covid: Emerging work and education inequalities

[5] ONS (2021), Vacancies and jobs in the UK: February 2021

[6] Statista (2020), Percentage of households with home computers in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1985 to 2018

[7] Report that 'I am not/rarely/sometimes able to do all I want to' in response to 'How would you rate your ability to use technology in daily and working life? For example, to use search engines, use video conferencing or edit documents'

[8] Lloyds Bank (2020), UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 — Key Findings

Support needs

Support with employment, higher education, or training were cited as respondents' most important needs.

// 43% of respondents reported that their support needs had changed because of the pandemic, however overall support needs have not changed considerably since our assessment in May 2020.

// Employment advice and guidance continues to be the most important and most cited need. In line with challenging labour market conditions, 46% of respondents said Covid-19 had reduced their access to employment, and a quarter (25%) said it reduced their access to employment support, implying though support had mostly moved online, this offering was not fulfilling all needs.

// An increased focus on training advice and guidance reflects a change in goals of people of refugee background in response to the challenging labour market conditions caused by Covid-19, and the education and training opportunities available to them.

// Data on digital access and literacy demonstrates that this is a primary support need. Access to digital equipment and improvements to digital literacy is important for people of refugee background to access support and achieve their goals.

// Respondents expect their priority needs will remain the same in 3–6 months' time. In light of these challenges and the existing barriers people of refugee background face, it is important for the sector to offer relevant, high quality support, including alternative entry routes and progression opportunities within the labour market and identify actions for improving digital access and literacy.

02 // Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2021, it will be one year since England first went into lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the course of the year, there have been three national lockdowns and further periods under tiered restrictions limiting the activities of the country, as a result of which refugees and people of refugee background have faced specific challenges.

Difficult labour market conditions, low levels of digital access and literacy and ongoing uncertainty have all impacted on the opportunities and experiences of refugees and people of refugee background.

This report uses quantitative and qualitative data analysis to explore the impact of Covid-19 on refugees and people of refugee background. Quantitative data was collected through an online survey disseminated to 470 clients in February 2021, with 149 respondents.[9]

Qualitative data was gathered in interviews with four referral partner organisations and three Breaking Barriers clients who are members of our Ambassador Council (an advisory group for our charity).[10]

For further information on the methodology, please see Appendix.

[9] Client is a term used to describe the service users of Breaking Barriers and other charities. Breaking Barriers' clients meet certain eligibility criteria including being aged 18+, living in London, holding one of the following statuses — refugee status, discretionary leave to remain, humanitarian protection — and having the right to work in the UK. We also support those with a family reunion visa related to someone with these statuses, survivors of human trafficking and asylum seekers with the right to work.

[10] Referral partners are organisations that work refugee sector, normally focused on another aspect of refugee integration

03 // The labour market

Unemployment

Labour market conditions have become more challenging.

The UK unemployment rate rose from 4% at the start of 2020 to 5.1% in late 2020 and is forecast to increase to 8% in 2021. The redundancy rate has risen more during the pandemic than in the 2008–09 crisis.[11]

BAME migrants, including refugees and people of refugee background, have been disproportionately affected, with higher unemployment rates and more precarious employment than UK workers.[12]

In our survey we asked respondents about their employment. Nearly one in five (17%) who were in work prior to the pandemic lost employment, significantly higher than 5% of people who had lost their jobs by October 2020 in the UK overall.[13] 14% of respondents who were employed, were on furlough.

Most respondents who lost their jobs said they were made unemployed involuntarily (59% – 14 respondents) and nearly 30% worked in retail, hotels and restaurants (7 respondents).[14] This reflects wider sector trends where redundancy rates have been highest in hospitality, administrative and support services.[15]

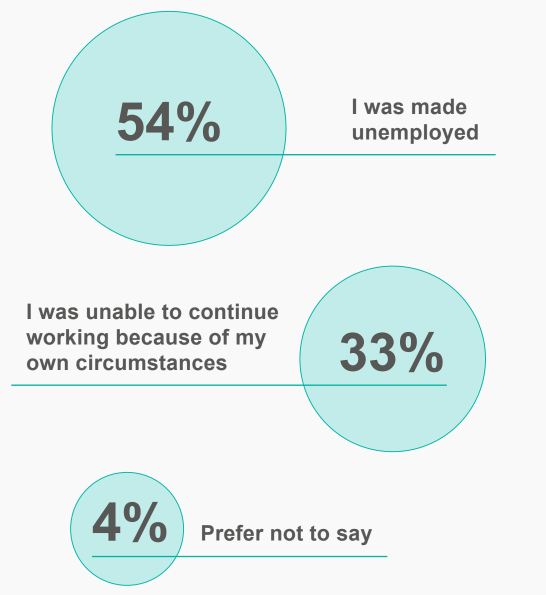
Employment opportunities

Future opportunities for refugees and those of refugee backgrounds are also more limited.

UK job postings have been significantly lower than in previous years (37% lower in Feb 2021 compared to same time last year),[16] with sectors such as accommodation and food services and arts, entertainment and recreation, experiencing particularly large falls in vacancies.[17]

According to the CIPD, employment intentions also remain subdued in hospitality, finance and insurance, and administration and support service activities.[18]

Figure 1 **The proportion of respondents who reported having lost employment due to Covid-19 by reason**



[11] ONS (2021), Labour market overview, UK: February 2021
HM Treasury (2021), Forecasts for the UK economy: a comparison of independent forecasts

[12] For example, part-time, zero hours contracts, and non-permanent roles.
Dafni Papaoutsaki (2020), Covid-19 and the Low Paid
Dr Yang Hu (2020), The economic impact of Covid-19: Ethnic and migrant divides in the UK

[13] Centre for Economic Performance (2020), Generation Covid: Emerging work and education inequalities

[14] Low sample of 24 respondents

[15] ONS (2021), Redundancies by age, industry and region

[16] Indeed hiring lab — UK and Ireland (2021), The Impact of Coronavirus on UK Job Postings Through February 12: Data from Indeed

[17] ONS (2021), Vacancies and jobs in the UK: February 2021

[18] CIPD (2021), Labour Market Outlook — views from employers

Our client base is experiencing a similar trend, with 57% fewer of Breaking Barriers clients achieving an employment related outcome since July 2020, compared to the same period in the previous year.[19]

Figure 2 **The proportion of Breaking Barriers' client outcomes that are employment related[20]**

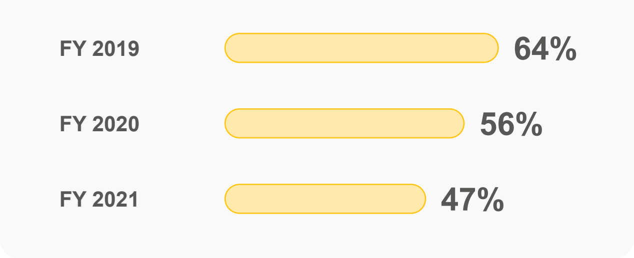
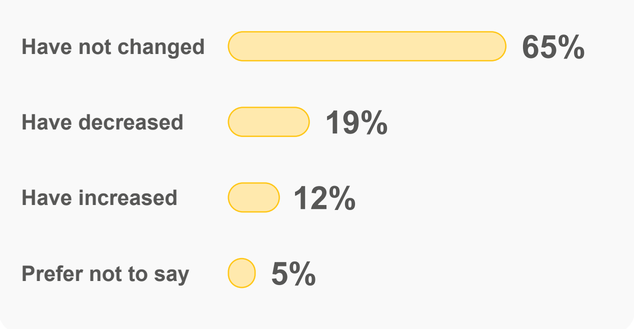


Figure 3 **The proportion of respondents whose working hours have changed due to Covid-19**



In work challenges

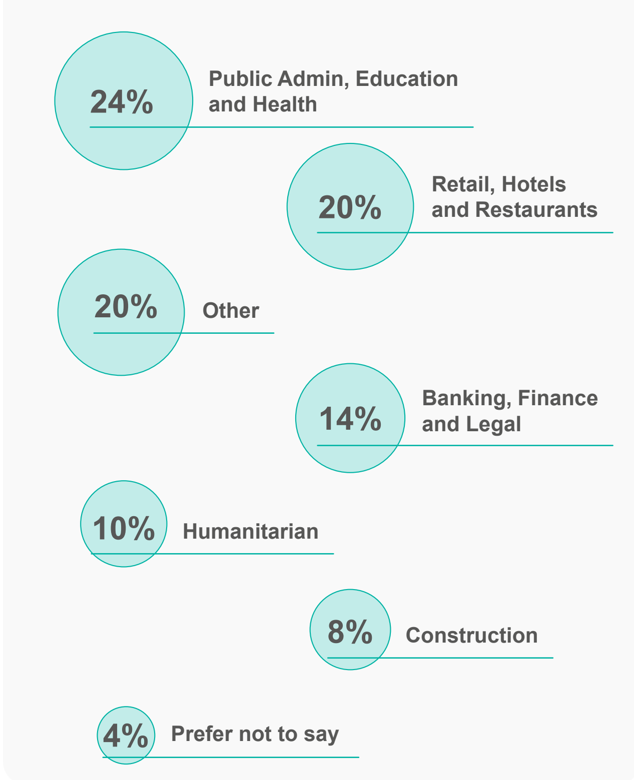
Even for clients in employment, being at work has sometimes been difficult.

Almost one in 5 respondents to our survey who were in work (19%) said their hours had decreased because of Covid-19. Uncertainty has made even those with employment feel less secure and financially stable; research shows that in-work poverty for BAME migrants has been worsened by the pandemic as they are more likely than non-migrants to be working fewer hours than usual or suffering income loss.[21]

One quarter of respondents who are in work (24%) are in public admin, education and health and other key worker roles where workplace experiences have become more challenging because of the pandemic.[22]

For example, one client we spoke to working on the frontline had been targeted with aggressive behaviours when attempting to enforce social distancing rules. Managing risks to family members and household members also impacted on workplace experiences.

Figure 4 **The proportion of employed respondents by sector**



[19] Employment related outcomes include employment, changed employment, apprenticeships, promotions or internships and work experience. Between July 2020 and January 2021 41 clients achieved (48) employment related outcomes, compared to 96 in the same period last year (104 outcomes)

[20] Breaking Barriers' financial year is from 29th May to 28th May

[21] Dr Yang Hu (2020), The economic impact of Covid-19: Ethnic and migrant divides in the UK

[22] Key worker occupation groups are: health and social care, education and childcare, utilities and communication, food and necessary goods, transport, key public services, public safety and national security, national and local governments. Sample of 50 respondents

04 // Digital access and literacy

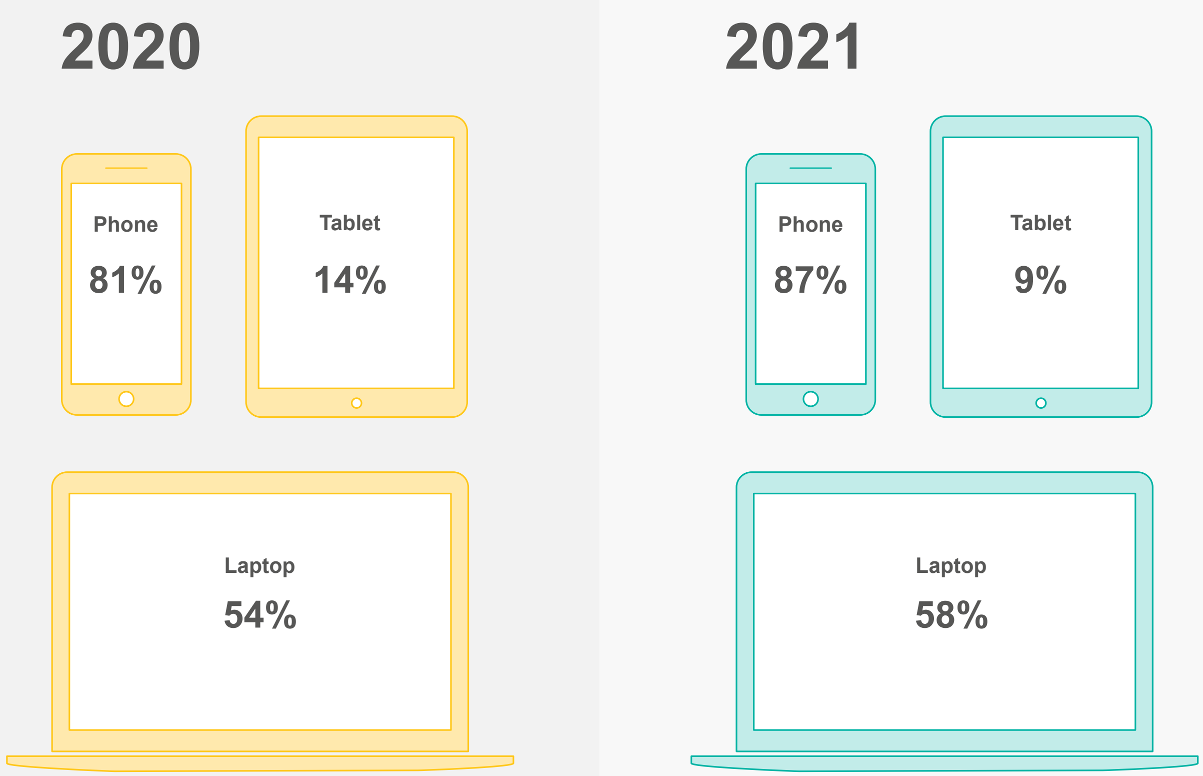
Increased digitalisation in daily life has been challenging for people of refugee background.

Government restrictions, lockdowns and social distancing rules have impacted on service access and led to the digitalisation of many activities, meaning access to digital equipment and digital literacy has become increasingly important.

Digital access

Our 2020 needs assessment identified digital access as a barrier for refugees and people of refugee background, which continues to be the case this year. All interviewees also raised a lack of digital access as a major challenge facing refugees and people of refugee background because of Covid-19.

Figure 5 **The proportion of respondents with access to electronic devices**



Note: Comparing the results of this needs assessment to the May-20 needs assessment

Despite the efforts of the sector, the proportion of people of refugee background who have access to digital equipment remains significantly lower than for the UK population.

58% of survey respondents had access to a laptop and 37% report only having access to a mobile or smart phone, compared to 88% of UK households who have access to a home computer and 63% with access to a laptop.[23]

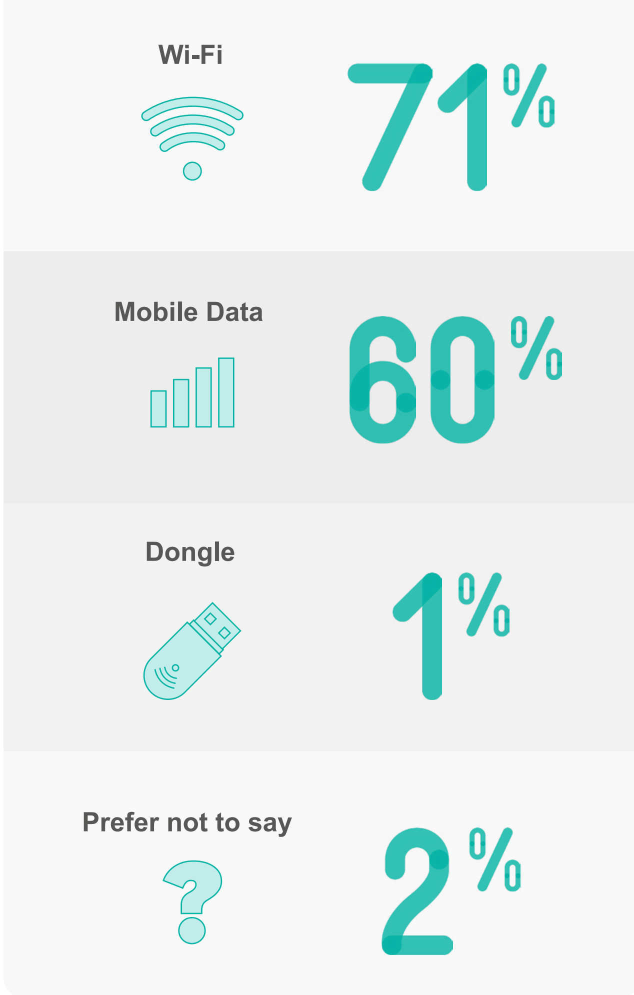
It is worth noting that respondents' access is likely to be an over-estimate of digital access among people of refugee background, as they would need to have access to suitable technology to respond to our survey.

86% of respondents have access to the internet at home, compared to 82% in our May 2020 needs assessment (60% via mobile data and 71% with Wi-Fi). Just over half (53%) of respondents have access to both a laptop and Wi-Fi in their home, compared to 43% in 2020. This indicates that some people of refugee background have limited access to services and social activities, impacting on education and employment opportunities.

Improvements in digital access since May 2020 have been greater for some groups; the proportion of respondents aged below 36 with a laptop has increased to 57% from 44% in 2020. However, access is variable; for example, 81% of employed respondents have access to a laptop compared to 44% of unemployed respondents.

Given that most job applications need to be completed online, these findings indicate that lack of digital access for unemployed people of refugee background is a significant barrier to employment. Public provisions of technology have been slow and there has been insufficient focus on getting these items to people of refugee background. Interviewees also highlighted that though providing clients with access to the internet is helpful, not having a computer or laptop means access to many services and opportunities remains limited.

Figure 6 **The proportion of respondents by means of access to the internet**



[23] Statista (2020), Percentage of households with home computers in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1985 to 2018

Digital literacy

Digital literacy is also a barrier for refugees and people of refugee background.

26% of survey respondents self-report low levels of digital literacy,[24] compared to 22% of the whole UK population (including those above working age).[25] We expect some over-representation among our respondents as the survey was distributed by email.

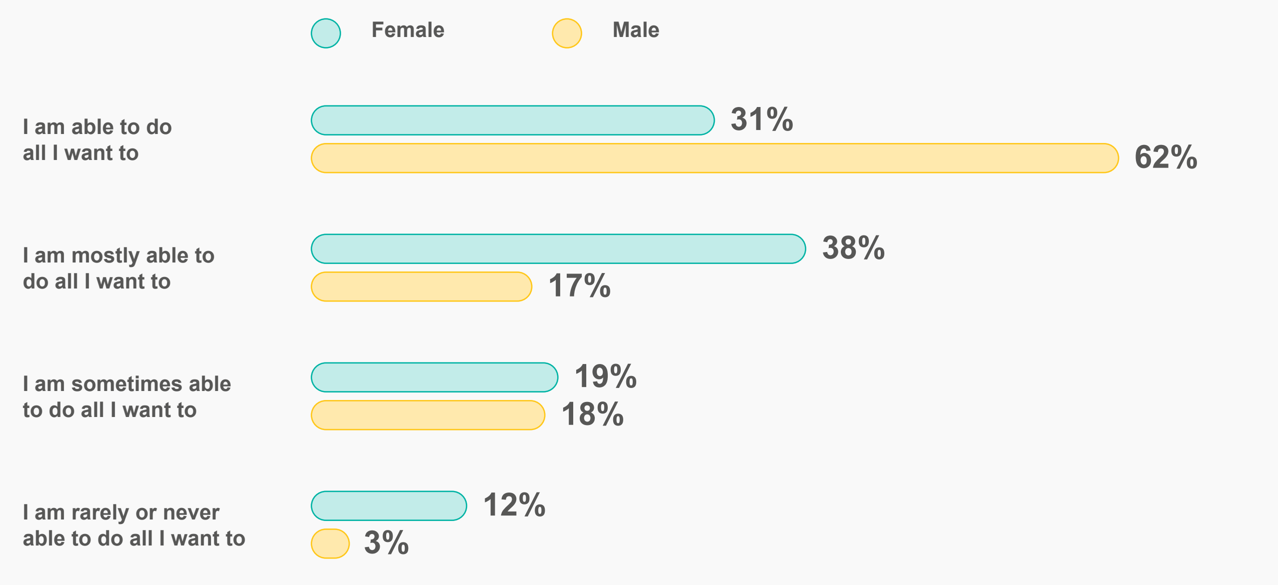
Digital literacy varies by gender; men were much more likely to report being able to do 'all they wanted' with technology (62%) than women (31%) and older respondents were more likely to report lower levels of digital literacy than younger ones (73–79% of those aged below 50 compared to 56% for those 50+).[26]

Increased digitalisation restricts access to services and employment activities.

This exacerbates existing barriers refugees and people of refugee background face, meaning they require more support to undertake them.

Specifics raised include online interview and application processes, and access to local services. Remote working was also considered more difficult for those who face confidence, language and communication barriers, as UK work culture and ways of working are harder to learn, affecting people's ability to integrate in the workplace.

Figure 7 **The proportion of respondents reporting different levels of digital literacy by gender**



[24] Report that 'I am not/rarely/sometimes able to do all I want to' in response to 'How would you rate your ability to use technology in daily and working life? For example, to use search engines, use video conferencing or edit documents'

[25] Lloyds Bank (2020), UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 — Key Findings

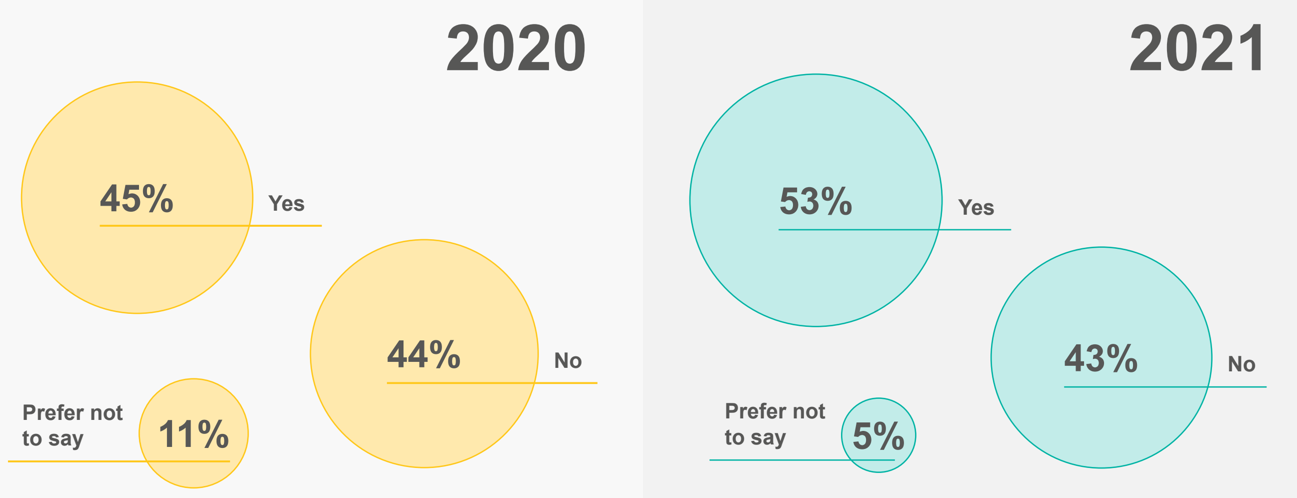
[26] Note: small sample size for those aged 50+

05 // Support needs

43% of respondents reported that their support needs had changed because of the pandemic, with women more likely to say their support needs have changed (49%) than men (37%).

The overall proportion of respondents who felt their support needs had changed is consistent with our 2020 findings, indicating that challenges of the pandemic remain for some groups.

Figure 8 **The proportion of respondents reporting their support needs have changed due to Covid-19**



Note: Comparing the results of this needs assessment to the May-20 needs assessment

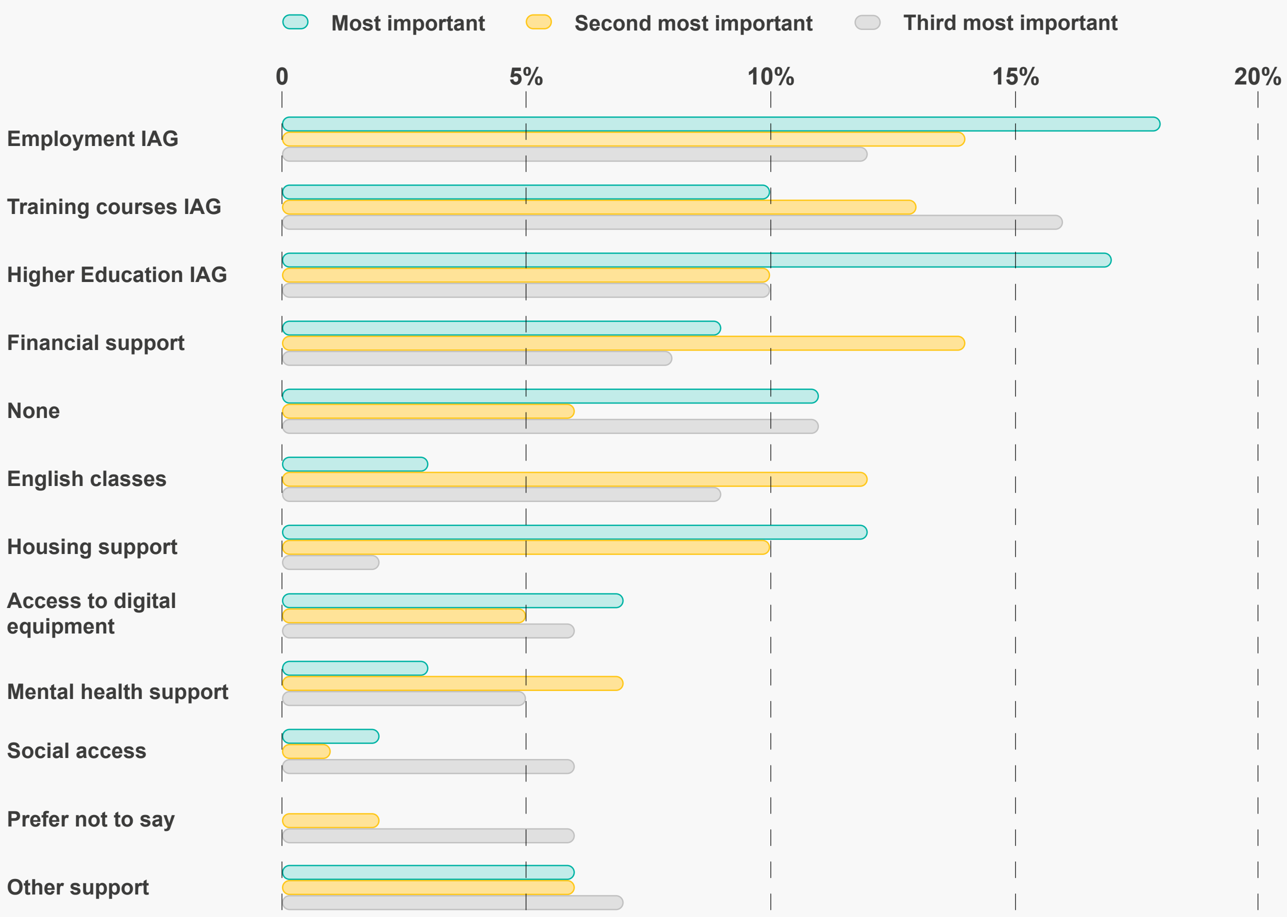
Overall support needs have not changed considerably since the last assessment in May 2020.

This year, 71% of respondents cited support with employment, higher education, or training as one of their three most important needs.

Employment advice and guidance continues to be the most important and most cited need by respondents (39%), but there has been a shift in priorities towards training course advice and guidance (34% of respondents compared to 14% in 2020). The third most cited support need was higher education advice and guidance with 34% of respondents identifying this as a priority need. All of these were also identified as priority needs by interviewees.

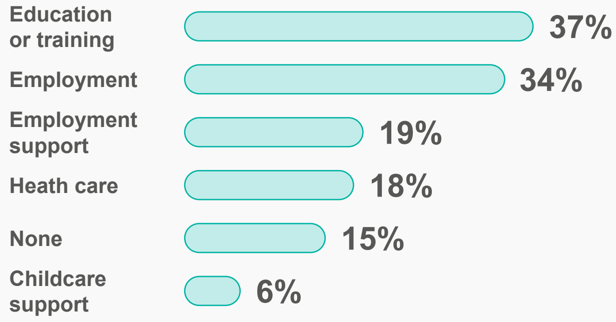
Access to education, training, employment and employment support were also the most cited as services or opportunities reduced by Covid-19.

Figure 9 **The proportion of respondents stating each support needed by priority**



Note: IAG stands for information, advice and guidance

Figure 10 **The proportion of respondents stating their access to services or opportunities has been reduced by Covid-19**



Financial support has become less frequently cited need by respondents (28% compared to 41% in May 2020). Though financial hardship was a significant concern initially, this had somewhat subsided as over time, which interviewees felt is likely because clients have become more knowledgeable and equipped to access opportunities independently. Organisations have therefore prioritised hardship support to those who continue to face significant barriers to access e.g., individuals who are asylum seekers, homeless or destitute.

Housing support is the third most cited primary need (12% of respondents) but overall was cited by less than a quarter of respondents (22%).

Additional priority support needs were also identified by interviewees including digital access and wellbeing support. This difference in findings may result from respondents' knowledge of the support that Breaking Barriers is able to provide. It may also be the case that respondents do not view digital access or wellbeing support as independent needs but rather as means to achieve other outcomes e.g., access to the labour market or education.

The next section explains the main support needs findings.

Employment advice and guidance

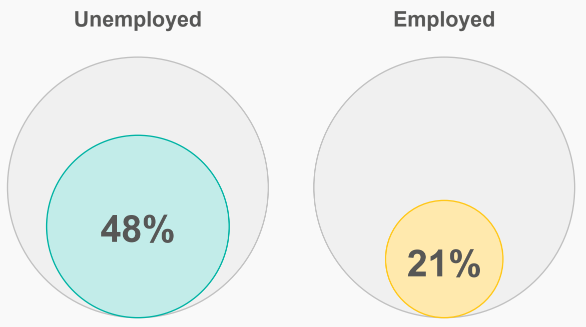
Employment advice and guidance is the most cited priority need by respondents (39%) and was highlighted by all interviewees as a priority need.

In line with challenging labour market conditions, 46% of respondents said Covid-19 had reduced their access to employment, and a quarter (25%) said it reduced their access to employment support, further highlighting that digital access to services is restrictive for many.

Nearly half (48%) of unemployed respondents and one in five (21%) of employed respondents cited employment advice and guidance as a primary support need.

Interviewees felt that clients' confidence and motivation for job opportunities had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, meaning they would need more support to pursue them. Clients were concerned about labour market changes and opportunities and had experienced more competition when applying for roles, which for many has led to a change in goals. One client explained that not receiving responses to job applications had been demotivating and meant they no longer planned to get a part-time job alongside being in education.

Figure 11 **The proportion of respondents stating employment advice and guidance as a current support need by employment status**



Note: those on furlough and who prefer not to say have been removed from this graph due to a low number of responses

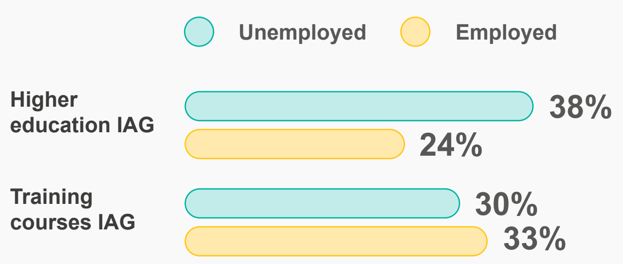
Unemployed includes those who are unemployed and inactive

Training & education advice and guidance

Training and education advice and guidance was cited by 34% of respondents.

As with employment support, higher education advice and guidance was considered a support need by a higher proportion of unemployed respondents (38%) than employed respondents (24%).

Figure 12 **The proportion of respondents stating higher education or training course advice and guidance as a current support need by employment status.**



Note: those on furlough and who prefer not to say have been removed from this graph due to a low number of responses

Unemployed includes those who are unemployed and inactive

This reflects a likely shift in clients' goals from employment to education and training, because of the challenging labour market. This trend is also visible in the outcomes of Breaking Barriers' clients, where the proportion of education and training outcomes compared to employment related outcomes achieved since the pandemic is much higher than in previous years.

In addition, education and training opportunities are more limited and harder to access.

Though many activities have moved online, half of respondents (50%) said Covid-19 restricted their access to education and training services. Interviewees told us that exam and course cancellations and deferrals have negatively impacted the educational experiences of refugees and people of refugee background, and even where in-person activities have continued, social distancing rules have reduced capacity.

Views on remote education and training were mixed. Access to opportunities has increased where online classes facilitated more admissions to some courses, and remote activities were more flexible to other commitments. However, client interviewees felt it was more difficult to stay motivated and that the lack of in person interaction impacted negatively on their wellbeing. As a result, there were fewer opportunities for informal English practice and integration, particularly for new arrivals with limited other community interaction.

Digital access and literacy

Our findings on digital access and literacy demonstrate that this is a primary support need.

We expect digital access was not highly cited by respondents as it may not be viewed as an independent need but rather as means to attain other goals e.g., employment.

Support to develop lifelong skills and confidence to navigate oneself online was thought to be useful in future both for everyday life as well as in future education and employment, which are all likely to have an increased reliance on digital access. One interviewee noted that a narrow focus on technical skills was not enough, as clients would also need support on how to act in remote environments, including online workplaces.

Digital access and literacy have impacted on client access to support.

All organisations said clients' access to digital equipment impacted their support which was now mostly being delivered over the phone or by video call. Experiences were very variable, but those with limited digital access and literacy needed significantly more 'hand holding' through processes than they had in person. Confidence, communication and language barriers people of refugee background are more likely to face also restricts their ability to engage fully online and means they need additional support.

Wellbeing support

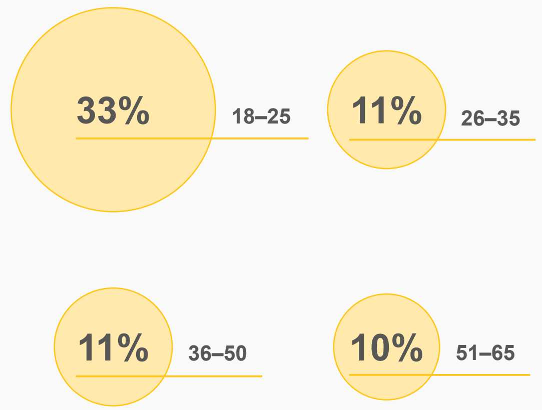
Social isolation and the implications for mental health was raised by all interviewees as a concern.

In contrast, only 13% of survey respondents cited mental health support as a need. However, this varied among groups with 18–25 year old survey respondents more likely to report mental health as a support need than other age groups (33%). It is also worth noting that overall mental health issues tend to be under-reported.

In December 2020, over half (54%) of the adult UK population reported having felt anxious or worried in the previous two weeks and almost a quarter (23%) reported feeling lonely over the same period.[27]

Clients highlighted as more vulnerable and in need of support during this period were those who had experienced trauma or have existing mental health conditions, those who were not working or are socially isolated (particularly newly arrived people of refugee background), and those whose language barriers might prevent them from engaging online. Interviewees were concerned that this kind of intensive support was not easily delivered remotely.

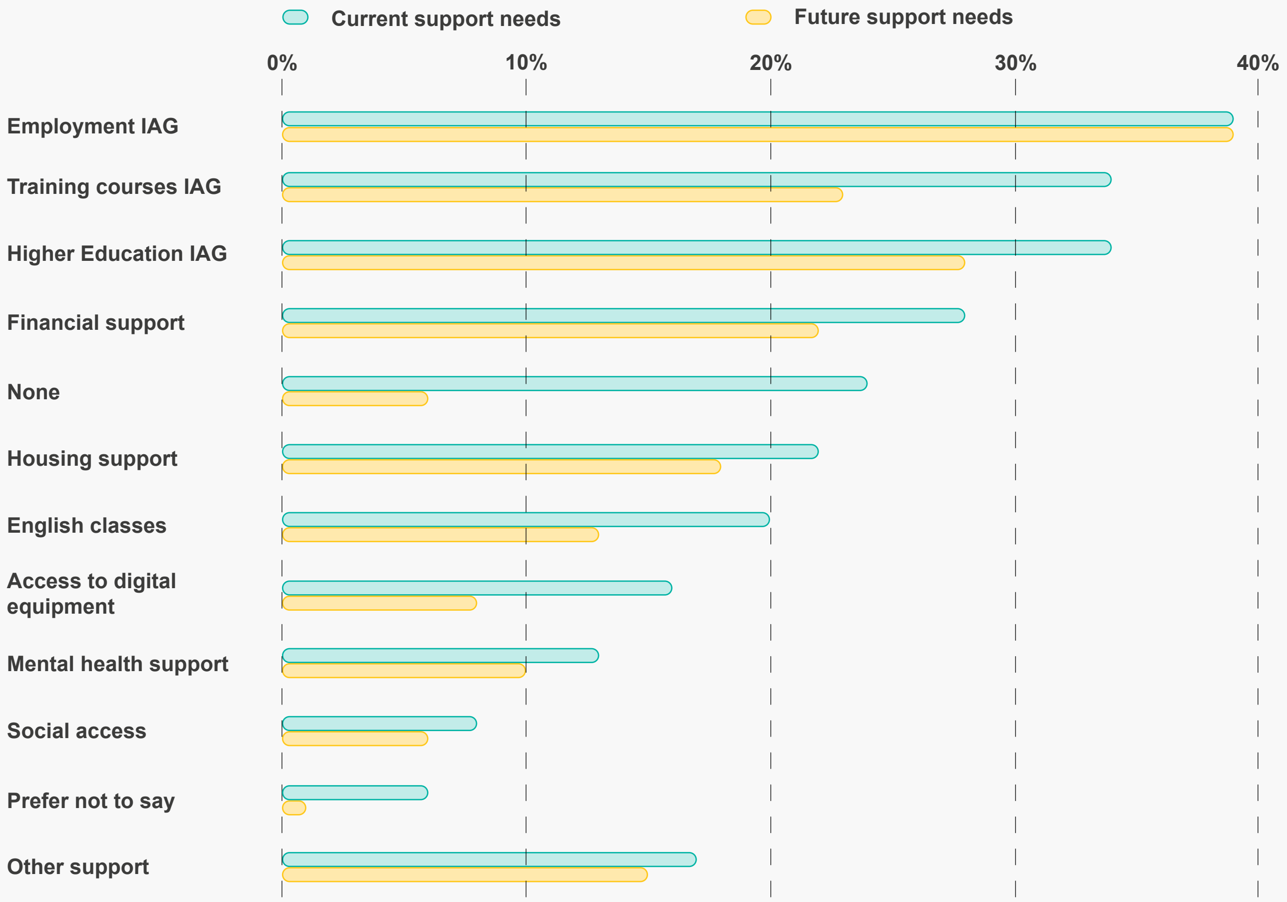
Figure 13 **The proportion of respondents stating mental health support as a current support need by age group**



Note: the sample sizes for the 18–25 category and the 51–65 category are small (15 and 10 respectively)

[27] Mental health foundation (2020), Wave 9: pre-Christmas 2020

Figure 14 **The proportion of respondents stating each support need as a current support need compared to the proportion stating it as a future support need (expected in 3–6 months' time)**



Note: IAG stands for information, advice and guidance

Future needs

Respondents expect their priority needs will remain the same in 3–6 months' time.

Employment (39%), education (28%) and training course (23%) advice and guidance were cited most often by respondents. This reflects continuing challenges in the labour market where opportunities are likely to continue to be limited, as more people are out of work, there are substantial risks of further redundancies when job retention schemes end,[28] and uncertainty affecting business confidence and hiring decisions continues.

Interviewees also identified these support needs as continuing to be a priority both during Covid-19 and after, alongside digital access and wellbeing support. Given that at the time of distributing this survey existing lockdown restrictions were expected to lift over the following months, the similarity between existing and future support need findings indicate respondents are viewing existing support needs in light of these anticipated changes.

[28] British Chambers of Commerce (2021), BCC Covid-19 impact survey: cashflow remains critical

06 // Conclusion

This analysis highlights that the support needs of over two in five people of refugee background have changed due to Covid and this is expected to be the case for at least the next 3–6 months.

// Challenging labour market conditions and reduced opportunities have meant employment, training course and education advice and guidance are the most cited support needs by people of refugee background.

// Compared to early in the pandemic, there has been an increase in the proportion of respondents citing training courses advice and guidance as support needs, demonstrating a shift in short-term aspirations from employment to education and training. This increased focus on education and training is vital to sustaining levels of motivation and confidence up during this competitive labour market period to reduce the negative impacts of unemployment.

// Low levels of digital access and literacy are significant barriers to refugees and people of refugee backgrounds being able to participate in increasingly digitalised everyday activities and to achieve their goals in the long term. Despite the efforts of the sector, the proportion of refugees and people of refugee background who have access to digital equipment remains lower than the UK population and is a significant unmet need.

// Though charity organisations have responded quickly and flexibly to restrictions by opting to provide most support services online, online activities have exacerbated barriers in communication, language, digital literacy and access to digital equipment, meaning some refugees and people of refugee background have not been able to effectively receive support and may not be able to make the most of opportunities available to them.

// This report identifies that in light of these challenges and the existing barriers people of refugee background face, it is important for the sector to offer relevant, high quality support, including alternative entry routes and progression opportunities within the labour market and identify actions for improving digital access and literacy.

07 // Appendix — methodology

This report uses quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Quantitative data was collected by Breaking Barriers through an online survey (in Amharic, Arabic, English and Farsi) disseminated via email in February 2021. This was sent to 470 clients who had received support from Breaking Barriers in 2020–21 and an additional sample who had received support in earlier years.

149 responses were received (32% completion rate), however the sample size for each question varies due to attrition. Compared to the target sample, there is some over-representation of respondents aged 36–50 and under representation of those aged 18–25. There is also a slight under-representation of males.

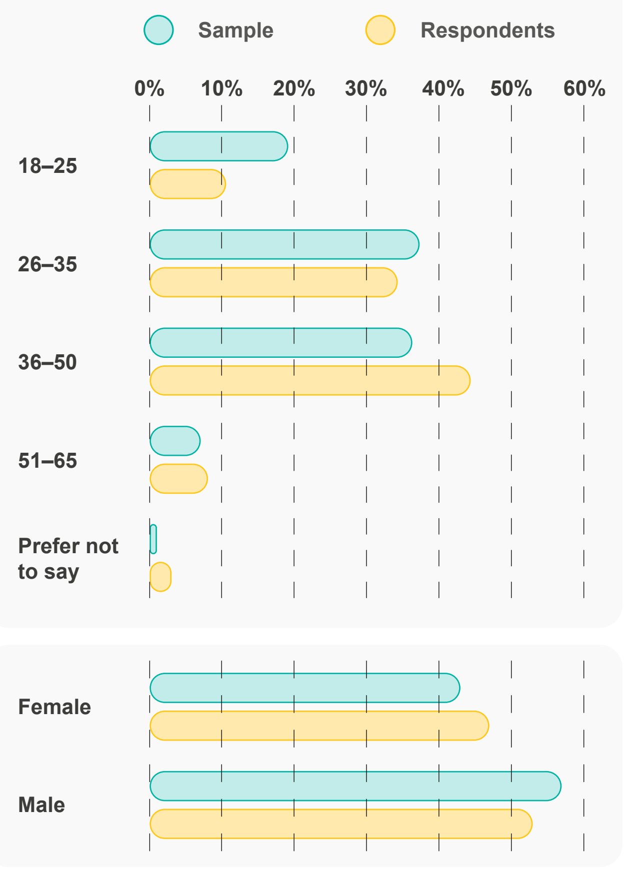
The respondent demographics are similar to, the 2020 needs assessment, which may have a small impact on trends.

Respondents were more likely to be aged 36–50 (44% vs. 35%) and more likely to be employed (30% vs. 21%).

It is important to note that this survey was sent to clients Breaking Barriers has worked with in London and that two-thirds of respondents (66%) are currently receiving Breaking Barriers support. Therefore, responses may be more reflective of London-based support needs and respondents may be more likely to have existing needs around employment and education, in line with Breaking Barriers' services.

Qualitative data was collected through interviews with referral partner organisations[29] and current or previous Breaking Barriers clients who are members of our Ambassador Council (an advisory group for the charity). Four referral partners and three clients were interviewed. Written feedback from an additional referral partner has also been included.

Figure 15 **The proportion of respondents by age group and gender**



[29] Referral partners are organisations that work refugee sector, normally focused on another aspect of refugee integration

BREAKING BARRIERS
Integrating refugees through employment.

With thanks to

Breaking Barriers Ambassador Council
Helen Bamber Foundation
Refuaid
Refugee Council
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