

A Pandemic In Sedgemoor

*A Summary of
A Review of the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic
on the lives of the Clients of Citizens Advice Sedgemoor*

By
the Research and Campaigns Team
of
Citizens Advice Sedgemoor

This is a summary of a preliminary report on the experience of Citizens Advice Sedgemoor and the COVID-19 Pandemic of Spring 2020. The story may not be over yet.

It includes some details on common Computer Troubles, and a brutally simplified guide to information law.

Our experience highlights three aspects.

COVID19

We infer that the greatest indicator of the risk of dying from COVID19 is the person's age. The second great indicator is the Ethnicity of the person. The third indicator is where on the scale of Deprivation they live. Other factors, notably pre-existing health conditions, makes the risk even more horrifying.

So a person who is over 80, and is Black, and lives in one of the most deprived areas has an enormous risk.

This tells us that those people who live in the most deprived parts of Sedgemoor - in Sydenham North, Hamp and Sydenham South face a significantly greater risk of dying from the disease. Twice the risk of those in the least privileged areas.

It tells us that those who live in Cheddar, Wembdon and Burnham North are at a much reduced risk.

The risk worsens hugely for people who are not White.

It also worsens hugely for older people who have pre-existing health conditions.

Worst of all is to be living in a deprived area, and to be older, and to have pre-existing health conditions, and to be Black.

Digital Inclusion

There are now few homes in Sedgemoor remaining who have no access to Broadband Internet, and it seems likely that they will be offered access within the next few months.

Many households do not acquire a computer and a connection because of the cost. These are likely to be the financially disadvantaged.

But many people simply choose not to engage with the technology. We suspect that the pressures of the Covid Pandemic may be reducing the number of them, but the evidence is not yet available.

The old problem of literacy and IT literacy still persists.

We applaud the efforts of the Department of Work and Pensions to provide support for those applying for benefits, but the very nature of this is limited.

Domestic Abuse

Domestic Abuse statistically small for CA Sedgemoor, but for the victims - and perhaps their children – the impact is huge: life changing.

It is difficult to study cases through Citizens Advice data because records are categorised by reference to 11 different Advice Issue Codes.

Nationally, during the year ending March 2018, Police attended 1.2 million incidents and recorded 0.6 million domestic-abuse related crimes. They made 225714 arrests – which is 38 for every 100 crimes recorded. Of those prosecuted, more than three quarters secured a conviction.

In Avon and Somerset, domestic abuse accounted for 2% of calls to police in 2012-13. 3% of these were from repeat victims. Domestic Abuse accounted for 8% of recorded crime. 2788 assaults with injury were related to Domestic Abuse – which is 36% of the total reported. The force recorded 503 cases of harassment that were Domestic Abuse related – 57%. They recorded 216 sexual offences that were Domestic Abuse related – 13% of the total. For every 100 Domestic Abuse crimes recorded, there were 70 arrests.

The case studies demonstrate that this is a real, emotive, and unhappy problem.

Domestic abuse is not a numerically large problem for Citizens Advice Sedgemoor, although our counting is almost certainly significantly flawed, and there are probably many more of our cases that start with Abuse, but present with another problem (eg Debt, Food Bank and/or Homelessness).

There is no dominant pattern. It cannot simply be seen as a stereotypical story of man-hits-partner. We have examples of offspring attacking parents and females attacking males. One is reported by a third party.

More than half of the cases are said to involve violence. Only a quarter refer to police; and none of the clients are explicitly seeking punishment for the perpetrator.

A third of the cases seem to be about custody of children.

What Next ?

The Gap

There is very strong evidence of a Gap between the most Deprived and the least - including in Sedgemoor.

A number of reliefs have been in place during the pandemic:

- Improved rates of Universal Credit
- Improved rates of Housing Benefit
- Improved support for the Homeless
- Prevention of Eviction to mitigate Homelessness.

It is important that this progress is not lost - that further progress is made to mitigate the most severe Deprivation. There is a fear that this progress is temporary.

We await the report of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission Inquiry on the disparities in Risk and outcomes.

Digital Inclusion

It would be of huge advantage to the people of Sedgemoor to have a service that gives them access to a computer, outside office hours - with some support, space to explore and empowerment.

Domestic Abuse

This report is intended to raise awareness of a major problem in our society.

It is major in that it has huge effects on the lives of the adults involved, and their children. It worsens when people live in unrelieved close confines, such as “the lockdown”, but it also surfaces several times a year in the long Bank Holidays. We suggest that it also worsens with Deprivation, and we recommend further research in this area.

It is a particularly Difficult problem in that we depend heavily on external evidence, although we include a significant quantity of Case Study material. Citizens Advice data is particularly difficult to get, and we suggest that a Search capability for keywords in Case Notes text is called for.

We can see no main solution. The law is gradually improving.

Finally

The Pandemic has at least had one beneficial effect - it has drawn attention and appreciation for the Key Workers. Obvious key workers are working within the National Health Service; but we now understand that people working in Care Homes are also Key; and workers in the Emergency Services; and workers in food supply - and very many more. They are not paid according to their importance in society.