INSIGHT SUMMARY

Autumn 2022
“I get lots of help when I don’t know where to go. I can phone them: METRO is somewhere to go; a comfortable, safe place.”

METRO Service User Forum contributor, February 2022
Introduction

METRO is a leading equalities charity supporting people experiencing issues around sexuality, gender, equality, diversity and identity. Providing services throughout London, Kent, Medway and Essex across our five domains: Sexual & Reproductive Health, Community, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Youth and HIV.

Through these services and our interactions within the communities we serve, we are able to identify trends, hear concerns and see how various decisions at a policy level impact on people’s lives. We have drawn together these insights into this overview.

Developed for policy makers and politicians at both national and local levels, we hope that you find these insights useful in informing your work.
Cost-of-living crisis

The need for support has increased and intensified for our services just as our charity and other voluntary and community sector agencies face staff shortages with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis taking its toll on staff and volunteer retention, morale, and wellbeing.

As a charity serving many people who live on low incomes, the ongoing, escalating cost-of-living crisis is an issue our team are supporting people through on a daily basis. We hear about the needs of individuals, partners, and people’s dependents through the broad spectrum of health and wellbeing services we deliver. This includes advocacy and health support for people living with HIV, welfare advice for disabled people, mental health support for LGBTQ+ young people and adults, and sexual health services for young people. Many of our services include geographic areas of socio-economic deprivation in London and the south east of England.

For our staff of 89 people, they are also affected by the growing crisis caused by inflation and increasing energy costs, as people working in the charity sector, with many also on low incomes. This issue is also relevant for many of our volunteers, numbering almost 100 people, who provide vital assistance in delivering counselling and peer support to LGBTQ+ young people and adults, and people living with HIV among others who could be most affected by increasing cost-of-living pressures.
Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we want to address the social isolation many had been experiencing, and the subsequent negative impact on their mental health - this applies across our staff, volunteers and service users - yet what should be minor financial issues such as travel costs are now major issues, alongside food and housing costs, the latter particularly for people renting.

Research from The Trussell Trust, whose foodbanks METRO refers service users to, provides evidence of the scale of this crisis with 21% people who were claiming Universal Credit unable to cook hot meals, and 23% unable to travel to work or essential appointments because they couldn’t afford the cost of public transport or fuel.¹

For our service users, frontline workers verify that people in more rural areas are struggling to pay for fuel to drive to medical appointments or for shopping trips and to care for their pets who for some people provide their sole companionship. More broadly, people are also eating less fresh, healthy food to reduce their shopping bills. Those who are digitally excluded cannot navigate the additional benefits that are available to them without our support either over the phone or in-person. Our staff are spending hours in phone queues to energy companies, local authority call centres, and to the Department of Work and Pensions to advocate for and support hundreds of people with an intensified demand for support akin to the social and economic crisis during COVID-19. Anxiety levels for our service users and frontline workers alike are rising and already taking a toll on mental health and wellbeing.

¹ Forty percent of people claiming Universal Credit skipping meals to survive, new research from the Trussel Trust reveals: https://www.trusselltrust.org/2022/09/07/forty-percent-of-people-claiming-universal-credit-skipping-meals-to-survive-new-research-from-the-trussell-trust-reveals/ (accessed 23 September 2022): ‘The research is based on an online survey by YouGov of 1,846 adults (18+) currently claiming Universal Credit. All, figures unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Fieldwork was carried out online and was undertaken 10 – 31 August 2022.’
Our services

METRO delivered over 150,000 occasions of service in the financial year 2021-2022 across our five domains:

**Sexual & Reproductive Health: Over 40,000 occasions of service**

METRO delivers a range of public sector contracts, particularly serving young people.

**Insights:**

- Rising cost of commodities, from condoms to gloves, which increase our costs despite stagnant budgets
- Impact of Brexit on availability of stocks of female/internal condoms and dental dams affecting choice and compromising sexual and reproductive health
- In the context of Roe v Wade in the USA, we know there is concern that our progressive reproductive rights in the UK are robustly protected, including:
  - Abortion clinic buffer zones - particularly as anti-choice sentiment rises in the UK
  - Essential at-home abortion choices.
Community: Over 4,000 occasions of service

METRO is the voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure provider for the Royal Borough of Greenwich, where we also deliver LGBTQ+ hate crime victim support, and the latter in Croydon.

Insights:

- Voluntary and community organisations we work with report rising levels of debt for their clients and communities
- The local VCS is starting to show considerable financial stress itself with groups now coming to METRO for support around insolvency due to energy bills
- Addressing systemic, institutional, and societal racism continues to be a priority for our communities, especially observed through our infrastructure support in the Royal Borough of Greenwich and in the face of the narrative on the absence of institutional racism in the UK presented in the Commission for Race and Ethnic Disparities report (2021)
- Public sector funding cuts directly affecting the scope of grants and contracts to the sector with unrealistic budgets for salaries to provide capacity and resources for sufficient service delivery
- The voices of disabled people are not being heard to ensure that the maxim ‘nothing about us without us’ is realised in meeting the public sector equality duty enshrined in the Equality Act 2010
Mental Health & Wellbeing: Over 5,000 occasions of service

METRO provides a range of specialist LGBTQ+ mental health and wellbeing services, including counselling for young people and adults, a mental health weekly drop-in group, a one-to-one programme for adults in Lewisham, and a general parenting support programme in Greenwich.

Insights:

• Financial anxiety and stress are affecting families we support in our parenting programme for Greenwich, particularly teenagers with school attendance issues

• Demand for our specialist gender identity and sexual orientation counselling for young people has long waiting lists and insufficient funding to meet this demand, however statutory funding is being cut and is currently insufficient for local demand for service across London

• The current climate of transphobia as exemplified in the controversy over the revision of the Conversion Therapy Ban legislation to remove trans people from its protection is having a significant impact on our clients’ mental health and wellbeing
Youth: Over 2,000 occasions of service

METRO provides LGBTQ+ youth groups in various south London boroughs and in Medway, a trans-specific group open to all young London residents, and an HIV support group for young people.

Insights:

• Providing some of the rare safe spaces for LGBTQ+ young people in London and Medway, we are receiving insufficient and inconsistent funding across many boroughs where this provision has been either deprioritised or service specifications are financially unviable

• Staff recruitment for youth work is challenging in the current economic climate and threatens the delivery of this vital work for young people’s emotional and sexual health and wellbeing. Youth work requires increased resources to be seen as an attractive and financially viable professional pathway
HIV: Almost 100,000 occasions of service

Leading the GMI Partnership we co-deliver London’s HIV Prevention Programme as well a range of HIV prevention and support services in London and Essex, including a family support programme.

Insights:

- Concern in the men who have sex with men community around the availability of vaccinations against Monkeypox

- Concern around the lack of available information and vaccines for the monkeypox outbreak predominantly affecting gay and bisexual men and other and men who have sex with men (GBMSM). They report long queues to speak to someone in sexual health services, and a lack of appointment slots and walk-in capacity

- The stigma surrounding living with HIV is still high and people from GBMSM and Black, Asian and minority ethnic populations are still highly affected by HIV. We strive to support people who are newly diagnosed often through A&E settings, with peer support in order to decrease stigma and so that people can live well with HIV
• Working with a high number of people living with HIV who are from migrant communities, we are providing additional support to the NHS for people that don’t understand their eligibility for care and benefits. Many people are unable to access HIV testing, treatment and care unless language specific support is given. Our Latin American self-stigma project is breaking-down the stigma of accessing care and living with HIV for people from these communities who speak Spanish and Portuguese. But we need more in person support for these services in NHS clinics

• The cost-of-living crisis weighs heavily on many of the people living with HIV that we support. They report:
  - Missing essential health appointments to avoid high transport costs
  - Nutrition being affected by food prices and reduced purchase of fresh food
  - Older people are particularly at risk of fuel poverty over the winter
  - Families we support living with HIV are at risk of homelessness due to high cost of living and rent increases leaving families in debt and rent errors