

Case Study: Adapting support and services during Covid-19

By Redcar and Cleveland Mind

“Because of the areas we work in and the communities we serve, simply moving all our services online was far from a complete solution. We’ve been able to ensure people in crisis continue to be identified and given the information and support they need by linking up with those they know and trust – their neighbours.”

Veronica Harnett, Chief Executive

What does your organisation do?

We support the mental health and wellbeing of everyone in our local communities. Although we are part of the Mind Network, we are an independent charity, so all the money we raise is spent on services in our area. We strive to provide and promote quality wellbeing, prevention and recovery services that put people first. This includes our Road to Recovery programme, for adults needing one to one, emotional and practical support, our Step Forwards Tees Valley programme which supports people with complex health issues into work, our Carers partnership project for carers with mental health needs or for those caring for someone with a mental health problem, and Future Focus, a service designed to help young people aged 14-19 experiencing a range of emotional wellbeing difficulties.

How did lockdown affect what you do?

The week before lockdown we withdrew all our face to face support and replaced it with one to one support over the phone instead. It was clear to us that infections were increasing, so we risk assessed our work and decided to act swiftly. We also created an online offer, which included a dedicated section on our website detailing all the

support still available, from ourselves and our partners. We have gradually added more resources to our site, to help people help themselves, including ideas for staying healthy in mind and body. With lockdown itself, we were forced to close our office and noticed a severe drop in referrals to the service, which even now have not yet returned to normal levels. We’ve introduced an online chat facility on our website for people to get in touch out of hours too, and extended our opening hours till 8pm, Monday to Thursday to allow people with daytime caring responsibilities the opportunity to access evening appointments.

What initiatives did you launch after lockdown and what impacts have they had?

HEROES project (developing hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism in local communities)

- As we were no longer able to send our mental health professionals out into the community, it was very difficult for us to identify and support people that were on the verge of crisis, numbers of which were very likely increasing as a result of the isolation and financial impacts that Covid-19 was having on so many people.

- We approached volunteer groups set up to provide assistance to neighbours during the pandemic, and teamed up with other voluntary sector partners to create our HEROES project.
- With funding from the Emergency Covid Fund and the Lottery, we developed training for Covid Response Volunteers who had been helping doing shopping, collecting prescriptions, and so on, to also look out for the signs of distress in their neighbours. We have so far delivered Zoom training for volunteers from Guisborough Bridge Food Bank and East Cleveland Good Neighbours, in how to have positive “over the garden wall” conversations, and what to do when they come across someone that they think might be at risk.
- While this might lead to more people accessing our service, it also heads off a number of referrals, as the volunteers are able to directly promote a number of wellbeing activities to help the people they come across.
- Another benefit of our HEROES scheme is that the volunteers are reporting an increased sense of value and worth in what they are doing, and it is also helping to build stronger communities.

Walking groups and outside support

- When lockdown restrictions eased, we were able to restart our Nordic walking group, ensuring physical distance between participants, of course.
- We’ve also met with some of our young people on a one to one basis for “walk and talk” sessions along the beach, which have proved quite a successful way of getting them to talk.
- Our Health Link Workers (part of our Step Forward Tees Valley programme) are now meeting some of their adult participants for one to one sessions outside too, which has been really important, as many of them were very anxious to venture outside which, in itself, was becoming a barrier to recovery.

We will keep these and all our activities under review as the situation with Covid and restrictions continues to change.

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What challenges did you face?

Reaching children and young people

- When we moved a lot of our support online, we found that children and young people were actually engaging less with us. This is in part because we operate in an area with fairly high levels of deprivation and digital exclusion, exacerbated by poor connectivity (broadband) compared to many other areas of the country.
- In addition, many young people are not keen to take part in video calls, perhaps because they are more image conscious than adults. Even when we’ve tried to provide support over the phone, we’ve been finding that many young people are withdrawing after a while and lose interest when it comes to keeping in touch. Reaching young people during the Covid period has therefore been a real challenge and something we are still focussed on solving. Text messages seem to be the most effective way so far.

Assumptions that our service was closed

- As our offices have been closed for seven months now, many people presume that the service itself isn’t open. We used this year’s World Mental Health Day on 10 October, to launch a campaign called “Talk to Us”, to reinforce the fact that we’re still here and ready to help people if they’re in distress.

Keeping people safe

- Even with lockdown easing, another problem we’ve had is managing the difficult balance of providing face to face support while keeping our staff and service users safe.

Staff wellbeing

- As the pandemic and remote working have gone on for so long this is a challenge. Having virtual supervision is not the same as having face to face one to ones, and it is less easy to spot whether an individual is having any problems. Many people, for instance, may have homeworking situations that are far from ideal, and it may be difficult for some staff to switch off from work.

Have you noticed any changes in the challenges people are facing during Covid-19?

People are struggling in different ways now: initially, we had lots of people presenting with huge anxieties about the pandemic. Now, in the last month, we've seen a 70% increase in depression in adults, caused by job loss and financial insecurities. Worryingly, recently, we've also had more presentations from young teenagers, aged 14 and 15, who struggled during lockdown with being socially isolated from their peers and are now finding it difficult to adjust to being back at school.

Sadly, we're also aware, anecdotally, of a number of individuals who are suspected to have taken their own lives during lockdown, although we don't know what the causal factors have been. We have had a number of people present to us, though, who are telling us that lockdown has led them to consider suicide. We have to keep talking about this, especially as the winter months approach and people's isolation continues.

What are your next steps and plans for the future?

- Fortunately, Redcar and Cleveland Mind is well-known and embedded in the local community, so we are in a good position to unlock good positive work, such as our HEROES project – which will definitely continue when the pandemic is over.
- We've also got a great staff team in place and have secured funding that will help us respond not just to the challenges of Covid-19, but also the period beyond. While the Covid situation is still evolving (Redcar and Cleveland being categorised as a Tier 2 area at the time of interview), our asset-based approach to working means we are capable of managing the uncertainty, and going with the flow of wherever this pandemic takes us.

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