

Voices



Volume 1, April 2021

from the pandemic



6 project stories
on resilience, adaptation
and continuation for
UK communities



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Introduction

We started the Voices from the Pandemic series in the summer of 2020, because we wanted to share the experiences of our grantholders at an unprecedented time. This publication tells just some of the stories from the 19,660 projects who received funding over the last year, sharing hands on experience and learning from the crisis.

A year on from the start of the first lockdown, it's an opportunity to reflect on their work and their learning. As the largest funder of community activity in the UK, we've seen charities finding new ways to bring support and connection to the people they serve. Shantona Women's and Family Centre combined its food delivery programme with checking in on those vulnerable to domestic abuse. Friends at the End rethought their approach to networking, and saw enquiries triple.

Throughout 2020, The National Lottery Community Fund distributed emergency funding where it was needed. As the crisis continued, we've seen the importance of being alert and nimble enough to address what people are going through right now.

ACE – Action in Caerau and Ely offered a joined up service of wellbeing as well as practical support, filling gaps in provision. And when Shifting the Dial saw issues that the community needed to share, they put together a 3,000-strong Zoom conference in a single day.

As well as the day to day work of supporting their communities, our interviewees share the visions that underpin their work. We've heard how much it matters for charities to keep their core purpose in mind – not just chasing new funding opportunities, but focusing on what beneficiaries really need.

They've also shown why simple, even understated interventions like the power of creativity have had such an important role in people's wellbeing and sense of connection. The Right Key used music to support people recovering from addiction, bringing its community "clean and sober" through the harsh demands of lockdown. And Home-Start Wandsworth's activity packs meant isolated families felt cared for, with crafts helping parents as well as children to connect and tell their own stories.

Across the UK, across different communities and challenges, our grantholders have found solutions, connections and ways forward. This first instalment of Voices from the Pandemic shares how they've done it.



“We’ve managed to support our community. We are standing next to them.”

Nahid Rasool

Shantona Women’s and Family Centre



Shantona

Women's and Family Centre

A conversation with Nahid Rasool

Domestic abuse: recognising the problem

Shantona is based in the Harehills area of Leeds, one of the city's most ethnically diverse communities. The centre is a BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic)-led organisation. In 2019, it supported 1,700 people on issues including domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, health and inequality, and community cohesion.

“When we started, people said there was no domestic violence happening in the community,” Nahid says. Only 4% of referrals to Safer Leeds were from BAME communities and referrals from the South Asian community were non-existent.

“Some of our community don't understand domestic violence. They don't understand financial abuse, emotional, economic, mental. We started talking about it, engaging with various religious perspective and discussing why it's not okay [...] Women's roles are seen as limited to cleaning, doing household work and looking after children. To tackle this we raise awareness and work to empower women.”

Shantona now works with schools and community groups, and runs healthy relationship programmes. The centre's Community Messenger model trains volunteers to spread awareness in their own social circles and share information on six key messages:

- What is domestic violence and abuse?
- How does domestic violence affect children and family members?
- How does it affect an individual (identity, low self-esteem, psychological impact)?
- Where to go for help and support.
- Dispelling myths (around social services, not suffering in silence).
- Involving family members in support.

The model is deliberately simple, focusing on the essentials and making them easy to share. "Give that information to your friends, your family, your social gatherings. You don't need to do it professionally, you just go and do it! Then report back how many people you've supported. That way, we've created a knowledge base within the community." It's led to a huge increase in reporting.



"We started talking about it, engaging with various religious perspectives and discussing why it's not okay."

Supporting vulnerable families during Covid-19

It took about two weeks to adapt to remote working. Shantona's computers and server were already due for upgrades: "We didn't have many laptops, because the work was office-based, or delivering services." Many staff used basic mobiles rather than smartphones: "We couldn't do WhatsApp meetings or anything with those phones."

Staff borrowed computers, and good IT support helped them to access their folders on the charity's server. The National Lottery Community Fund agreed to the purchase of new phones, while Leeds City Council helped to buy new laptops.

"We are the first contact point... From that, we raise awareness, provide them with support to go to other agencies."

Before the pandemic, most of Shantona's services were face-to-face. "We are the first contact point... From that, we raise awareness, provide them with support to go to other agencies."

During lockdown, they had to find ways to stay in touch. "They're not on anyone's radar," Nahid explains, "so they will be struggling more. Often, they are living with the perpetrator: either their in-laws or their husband." By distributing food for families and activity packs for children, Shantona were able to check in with the most vulnerable people three times a week.

They turned to social media to reach more people. But they recognised that some wouldn't be familiar or confident with connecting online. "We produced a lot of cookery programmes: sending the parcel to them, and saying, 'Can you ask a person in the family to show you how to use WhatsApp?'"

The "Cooking with Zaynah" YouTube series has been a hit, with the four-year-old presenter and her mum sharing how to cook simple, nutritious recipes. They've also produced Tai Chi videos, sent through WhatsApp. The recipes and exercise routines encourage people to build connections and practise their computer skills.

In more formal support, Shantona helped families to access food or other help from one of the city's hubs. They helped people to complete the necessary paperwork and worked with volunteers and Leeds City Council to make sure that halal and vegetarian food options were available.

Now Nahid's immediate priority is support for older people, particularly older women who have been isolated by lockdown. They're using feedback collected during deliveries to develop befriending and wellbeing activities and help with basic technology skills.



Looking to the future

Shantona has fed into the pandemic response across Leeds and beyond. “I’m getting a lot of requests for information, including the Home Office, the health services – everybody wants reports from us about how it’s going, how it’s impacting, how we are coping.”

“I focused on the community, what was required.”

Nahid is pushing to remove barriers around language and technology, for more translations and digital support. More broadly, she’s looking at health inequalities, recognising that, “It’s not just health: everything around you affects your health. I want to create leadership. We want to do it for ourselves.”

Nahid is concerned about the long term, when so many people in the community have lost their jobs. “It’s fine that you’re doing food parcels, trying to provide halal food – but we don’t know how long this situation will continue. How are you going to support these people? So we’re planning strategically, rather than rushing for any money we see. A huge amount of funding was released during Covid-19. People applied left, right, centre. I’ve seen people applying for funding for so many things, creating things they need money for. I didn’t apply for money until I was sure – I focused on the community, what was required.”

Nahid Rasool is chief executive officer of Shantona Women’s and Family Centre in Leeds. She was interviewed on 5 June 2020.

We’ve supported Shantona Women’s and Family Centre since 2004, most recently with a £487,282 grant through the Reaching Communities England programme.

The story continues



shantona.co.uk

“I always question the impact we’re bringing – at this moment, the impact is huge, and it shows.”



Shifting the Dial

A conversation with Nathan Dennis

Breaking the ice: before the pandemic

Before coronavirus, Shifting the Dial ran monthly group forums with young African Caribbean men aged 16 to 25. Under the title #DearYoungers, these face to face events offered facilitated conversations about wellbeing. To find participants, they went to places young people go, to fast food restaurants as well as youth clubs.

Sessions were designed to be relaxed and welcoming. They'd start with icebreaker games, such as asking people to choose a song that matched their feelings. Each young man was asked to sing his song – or, if that's too uncomfortable, to play it on his phone. "It becomes a bit of a moment – if people know the song, they'll sing along. It creates an atmosphere."

Venues were set up like living rooms, with sofas and rugs. "The space we use, it feels like a home from home. When you have [Caribbean] food in the space, it just becomes richer. Over a number of sessions, you find there's a bit of team, peer support, family bonding happening."



Sessions would end with a question: ‘Do you know what your purpose is?’ or ‘What does manhood mean?’ They explored these themes in larger-scale events, such as a 70-strong conference on “The Making of a Man”, which looked at what it means to be a man – particularly a Black man – in the 21st century.

Keep your finger on the pulse

At the start of Covid-19, the project made a smooth transition to online work. “We just said, let’s go online, let’s use Zoom.” They promoted the forums on a new Instagram channel, alongside Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

The first online session had nine young men and enthusiastic feedback. Since then, Nathan has scheduled weekly forums and larger one-off events to address major issues of the pandemic.

“In the early days, there were a lot of conspiracy theories on social media – stuff like 5G,” which wrongly blamed new technology for the outbreak. So they invited Dr Justin Varney, head of public health for Birmingham City Council, to have a conversation with the young men: “We got the guys to share, and ask him questions.”

One of the biggest successes was an event about serious youth violence – put together in a single day. “There was an incident in our community. Because it had been captured and was being shared on social media, I was concerned about the retraumatising of young people. I felt we needed to have a conversation.”

Nathan got the idea for the conference at 8am. By 1pm, he had confirmed his speakers and announced the event. “The conference started at 5pm – so I had about four hours to promote it. It was crazy, because it was the first time we livestreamed a Zoom. We had over 3,000 viewers.” That fast timing was key.

“There was an incident in our community. Because it was being shared on social media, I was concerned about the retraumatising of young people. I felt we needed to have a conversation.”

Quick reaction is essential, as in their response to the death of George Floyd. “We’ve had to change some of the weekly forums, let them be about Black Lives Matter, just to give people that space to breathe. Imagine if [the forum] wasn’t there – all that anger, not being able to articulate yourself. Many people started to relive times they experienced racial discrimination.”

“Sometimes people come in saying, ‘I’m feeling low.’ Then you hear them say ‘I feel so much better, thank you so much, man, keep doing this.’”

It’s about addressing participants’ concerns, as they happen. As worries rose about unemployment, Nathan invited the West Midlands Combined Authority to showcase job opportunities in the area. “There’s a lot of doom and gloom in the news, but supermarket chains were employing; construction, HS2 were recruiting.”

Resilience and growth

Teaching resilience is “fundamental”: “You have to be resilient during Covid-19.” They’ve shared practical strategies, including journaling, action planning and ways to be productive under lockdown. Sessions with relatable role models are popular, particularly when there’s an economic angle: young men who have started their own businesses.

Demand is strong. “Consistently, we do weekly forums, and the guys still come out. It’s changing people’s lives, helping them to stay alive. It’s that real, because people will share with you in the forums about the struggle.

“Sometimes people come in saying, ‘I’m feeling low.’ Then you hear them say ‘I feel so much better, thank you so much, man, keep doing this.’ So you know that it’s having a massive impact in ways that sometimes it’s hard to articulate.”

These positive results are validated by polls run at the beginning and end of each session. Developed with the Centre for Mental Health, they track shifts in attitudes, mindset and behaviour.



“The space we use, it feels like a home from home.”

The power of partnership

For the charity sector, Covid-19 has brought new funding and potential opportunities but, for Nathan, some frustration too. “There’s been a lot of what I call ‘magic money’ that’s appeared. As a smaller organisation, we haven’t been able to take advantage. I don’t have a fundraising team, or someone who’s sitting there to smack out bids. That’s a challenge, not having the capacity to take those opportunities.”

So he’d like to see more capacity building and development programmes attached to grants and more connections between charities of different sizes and specialisms.

“That’s a tension with many grassroots organisations. You get caught up in delivery, responding all the time. You never get time to do strategy. That’s why I love the partnership.” By co-delivering this project, First Class Foundation can draw on the skills of its partners, from evaluation to public relations. With that support, the organisation has space to plan and grow.

“We challenge each other, we’re accountable to each other, we’ve got good governance structure. We strengthen each other.”

He recommends chasing purpose, not money. “Fundamental principle, as an individual or as an organisation: make sure you know what your ‘why’ is. When the going gets tough, go back to why I want to do this. I want to help, I want to bring transformations to people’s lives. If you know what your why is, it gives you that strength to go on.”

Nathan Dennis is a trustee of First Class Foundation. A trainer and consultant, he works with young people to build mental health resilience and help them find their purpose. He was interviewed on 17 June 2020.

Shifting the Dial received a grant of £746,112 through the [Partnerships](#) programme in England.

The story continues



[Making of a Man](#)



firstclassnation.com

“I’m grateful that, in a time like this, we could be a lighthouse for many in our community.”





Friends at the End

A conversation with Amanda Ward

Choice and control at the end of life

“A lot of work that we do is trying to give people control back,” Amanda explains, “to give them choices and opportunities.” Before the pandemic, the charity held workshops to help people to put their end of life documentation in place.

As well as wills, this includes Powers of Attorney, a legal document that names someone else to help make decisions with you or on your behalf; Advance Directives, which record any medical treatments you don’t want to be given, and Advance Statements, which set down your preferences regarding future health or social care.

“A lot of work that we do is trying to give people control back to give them choices and opportunities.”

“People say, ‘Now’s the time. I’m being faced with mortality like never before, I want to stop putting off things, like my will.’”

They also hosted ‘death cafés’ where people got together over coffee and cake to talk about the loss of their loved one. “It’s an outlet for people to talk and share and to feel supported,” Amanda says.

The benefits of these groups go beyond practical advice. Often, friendships grew naturally. “That’s something that’s been really nice: to see people who have maybe been experiencing loneliness, coming along to one of our events, meeting people in their area, and keeping in touch [...] now they’ve got their own wee friendship groups.”

Making connections in lockdown

All this work was done face-to-face, so the first lockdown brought huge changes. The first task was to contact the charity’s existing membership. “We wrote to them, we phoned the people who weren’t on email, and asked: ‘We’re not able to run our local groups, but how can we still support you?’”

To reach beyond the membership, they turned to local and social media and other voluntary groups. They also did their own scoping exercise: “Is there anyone doing similar work to us in our area? We found that there wasn’t.” They wrote to 32 local authorities throughout Scotland, and to voluntary associations operating within those authorities. “We said, this is who we are, this is what we do. We know that there’s a real need for this, especially as people are becoming unwell.”

As a result, Friends at the End has been added to more befriending networks, and is receiving many more referrals. “People say, ‘Now’s the time. I’m being faced with mortality like never before, I want to stop putting off things, like my will.’”

There has been a threefold increase in enquiries: between April and June 2020, Friends at the End gave advice to hundreds of callers, and assisted 15 people through the end of life planning process.



Powers of Attorney



Advance Directives



Advance Statements

Some changes have been unexpected. “A lot of networking opportunities have moved online, which has been really useful for us. We definitely feel we’re part of networks we weren’t part of before – we’re a small charity, [it’s just myself and one part-time member of staff].”

“Ordinarily we do this work face-to-face: you can give someone a hug, or hold their hand. That’s been one of the hardest things, not being able to do what feels human.”

Facing mortality as part of life

Covid-19 has made people readier to talk about mortality. “It’s something that we certainly bury our heads in the sand about. Whereas - watching the news every day, having reports of deaths every day - that’s just a starkness we’ve never had to face before.” The charity hopes to harness that new awareness to help people see death as part of life.

End of life plans are time consuming – particularly since they’re now being done one-to-one, rather than in workshop settings. Amanda hopes to put some of the questionnaires online, followed by “a more nuanced conversation” once the details have been filled in. This would also allow people to pace themselves over what can be an intense process, giving people a chance to, “Do a bit, take some time away, start again.”

To keep going, she prioritises. “There’s always more to do than there is time and people to do it.” She also thinks strategically, staying focussed on the “people that we’re here to help.”

Compassion and kindness

For Amanda, “being as kind and compassionate to people as you possibly can,” has always been essential. “It’s important to have the qualifications” – she is an academic and lawyer, with a background in healthcare law ethics – “but it’s more than just getting your documents in order. It’s about pulling out from that, what are this person’s circumstances? Do they need support in other ways?”

That compassion makes its own demands. “We’re working from home, with all the issues that go with that – schools are closed, childcare. The conversations take a long time, making sure that we’re doing everything absolutely right with these documents.

“Then we go into all the scenarios – would you want to go into a hospice? Who can care for you, would you want to go into a care home? We ask, consider if you couldn’t communicate, how would you want to be cared for?”

“People can find it really overwhelming, I can sense that on the phone, but we aren’t able to offer physical comfort. That’s been one of the hardest things, not being able to do what feels human.”

Yet it's inspiring, too. Amanda is most proud of the times when families get in touch. She remembers an older woman, who needed acute care at the end of her life. "She was so unwell that she couldn't express her own wishes – but she had her end of life pack with her, and it spoke for her. One of the family members said that it was like a shield against aggressive treatment or overtreatment."

For the family, this was a 'good death', one where her wishes were respected and cared for. "The feedback from families, thank you cards coming to the office - it feels really worthwhile. It's a lot of effort, but when we know it's worked, for us that's the greatest achievement."

Alison Ward is chief executive of Friends at the End. She was interviewed on 29 June 2020.

Friends at the End received £9,993 through [Awards for All Scotland](#), which is a quick way to apply for funding between £300 and £10,000.

The story continues



fate.scot/news/coronavirus-covid-19

"It allows you to get on with actually living your life, knowing that you don't have to be scared or afraid, because you've done everything in your power to make the end of life a good one."





Home-Start

Wandsworth

A conversation with Carey Davies, Sarah Maher and Lisa Quarrey

Volunteers and peers

Home-Start is a UK-wide network of over 200 groups that support families who are facing challenges like isolation, bereavement and postnatal depression.

“I love the fact my volunteer didn’t judge me, I felt I could say anything to her.”

Home-Start Wandsworth offers group activities, befriending, and a ‘Bump to Baby’ home visiting service. It matches families with volunteers who offer a mix of practical and emotional support.

Volunteers – almost all parents themselves – receive nine days’ training, including mental health awareness and safeguarding. “We don’t take over, and say, I’ll be the babysitter,” Family Hubs Coordinator Carey explains. “It’s more about working alongside families, suggesting things that might make them and the baby happier.”

“There were lots of things to sort out... trips to council offices, to the hospital, to the Citizen’s Advice Bureau.”



“Listening is so important”, says Bump to Baby Coordinator Sarah. “How often do we have someone who’s prepared to just sit and listen, let us chat?” It’s something the families really value: “they’ll often say, ‘I love the fact my volunteer didn’t judge me, I felt I could say anything to her.’”

Volunteer Lisa was matched with a new mum who had left her abusive partner. “She’d recently been homeless and in temporary accommodation. There were lots of things to sort out... trips to council offices, to the hospital, to the Citizen’s Advice Bureau. I think she felt overwhelmed with the list of things she had to do, with a newborn baby, whilst moving into new accommodation.”

Having support meant time and space to focus. “You want to be able to deal with the problem in front of you, and that can be difficult when you’re also looking after a baby,” Lisa explains.



‘Zooming’ through lockdown

Lockdown meant switching from face-to-face to remote support. Carey took her weekly groups onto Zoom: “the creative group, a general hub group that anyone can join, and a bump to baby one. [At first] there was almost more attendance than in real life! Whether because they don’t have to get there on public transport, maybe it’s easier just to come in on your Zoom?”

Carey believes the group’s shared history is a big part of its success. “That group is very comfortable with each other. We’ve talked about everything – Black Lives Matter, not being able to sleep, anxiety about Covid, pelvic floor, everything!”

The move online brought new opportunities. Sarah suggested several parents might be interested in a Zoom baby group run by a postnatal depression counsellor. One mum became upset during the session, but afterwards she explained, “I’d just had that lightbulb moment.” Listening to the counsellor, she felt that “Everything she said just was as I’d been feeling.”

Volunteers like Lisa have continued one-to-one support through regular video calls. Families knew that support was still there: “they can ring or text pretty well any time,” explains Sarah.

Sarah acknowledges that practical support has been more of a challenge. “Some of our referrals come from mums who are struggling with their mental health, so that’s something we’ve been able to maintain. But we have some with twins, they want another pair of hands – that’s been harder.”



“We made these creative kits,” Carey explains. “with print-outs saying ‘you can make this with the equipment we’ve given you.’”

They’ve responded with tangible, practical advice. They signpost to foodbanks, health professionals and local agencies, and to organisations such as Little Village, another National Lottery-funded charity which supplies donated baby clothes, toys and equipment.

For Sarah, making food or Little Village deliveries was a good way to catch up with families, particularly those who hadn’t joined the Zoom meetings. “You can get a lot out of seeing someone, maybe if their child’s with them on the doorstep. Some people like speaking on the phone, maybe they can open up a bit more that way. But if someone’s feeling low, you can probably assess that more when you’re seeing them.”

Families have experienced lockdown in different ways. For some parents, “particularly if they’ve had their partner working from home, they’ve felt they’ve had more family time. They’ve liked not worrying about what’s on social media and feeling inadequate, a few have said that.”

For others, it has been very hard, especially where partners have lost work. “There’s been a lot of stresses building up within the family. It’s hard for them to know who to talk to, in that situation. If they’re talking from home, the partner might be aware, so it’s been hard sometimes to have that confidentiality.”

Many have been fearful. The mum Lisa supports didn’t leave the house during lockdown: “She was too anxious to go out - and if she’d been ill, she’s the only person to look after the baby, so she really was cautious.” “A few of our mums have been too frightened even to go on the daily walk,” Sarah confirms.

Connecting through crayons, sellotape and stickers

Activity packs have also been hugely welcome. “We made these creative kits,” Carey explains. “with print-outs saying ‘you can make this with the equipment we’ve given you’. Adult colouring, for mindfulness, and children’s reading books.” They included all the necessary equipment: not just colouring books, but pens too.

People said the kits made them feel cared for, “part of a family”, perhaps because “it was all personally done – it wasn’t like we bought a pack, we put individual things in.” In response, “they’ve all sent pictures of things their kids made, it was so lovely.”

Sarah wants to build on the success of the creative kits. “It’s really emphasised what a lot of mums get out of that, whether they have any experience of arts and crafts. Most people are receptive to having a go, and are surprised at what they get out of it.” “Some people will say, ‘Oh no, I don’t do anything creative,’” says Carey, but afterwards they’re proud, “they’ll say, ‘I made that!’”

This can be a powerful way to build connections. “One girl has done this embroidery on her postnatal depression. It’s absolutely stunning – we’ve shared it on our Instagram. She opened up, said, ‘This what I’ve been through, and I’ve embroidered it all.’ Another mum then said, ‘I’ve had the same experience’. Just through embroidery! I’m really proud of that, how it’s brought those conversations.”

Carey Davies and **Sarah Maher** are coordinators at Home-Start Wandsworth. **Lisa Quarrey** is a volunteer with the charity in south London. Interviewed on 6, 8 and 31 July 2020.

We’ve supported Home-Start Wandsworth since 2011. It received £198,777 through through [Reaching Communities England](#), which offers funding over £10,000 for projects working for positive change in their community. Its Stay Connected project received £69,129 through the [Coronavirus Community Support Fund](#).

The story continues



homestartwandsworth.org.uk

“Listening is so important. How often do we have someone who’s prepared to just sit and listen?”





ACE

Action in Caerau and Ely

A conversation with Sam Froud Powell

Building on the community's strengths

Action in Caerau and Ely (ACE) is owned and run by the residents of two council estates in western Cardiff. From crisis support to community arts and crafts, its projects help regenerate these communities.

Caerau and Ely are the second and third most deprived communities in Cardiff, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. ACE works with local people to change the narrative of the area, to celebrate its heritage and its strengths.

One project is their community food shop, part of the Your Local Pantry scheme. It's based at The Dusty Forge, a former pub which is now ACE's much-loved main venue. For a weekly fee of £5, scheme members can choose about £20-£25 of shopping. The food comes from FareShare, a National Lottery-funded charity that redistributes supermarket surpluses, and other sources.

Sam Froud Powell, ACE's Community Support Coordinator, explains that, "we wanted to provide something really affordable that had the dignity of choice." The pantry avoids the potential stigma of going to a foodbank, and was immediately popular. Starting deliberately small, membership has grown from 30 in June 2019, to nearly 200.

“We wanted to provide something really affordable that had the dignity of choice.”

“It brought a lot of new people into the building,” Sam says. “What was really nice was that they felt positive about being part of the project, and gave us feedback about the new things they’d cooked.” Those conversations showed the depth of knowledge in the community, a resource to celebrate and share. “People on low incomes get castigated for being terrible at managing – but this showed how much experience they have in managing budgets. We’re trying to help people with information, but the knowledge and input of the members are key.”

Covid-19: realistic choices

Lockdown meant choosing which work to continue, and how. Where possible, projects were delivered by staff and volunteers working from home, often with real ingenuity: the Hidden Hill Fort community archaeology project ran a “Big Dig” in residents’ gardens. Drop-in advice sessions became a telephone service. The Dusty Forge closed to the public, but ACE continued to run core services from the building.

“We focused on making best use of our resources. The Dusty Forge became a food distribution hub, serving pantry members and providing emergency food parcels.” With donations from local churches and individuals as well as FareShare supplies, more food was coming in than ever before.

The pantry had to work with reduced numbers. “We were careful not to overcommit. If we’d tried to keep providing food to everybody, staff would have burned out, and we’d have disappointed people by failing to deliver.”

From the start of lockdown in March until the end of June (2020), ACE made 650 pantry deliveries, and sent out 300 free emergency parcels. They coordinated with Cardiff Council to avoid duplication and fill gaps in existing services.

ACE explained to members that they would prioritise those most in need, to reduce the risk of disappointment. “It wasn’t hard and fast criteria, but we tried to focus support on those who weren’t receiving help from elsewhere.”

Some families didn’t qualify for free school meals, but still found it difficult financially. People who were shielding were another priority, and those whose anxiety or mental health issues made it difficult to shop. “We know families and pantry members who haven’t left the house over the course of the pandemic. We’re trying to be sensitive to those situations. If someone’s a single parent with three or four children, it’s just not a nice experience to go to a socially distanced supermarket. Even though they’re not shielding, we recognise that it’s harder for them.”

People on the delivery list continued to pay £5. “We felt it was important to keep that element, that it’s not charity you’re asking for.”

Support by phone

ACE's advice line set up a new rota, with calls transferred to staff's home mobiles, and requests logged in a central spreadsheet. They'd received 500 calls by the end of June.

Though most asked for help with food, prescriptions or money and benefits, some callers simply felt isolated and wanted someone to talk to. So ACE trained volunteers to make regular wellbeing calls. "The support line isn't really set up for people to have a 20-minute chat, so we'll offer a friendly follow-up call." It's popular with volunteers as well as service users, mobilising those who can't take part in the practical activities.

Sam, who coordinates the practical side, feels lucky to work alongside a dedicated health and wellbeing team. "We're trying to provide things in a joined-up way."

One example is the new "back home box", a care package for people discharged from hospital. It includes essential foods, information about services offered by ACE and its partners, and "nice things: toiletries, skin cream". As well as a caring gesture at what can be a vulnerable time, the box can be the start of a relationship with ACE, letting people know how to get involved.

"We know families and pantry members who haven't left the house over the course of the pandemic. We're trying to be sensitive to those situations."



"People want to do more, but we don't want them burning the candle at both ends."

Taking care of your team

Like many charities, ACE faced rising demand and falling volunteer numbers at the start of the pandemic. "A lot of our volunteers couldn't be involved because of shielding and childcare. We saw a big dip, but then we started getting offers from new volunteers. We weren't able to say yes to everybody straight away, because of social distancing." Numbers at The Dusty Forge are strictly limited.

Sam is proud of the team. "People have stepped up, shown flexibility and huge compassion, wanted to make things better. It's been a lovely environment to work in." But they've had to be careful about burnout. "People want to do more, but we don't want them burning the candle at both ends."

Openness has been essential, starting with discussions about capacity. "We took a step back from some activities, those we felt were impossible. It's about flexibility. People who were on our training project now help with food distribution. There was a lot of that, repurposing capacity. As long as that was managed well, it worked fine."

“What was really nice was that they felt positive about being part of the project, and gave us feedback about the new things they’d cooked.”

Funders have an important role in avoiding burnout. Sam praises the flexibility that allowed ACE to make its own decisions. “Accountability to management and to funders can be a big source of staff stress. We felt trusted to make decisions, to do what we need to do. That really helped staff wellbeing and morale.”

It’s the people who make The Dusty Forge what it is – and they’re eager to return. “We’ve had good feedback over Covid, but it would be a disaster if we have to work like this forever. We’re a community organisation, not a food distribution centre. People do value the telephone, they do value the food - but that’s not what it’s all about. They want to have that community space again, where people come together and are energised by each other. I think they’re feeling the lack of that – socially, but also because they want to be involved in making a difference.”

Sam Froud Powell is community support coordinator at ACE. He was interviewed on 23 July 2020.

We’ve funded ACE since 2012, most recently £498,343 through the **Helping Working Families** programme, which funds projects that bring about positive change for working families who are affected by poverty and supporting a child.

The story continues



aceplace.org

“They want to have that community space again, where people come together and are energised by each other.”



The Right Key

A conversation with Sheila Smyth

Since the start of the pandemic, “We’ve lost no one,” says Sheila Smyth from The Right Key. They run a Recovery Café, in County Down in Northern Ireland, which is open to everyone in the community, but gives a particular welcome to people recovering from addiction.

“We were able to keep people together, and keep people sane and sober. People have come out of lockdown with massive alcohol dependencies that they didn’t have before. And yet we had a group of recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, people in mental health recovery and

who had experienced bereavement and sadness and brokenness - and they stayed clean and sober.”

Music and creativity for healing

The Right Key uses music and crafts to support people in recovery, alongside traditional methods like counselling. Sheila is a musician and composer whose work began with a series of music workshops in a rehabilitation centre. At the end of the 12-week residential programme, participants turned to her because they wanted to stay together, to keep singing. “That’s how we formed the recovery café.”

The group has worked in prisons and clinics, but the recovery café is the heart of the work. Starting in a small building in Dromore, they moved in 2019 to a former schoolhouse in Loughbrickland. “The beauty of it is that it has a rural feel to it. It means that you can come out of your situation, whatever the drama is, to a safe, peaceful place by a lake.”

Other activities include woodworking – making musical instruments as well as toys and gifts – and guitar and piano tuition. Before the pandemic, they offered some rooms for crisis housing, and performed concerts in the community. “That brings about a lot of social change: imparting knowledge, challenging stigma.”

But for Sheila, “the golden thread that runs through all of that is people’s stories. We wrap it all in music, then take the music out, harnessing that recovery.”

Adapting during lockdown

Before the pandemic, The Right Key had been renovating its premises. “We were going to launch our building on 27 June!” Instead, they had to lock down.

“There was such a sadness, because Loughbrickland means so much to so many people. We’d hoped we’d be able to stay open, but addiction didn’t come under a necessary service. We needed to sustain all of our people, we didn’t want any of them taking backward steps in recovery.”



They applied to the Fund for support. “Thank Goodness for the Lottery, for just being able to ring and speak to our funding officer. We didn’t furlough any staff, the need was so great – we worked incredibly hard all through lockdown. We were still paying rent and wages.” They lost income from their café and craft shop, and from the outside contracts they were developing. The Fund responded with flexible support: a new one-off grant of £20,000 and a permission to reallocate existing funds.

Technical support was also vital. “Everyone got connected, even people that are not familiar with laptops. When we saw each other again on Teams, for the first time – all the wee squares and all the faces – it was like throwing a lifeline. The laughter!”

Along with counselling and peer support, they kept working through music. “It was different, because everybody’s WiFi goes at a different speed! We work very hard towards concerts, in teaching people, layering those harmonies.

“But it was a lot of fun. There was a lot of laughter, because when people were a couple of bars behind, and the others were hearing that in a different speed. With what everyone’s been through, it was a complete tonic.”

A new creative writing programme was particularly successful. “That was just liquid gold! We started off on Teams with people who had never written. They absolutely rose to it.” It’s become a major new strand for the organisation, with 14 to 16 people in the weekly creative writing class.

“Maybe half of them are using their writing to heal. It’s become a cathartic thing: they write about things that were maybe painful in the past. In some sessions, people have broken when they’ve read the story out. We just stay with that moment, because it’s a healing moment. They write it out, they read it out, and then they move through it.”

Keeping the ship steady

Online meetings were a way to support staff as well as service users. “Once a week, we had a big session with everyone on it, where I would encourage them and chat to them. We also had our peer mentors’ and leaders’ meeting online, which encouraged them as well.”

“As an organisation, we had to keep the ship steady, keep walking and not be overwhelmed by what was happening.”

That meant paying active attention to morale. “Making sure that, as leaders, we led the others through, kept them motivated, kept them strong. To be honest, we just dug deep. There wasn’t any other way of doing that. As leaders, as a board, as peer mentors, we met often on Teams, just talked it through and offloaded.”



“We’ll sing, but we’ll be out in the garden, two metres apart - which is okay when it’s not raining!”

Working with a prison and secure unit

During lockdown, the project had to halt its visits to prisons – but Nathan, the project’s music tutor, took his classes online for the first time.

They found ways to keep working with female prisoners and young offenders at Hydebank Wood prison. “They had limited activities and few visitors. We were able to do the same at Shannon Clinic, a hospital for people who have mental health problems.”

These students made huge progress during lockdown. “They really applied themselves, really committed. It’s not just the lesson, it’s the fact that they can access the piano, and practice. They say it has literally kept them sane.”

Supporting people out of lockdown

The Right Key returned to the Old Schoolhouse from the first of June 2020, preparing their building to reopen with new social distancing measures.

“We’ll sing, but we’ll be out in the garden, two metres apart - which is okay when it’s not raining!” On wet days, they’ll break into smaller groups, spaced out in the different rooms of the building. “It takes tighter organisation, but it’s workable for us, which we’re very thankful for – because for a lot of people it hasn’t been workable.”

They’ve found that some need to take it slowly. “We almost need to release people from lockdown... We’ve been meeting up with them, having a coffee, unlocking them almost. These are people who have been active and capable, but with underlying health conditions. Because they’ve shielded, they’re now afraid to come out.”

Others want to stay for a weekend: “We’re offering that, free of charge, to people who need that retreat.” They’re also working with other recovery groups, who can take over the whole building, taking part in singing workshops without having to leave their own bubbles.

For some, this has been a chance to start again, to take their skills and start new businesses: “Micro enterprises, starting up under The Right Key social enterprise. They’re taking their courage, and saying, ‘I’m going to try this.’ It’s changed the way people thought.”

One has now started her own hairdressing business. “She’s Covid-19 approved, she has a certificate – she’s taken one of our little rooms. She’s had the courage to do that, because of the safety net of Loughbrickland - she had about ten customers with us.” Another has completed his counselling degree, and is now on a placement running a men’s mental health project.

Focusing on the positive

As an organisation, The Right Key have made a conscious decision to focus on the positive. “We’ve got to strengthen what remains and start building again, in what is now the new normal.”

Sheila’s proud that that staff and service users have changed their mindset: “They’re now extremely positive. They’ve accepted the pandemic, they’ve transitioned, to now be thinking, ‘We’ve come through this, how can we help others?’ How can we continue to offer, not just the support that we were offering, but to include the new recovery that’s needed?”

Sheila Smyth is development manager of The Right Key. A musician and composer, she uses music and creativity to support recovery, particularly for those recovering from addiction. She was interviewed on 23 July 2020.

We’ve supported The Right Key since 2013. The project currently receives £219,136 through People and Communities in Northern Ireland, which offers funding between £10,001 and £500,000 for projects working with your community. In 2020, it received £9,600 for its Covid-19 counselling programme, funded through Awards for All Northern Ireland.

therightkey.org

“We’ve got to strengthen what remains and start building again, in what is now the new normal.”



Final thoughts

The Voices from the Pandemic series started as a way to capture our grantholders' work in the moment. We saw charities adapting at intense pace. Their work helped to hold people and communities together, in the midst of what felt like an existential crisis.

We wanted to shine a light on that speed and resilience. We also knew it was important for them to bear witness, to share what they had done and learned, and to have their contribution recognised and celebrated.

We never imagined that, a year later, we'd be living with the same challenges – and with a new and very different idea of what “normal” might be. While responding to immediate and ongoing demand, groups are seizing the opportunity to think about what a new future means. How should charities recalibrate how they work? What does the wider sector need to do differently? Collectively, how have we responded to the challenges and issues the crisis has laid bare? In our next volume, we ask grantholders what happens next.

If you have a great idea that will support your community, we're here for you. Find out more about how to apply for funding at: tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/thinking-of-applying-for-funding

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