

Case study: The Forward Trust

August 2021

The Forward Trust helps people with drug and alcohol dependence to achieve and maintain drug- and crime-free lives. They offer services delivered in prisons and communities in the South-East, East Anglia, Yorkshire and the West Midlands. Their services include recovery support, housing and resettlement advice, vocational skills training, as well as support for families.

The Forward Trust received £9,750 through the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF). The CCSF is a funding programme supported by a grant of £200 million from Government, distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund, to help organisations in England respond to the COVID-19 crisis and increase community support to people affected by the pandemic.

How was the CCSF grant used?

Forward Trust used the CCSF grant to develop its 'Reach Out' online live text chat service. The service enabled trained staff and volunteers to provide remote confidential advice on issues like drug and alcohol dependency, mental health, housing and benefits. Forward Trust had been developing their idea for the online chat service in 2019 but it became a high priority when the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions increased the need for help while reducing access to existing services.

Forward Trust saw a significant increase in people contacting them for advice during the pandemic. Calls increased from 60 per month to over 300 per month over the period of the grant. They also noticed how more people than usual were contacting the service for support for mental health. Many beneficiaries were isolated at home without their usual sources of support and many were turning to alcohol and other substances. At the same time, staff were unable to deliver many of the organisation's usual face-to-face services.

Interactions through the chat service are referred to as 'calls' but they are real-time typed text conversations between the beneficiary and staff or volunteer, rather than live voice calls. Funds from the CCSF paid for an increase in a staff member's time to coordinate the service, including training and scheduling staff and volunteer training, as well as IT equipment like laptops and smartphones to deliver the service.



There's a lot of excitement in the organisation about [the online service] and now we're planning how to raise more funds for it, and use the evidence and the insights that we've generated ... It's an example of how you can innovate something quite quickly."

– Grantholder

Quick facts:

Grant period: **June-December 2021**

Over **740** beneficiaries directly supported

Calls increased from **60** to **300 per month** during the grant period

Over **30** volunteers supported the service

Three key messages:

- ① The new online service helped fill a gap left by the suspension of Forward Trust's face-to-face services, and allowed the organisation to redeploy staff and volunteers who otherwise might have been unable to work.
- ② The service was critical in responding to increased demand for support during the pandemic, particularly the increase in calls for support for mental health issues.
- ③ The CCSF grant enabled Forward Trust to rapidly develop an idea they were working on to meet new needs caused by the pandemic.

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What difference did the CCSF grant make?

For people and communities

More than 740 beneficiaries were supported via the new online service during the CCSF grant period. As a live online text chat, beneficiaries were able to have confidential support conversations even while locked down or in accommodation without any private space. This support was critical while people's financial worries and isolation were particularly acute and normal support services were suspended.

Beneficiaries of the new online service received practical advice but equally important was the opportunity for anonymous, discreet conversations with empathetic people who understood what they are going through.

The support provided by the service also extended to a wider community of people. Forward Trust noted an increase in calls from concerned family members seeking support for themselves and for loved ones dealing with substance misuse issues during the pandemic.



Without the development of Reach Out, I don't think anyone would've been better off, quite frankly. I think they would have been a hell of a lot worse off. – Staff member

The CCSF-funded service also signposted beneficiaries to existing mainstream publicly-funded support services. In some cases, the service potentially prevented the need for beneficiaries to use crisis services as the caller was provided with the support they needed from Reach Out.

Key learning from the experience:

The CCSF grant helped Forward Trust to develop the service much more quickly than usual, so has given the organisation valuable lessons in how to innovate efficiently. They are planning to continue the new service and are seeking further funding to sustain and develop it.

Want to know more?

Website: www.forwardtrust.org.uk/

Twitter: @ForwardTrust

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ForwardTrust/

YouTube:

www.youtube.com/channel/UCq6ScacPHpVGYgBGB0TFPtg

For volunteers

There were over 30 volunteers answering calls on the Reach Out service. Most volunteers were recruited from the 'Forward Connect' recovery community, a nationwide community for former and current clients of Forward Trust, peer supporters and mentors, volunteers and trainees. By listening and providing advice to people based on their own lived experience, these volunteers felt a sense of purpose during lockdown and better wellbeing from 'giving back' to the organisation that had supported them.

Other volunteers said they developed better listening skills, which they believed would have a positive effect on their ability to support friends and others dealing with life challenges. Staff and volunteers also received training in mental health support and learned new IT skills needed for remote working, which could be beneficial for future volunteering and employment opportunities.



Learning how to listen properly is something everyone can benefit from – it will change the way I interact with friends when they're talking about things that are difficult for them.
– Volunteer

For the organisation and its staff

The CCSF grant enabled Forward Trust to rapidly develop an existing idea for an online service and meant the organisation could offer people an alternative to face-to-face services during lockdown. Staff who were unable to deliver face-to-face services were redeployed to work on the online service, thereby avoiding the need for furlough.

Reach Out also provided a sense of community and support for staff working remotely through their shared responsibility to support people during the pandemic.



What's been really wonderful about the development of this service is that it's created this community ... there's so much support and help ... because we have such a big responsibility, we're dealing with people's emotions and their lives and their mental health. – Staff member