



Case study: Smile Group

August 2021

Smile Group is a registered charity that supports mums with their mental health before, during and after pregnancy. They provide tailored one-to-one support, counselling services and the opportunity to connect with peers in groups through weekly meetings. They offer women community, advice and friendship to improve their mental health, physical health and relationships. Smile is based in Cheshire East across the four towns of Nantwich, Congleton, Macclesfield and Sandbach.

Smile Group received £9,900 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?

The main purpose for the CCSF grant was to enable the Smile Group to offer consistent, reliable support to mothers in need during the pandemic. COVID-19 led to an increase in demand for Smile's services as the impact of the pandemic negatively affected the mental health of many of the mums and families they support, including an increased sense of isolation. Part of the CCSF grant, along with other funding awarded to the organisation, was used to fund four staff roles, which offered them stable employment and enabled the continuation of Smile's support across the four towns.



***It gave us that security of six months ... I think we've had better outcomes as a result of the funding ... It's enhanced it because of that continuity and knowing at least four hours of those weeks [funded using CCSF], those areas were going to get that support."* – Grantholder**

Prior to COVID-19, all services offered by Smile were face-to-face, including group sessions at children's centres and one-to-one home visits. Following the first lockdown, Smile transitioned to working remotely. Counselling services were offered online or by phone, and home visits were replaced with one-to-one support via telephone calls, texts, emails and video calls. The CCSF grant helped pay for new phones for staff for this transition. As

restrictions eased, group meetings were substituted with small group walks.

By supporting Smile to continue its services, the grant also supported their work with local health services to complement, transition and replace support for mothers when relationships broke down or services were stretched.

Quick facts

Grant period: July 2020 to January 2021

203 people supported

140 new referrals received

Three key messages:

- ① Using the CCSF grant to fund core staff hours and delivery enabled Smile to continue and adapt its delivery to meet increased demand.
- ② Group walks were a huge success and Smile plan to continue them. They helped mums leave the house and talk openly, and the physical activity contributed to overall wellbeing.
- ③ Health visitors and other professionals could continue to refer mums to Smile because they remained operational, which was valuable given the pressure on health services during the pandemic.

Funded by



In partnership with

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

Independently evaluated by



What difference did the CCSF grant make?

For people and communities

During their CCSF grant period, Smile supported 203 people including about 140 new referrals. Smile services were described as a 'lifesaver' for mothers struggling with their mental health. Due to COVID-19, some mothers faced an exacerbated sense of isolation as a result of restrictions that limited visits from their families and social gatherings. The Smile walks provided an opportunity for mums to meet and connect with others facing similar experiences, to create lasting friendships and to feel less alone. Partners and children also joined walks for support. Women reported how the walks reduced anxiety, and contributed as a physical activity to the '[five steps to mental wellbeing](#)'.



It was an enormous difference. I was here alone, and being alone with a baby, already struggling. Already I feel lonely when I am by myself, but I was feeling super lonely also with my baby. Every Friday I could meet someone else, it was a lifesaver. – Beneficiary

Beneficiaries commented that they could speak openly, without judgement, with staff and peers in groups at Smile. The support often improved the confidence of women and in some cases, this enabled them to return to work. The impact of counselling services also extended to the families of women. The support helped women rebuild their relationships with partners and children.

For volunteers

Prior to the pandemic, Smile worked with six volunteers who supported the group sessions, including three volunteer counsellors. Some volunteers were previously beneficiaries and maintained their relationship with Smile by volunteering and also accessed ongoing support. However, when the in-person groups were paused due to COVID-19, the normal roles for volunteers were disrupted. Furthermore, the financial effects of the pandemic also negatively impacted some volunteers and their personal circumstances. It was

Key legacy from the experience:

Following the end of the grant period, Smile Group expanded their services to a fourth town. This was in part possible because CCSF offered stability during the pandemic. This was seen as critical for the future as they anticipate demand will continue to increase.

therefore valuable that Smile was able to continue its services so that volunteers could remain involved and benefit from the support, for example, on the regular walks alongside staff and beneficiaries.



I like the companionship of having a group of people that are working towards the same cause. We've all got different roles, but as a volunteer, that's really important to me, that I've got a bit of a tribe. – Volunteer

For the organisation and its staff

Using the CCSF grant to help cover staffing costs was crucial for the organisation to have "adapted and survived and thrived" during COVID-19. The job security for staff enabled adapting to new ways of working, including the walks which engaged existing and new beneficiaries and volunteers.

Without the CCSF grant, Smile Group may not have been able to offer the same level of support, which included new, more flexible approaches such as phone calls, texts and regular updates via social media. In the absence of drop-in groups, introducing new online self-referral forms led to an increase in one-to-one service provision during COVID-19. The forms also helped prioritise support as in-person groups returned.

With the help of the funding to remain operational, Smile also benefitted from more recognition and collaboration among local health services. There is now a more 'streamlined' process for signposting and referrals. By building stronger relationships with health visitors, they can work together to support the transition from pregnancy to motherhood.



As professionals/ the health visitor going in, we can only offer so much. [We want clients] to seek support from their peers ... I feel very much reassured that, when I refer into the Smile Group or encourage the practitioners who I work with to do that, it's very non-judgemental. – Partner

Want to know more?

Website: <https://www.thesmilegroup.org/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TheSMILEGroup>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SmilegroupPNI/>

Email: hello@thesmilegroup.org

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/Smilepeersupport/>