



How a Community Organisation Adapted During the COVID-19 Crisis

August 2020

By working with our colleagues in the Voluntary and Community sector, we have a series of reports on our website that capture the experiences and issues from the point of view of services and groups that support local people in the community.

This is an independent case study showing an example of one community organisation's story of adapting and what the future holds.

About the organisation



Relate North & South West Sussex offer a range of services to help people with their couple and family relationships, whether the individuals are young or old, straight, gay or bi, single or in a relationship.

“

We can help with the big relationship threatening problems as well as the issues that just make things a little less than perfect. Even if things are going well for you, we can help keep things that way.

Lisa Phillips Centre Manager Relate North & South West Sussex

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What were the immediate challenges?

Relate North & South West Sussex had to close down its charity shop which meant lost income. They closed all face-to-face counselling and moved into crisis management. They introduced telephone and Zoom counselling, *which is not something they have done before and under normal circumstances would have taken a few months to set up. This was completed within 2 weeks.*

They used what IT they had, and people have adapted and been flexible. They have applied for funds to provide appropriate equipment.

Counsellors had to adapt very quickly - some were supporting home schooling, had other commitments, members of family at home and no separate space to work from home.

Staff and counsellor supervision has increased, and extra structures put in place. Supervision is conducted both individually, and in groups via Zoom and over the phone. Initially team meetings took place every day to weather the early days of the crisis, but this has now settled to a couple of times each week. This has been seen as positive as people have had to deal with cases and follow up. Their counsellors have had to be *creative and adaptable - some working with clients who were talking from the back of their cars*. Policies and procedures have also had to be more flexible to this new way of working.

For service users there has been a mixed response, there was a gradual increase in April, and many prefer this way of working, as it takes away the need to travel and childcare, but some want in-person face-to-face support. The charity has set-up a waiting list for clients waiting for face to face support and have around 80 people on this.

“ We have heard that being locked down together as a family and then trying to discuss things is challenging. *Many couples opted to call a temporary truce and simply focus on coping strategies during the lockdown.* ”

How has COVID-19 affected their finances?

Relate North & South West Sussex are gradually moving out of crisis mode and into a more stable, if challenging financial situation. Business plans in place earlier in the year have had to be set aside as they adapt to the new environment. Emergency grants secured early in lockdown took them out of crisis mode, and they are now operating at around two-thirds of previous levels. However, they are set to make a deficit in this financial year.

They need to test if face-to-face services are possible for the rest of this year, but it is taking time to get there. They need to ensure it is safe for people to return to the office and comply with Government guidance. In the meantime, the Zoom and telephone service remains the bread and butter service of the organisation in the midst of the pandemic, and more and more clients are accessing this service. However, for certain groups, children under 14 years and larger families, Zoom and telephone calls do not work so well.

“ Some clients have returned to face to face work, but we are moving cautiously and carefully, and the bulk of our work remains at a distance. ”

Relate North & South West Sussex has 18 counsellors who work remotely. They had to furlough 10 staff, mainly administration and charity shop staff but *people have been amazing*.

They have adapted the service by offering ‘*one off free session’s* for people struggling with the pandemic, as well as securing funding for free and subsidised counselling for those unable to afford their service. However, this fund is now running low and it will cost £65,000 annually to continue offering free and low-cost counselling to those struggling financially.

Early on in the crisis trustee meetings were held weekly to ensure there were sufficient funds to continue operating. 60% of funding comes from client income, 30% from the charity shop and 10% from other grants and funding, which means that when lockdown was announced, 90% of the charity’s income was cut off overnight. However, client income is once again coming in, and the Charity Shop has re-opened, albeit at lower levels than before. As the COVID-19 crisis begins to ease, they will be able to revisit a new fundraising strategy which will be realistic within these times.

Relate North & South West Sussex says that in many ways, the hardest part is yet to come - rethinking the way the service operates and is funded within the longer-term restrictions of this new normal.



We need to secure sustainable funding to support those hardest hit by the crisis who desperately need counselling support but cannot afford to pay for it, as well as to ensure our service reaches those who can afford to pay.



How have they begun to Forward Plan?

Relate Sussex opened the Charity Shop mid-June and began offering limited face to face services in mid-July. Some staff have returned on reduced hours. Currently 7 out of 10 people are back and are having to adapt to new ways of working.

The furlough changes will be a challenge for staff and Relate North & South West Sussex, but they are *incredibly grateful for the furlough scheme and staff appreciated it*.



Sussex Community Foundation is one of the funders that has consistently been a fantastic support to us. We are also extremely grateful to our Charity Shop landlord who waived a full quarter’s worth of charges to support us.



What are the concerns for the future, post COVID-19?

It is going to be a long time before Relate North & South West Sussex are able to even consider a return to its services as they were in March of this year. Although it has survived the crisis, and adapted quickly and creatively to the new environment, the future holds many challenges.

This area has been hard-hit with many redundancies and job-losses, particularly at the airport. The charity needs to find a way to support people who need it the most. Charities everywhere are struggling financially, and now that the emergency funds have been secured, there is the longer-term challenge of finding sustainable, ongoing funding to keep delivering this much-needed service. On the plus side, the organisation now has a full team of counsellors able to offer Zoom and phone counselling to clients across the county, which creates opportunities for new growth and a new way of working, which is likely to be with us for some time.

Levels of domestic violence has increased; *they have tried to keep people safe and careful to pick this up and directing to preventive services.*

Job losses and low income are expected to increase due to the anticipated recession. This will mean their work in the Crawley area will be especially important as it is likely to have the biggest impact of job losses from Gatwick.

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There is a need to provide finance for IT free of charge.

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Contact details

To learn more, visit their webpage <https://www.relate.org.uk/sussex> or

Relate Worthing

For general enquiries call **01273 697 997** or email reception.brighton@relate.org.uk

Relate North & South West Sussex

For general enquiries call **07799 170582 (9am - 1pm) or 07423 147915 (1pm - 5pm)** or email reception.crawley@relatesussex.org



Horsham Voluntary Sector Support

The Voluntary Sector Support team works with charities, volunteers and community groups.

They:

- help new volunteers find opportunities
- make it easy for groups to find volunteers
- help new groups to get started
- offer mentoring and peer support
- run [events and training courses](#)
- help keep you up to date with our fortnightly newsletter. [Subscribe to newsletter here.](#)

Email volunteering@horsham.gov.uk or call 01403 215191 to speak to a member of the team.

We have a simple ambition at Healthwatch West Sussex... to make local health and social care services better for people that use them.



We are here to listen, take action and influence positive change for local people living in West Sussex.

We record what people tell us and share this anonymously with those who make decisions about our health and care services.

You can contact us in several ways:



Telephone - 0300 012 0122



Email - helpdesk@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk



Website - www.healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

You can also follow our social media channels to always be updated with the latest in health and social care news across West Sussex: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#).

If you have questions about the content of this update, please either call 0300 012 0122 or email cheryl.berry@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk



How a voluntary organisation has adapted during COVID-19 - Case Study

