



How a Community Organisation Adapted During the COVID-19 Crisis

July 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



Carers Support West Sussex is an independent charity supporting some of the 89,000 family and friend carers living in West Sussex.

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With more than 26,000 carers currently registered with the charity, we run Support Groups, a Carer Response Line, deliver statutory carers assessments, and help carers access equipment to assist them in their caring role or provide funds so that carers can do something for themselves. We can also help carers access counselling and call back services, wellbeing support, specialist support and have teams in all the of the major hospitals in West Sussex, as well as East Surrey Hospital in Redhill.

With almost 100 members of staff and over 70 volunteers, as well as a dedicated team of Trustees, Carers Support is committed to ensuring carers are recognised and listened to. For information about the Charity read Impact Report 2019/20. <https://www.carerssupport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CSWS-Impact-Report-2019-2020.pdf>

Sonia Mangan, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Carers Support West Sussex

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What were the immediate challenges?

Many staff already had laptops and mobile phones etc. for remote working so were able to work from home quickly. They used Mitel Phone (internet phones) and managed to get 16 of those out to team members as well as people using their Carers Support West Sussex mobiles, webchat, velaro and enquiry emails very quickly. Up to 59 of their carer facing team could work on their Response Line at any one time. So very quickly, they moved to remote working and managing online chats, emails and call back services to support carers.

It was important to Carers Support West Sussex that the 26,000 carers on their database, and partners knew of these changes. They redeployed 59 of their 94 staff onto the response lines, set-up business resilience meetings with team leads and moved to a Business Recovery Plan within four weeks of the lockdown.

Moving to virtual was not 'scary' but it did increase managerial time as they needed to increase *wellbeing checks - have you taken a break, do you need to reduce hours - you need to do what is right for you and so on.*



The teams have been contacting 300 plus existing carers per week and working with on average 3-4 issues per carer as well as supporting up to 50 callers per day on the response line.



What was the impact on staff, volunteers and carers?

For carers there have been two elements:

- 1 COVID 19 - anxiety
- 2 Access issues, money, isolation, depression, lack of NHS services for cared for person, access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), COVID testing, and care homes.

The calls with family and friend carers have *became longer and more complex.*

For staff it was missing face to face meetings with carers. They setup virtual support groups but staff initially found these challenging as they needed to *get their heads around how to make them work for carers.* The carers really valued this connectivity and it has been a big issue for them. They have appreciated how the organisation has been supporting them but *frustrated that carers were not classed as keyworkers, anxious about safety and lack of PPE.*



For volunteers, a new volunteer co-ordinator's *objective was to increase volunteer numbers but now had 25+ volunteers unemployed*. Volunteers continued to have weekly catch ups with the teams and are now being redeployed to do wellbeing checks for vulnerable carers.

“ Our 50 volunteer counsellors who support carers stopped face to face and set up to provide telephone counselling within three weeks. ”

How has COVID affected their finances?

One of the learnings for the team is that their business contingency plan does not have a budget attached to it and obviously an organisation needs money to change things. Their board agreed to fund IT needs to keep the new ways of working going. This was around £17k and so applied for COVID 19 funding and was awarded £10.5k. No staff member was furloughed as the demand increased.

How have they begun to Forward Plan?

Carers Support West Sussex management team has used the ACEVO (<https://www.acevo.org.uk/>) self-assessment resilience tool to forward plan but are not assuming that everything will go back to how it was before COVID 19.

The organisation does not feel that they have *full information from the Government* at present. They keep their Trustees updated and the key contract person at West Sussex County Council. The organisation had to move quickly during the initial stage *it felt like moving 4 weeks in 2 days* and this is a challenge and potential governance risk for any CEO.

What are the concerns for the future, post COVID?

One effect of COVID 19 is that carers normally have some form of respite, but this stopped in March, there has been little or no respite, which means that carers are up close and personal 24/7 and *many do not want to worry anyone - at one point they were being described as “stoic”*. This will have an impact on loneliness and isolation for carers, waiting for assessments or an appointment for themselves or cared-for person. It may take over 12 months before things go back to some form of normal. *It is ok, but it is not ok*.

The CSWS team is concerned about *Carer Breakdown* as the lockdown eases as ‘people have had enough’. This is why ‘wellbeing’ is so important and should have more investment rather than less.



Contact details

To learn more about Carers Support West Sussex www.carerssupport.org.uk

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(Monday - Friday 9.00am to 5pm, Wednesdays 9am -7pm, Saturdays 10am - 12.)

