

How a Community Organisation Adapted During the COVID-19 Crisis

September 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



For nearly 100 years, 4Sight Vision Support has been the leading sight loss charity supporting the visually impaired community of West Sussex



At the heart of our holistic and person-centred services is a commitment to ensure that a diagnosis of sight loss is not a one-way road to loss of independence and isolation. Our 2,000 members and 300 volunteers create a community that inspires and mentors its peers to maintain and transform their own lives into positive and fulfilling ones after sight loss.

Nik Demetriades, CEO for 4Sight



What were the immediate challenges?

Some of the practical challenges included being able to *support* and *provide* for people already socially isolated due to being visually impaired, and to protect staff, volunteers and members. The enforced lockdown meant we had to stop all face-to-face meetings, services, activities, and support.

Sight loss was not on the *Clinically Most Vulnerable List*, e.g. those whom the government asked to *shield*. Many in the visually impaired community, who had been **able to independently shop, lost this overnight** - as supermarket delivery slots got consumed by others. Staff worked hard to support people in continuing to get access to food and future delivery slots.



The 4Sight Vision Support Team had to work out the best way of replacing face-to-face support and how to make this work financially. They involved staff and existing volunteers. *They began by providing equipment, mobiles etc to staff and volunteers, and had to locate funding to enable it to happen, as this was an extra resource.*

Staff and volunteers began speaking to about 800 people, some 200+ hours **a week** of *talk time*, which meant that their workload has increased massively. *Since working in this way, they discovered issues their members had not shared previously.*

There has been some challenge and push back around making this change, as the charity has a federated structure of Area Committees which link at local level with clubs that provide much face-to-face contact and support. There was an urgent need to find a united approach to Covid-19 and lockdown across the whole charity.

Initial Covid-19 response plans focused on three key areas:

- Providing support to staff, volunteers and members and ensuring safety
- Finding integrated and innovative solutions to continue service delivery
- Financial sustainability

They moved staff and volunteers to telephoning members and posting out hard copies of their newsletter - for those who preferred it. Low Vision Assessments are now completed virtually. They are using more technology with clubs taking place virtually, using video and teleconferencing. Their Sight Care Advisors, normally based at Chichester and Southlands Hospital Eye Clinics, have been working remotely as many of the eye clinic appointments were stopped. *Without a doubt their communication has increased with the main change being phone conversations to support social wellbeing.*

How did members find the move to technology-based support?

It was a massive shift for some. Some members were, and are not, confident with IT, although it is difficult to say exactly how many. They send out 1,000 hard copies of the newsletter and email just 200. For some, it is not about having the technology to hand, it's more about how to use Zoom.

“

As we move forward, post-Covid-19, to a more digital-based operation, we need to bring people together to ensure every one of our members can engage.

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How has Covid-19 affected their finances?

They had to furlough five members of staff, mainly due to the catastrophic impact Covid-19 was having on fundraising and events programme and paused two funded projects.

“Furlough is an interesting area”, says Nik: *“We could have taken the easier option and furloughed all staff and stopped providing services to our members. But we took the decision that it was vital to continue to provide the service.”*

How have they begun to forward plan?

They are using the [ACEVO](#) Toolkit to support their forward planning, which has started. The main challenge they face will be to get back to face-to-face support while following government guidance. *It is difficult to social distance when you cannot see or have a guide dog. This is a real problem for members.*

Their members are happy they are getting telephone calls, and they will aim to continue to do this beyond Covid-19 because it has been so valuable for members. However, self-care confidence among members is very low, which is a key concern for the charity as over 75% of its members fall into the ‘frail, elderly and vulnerable’ category.

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

The voluntary and community sector has changed and there will be further changes as they move forward. *There may well be a significant number of organisations who may not be around or who have to reduce their range and level of services due to funding reductions.*

The sector supports many NHS projects, such as Social Prescribing; Wellbeing; loneliness and isolation - the detriments to health - so, these areas will be affected too. There is urgent need for core funding for voluntary sector organisations to enable them to support members through Covid-19 and into the ‘new normal’.

4Sight Vision Support tell us they have seen an increase in demand and more complex cases. There is a percentage of members who report they are coping as they have good networks, families, friends, and local networks. But many are not - they are worried about the lack of low vision appointments and all issues relating to sight loss, as the NHS closed down - cancelling appointments etc. This has had a big impact on eye-health care, emotional wellbeing, and confidence.

Contact details

To learn more about 4 Sight Vision Support:

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Supporting community action across Mid Sussex

During this time of uncertainty, we have undertaken a range of different activities to support our members.

General Enquiries: 01444 258102

Learn more from our website: <http://www.msva.org.uk/>

Admin Hub: Delmon House, 36-38 Church Road, Burgess Hill, RH15 9AE

Registered charity number: 1158780



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