

Third Sector Case Study: Relationships Scotland Orkney



Description of revision to routine service delivery made in response to covid-19/lockdown

At the start of lockdown we suspended all face-to-face meetings for counselling, family mediation, family support, substance misuse counselling and support, children and young people's counselling and play therapy. We worked with colleagues across the Relationships Scotland network to develop best practice for online working, provided training and established new guidance and procedures for our staff and clients to ensure that services could be provided safely online (via video) or by phone. This included e.g. putting in place additional emergency safeguards and procedures for vulnerable clients.

Most Services moved swiftly online, but some services involving children and young people were not able to resume initially. The Child Contact Centre was able to facilitate contact for some non-resident parents online, prior to re-opening fully in line with Government guidelines in August. This required Risk Assessments and new protocols and procedures to minimise COVID-19 transmission risks, and the child contact room was modified to minimise risk (e.g. boxes of toys have been prepared for each family for their sole use) and to make it easier for staff to clean between contacts, in line with a new rigorous cleaning schedule. New guidance has been issued to parents attending the Con-tact Centre on the COVID-safe procedures to follow.

Play Therapy for younger children has not yet resumed as this involves close contact between child and adult, and the use of materials (e.g. sand) which could increase trans-mission risks. We are keeping this constantly under review and are maintaining contact with parents meantime online or by phone.

Although some clients have preferred not to move to online/phone meetings, for a variety of reasons, around 3/4 of our clients have done so. We have also continued to take new referrals (across all services we received 110 new referrals between 01.4.20 - 22.9.2020 compared with 125 for the same period last year). Where clients experience barriers to online work-ing e.g. lack of access to a private space, lack of access to phone/computer, we have offered a room in the building from where they can attend an online meeting. We have also offered alternative types of support e.g. phone calls and regular emails to keep in regular

contact with clients and offer them practical support and tools to help them cope day-to-day, while continuing to work remotely.

We are now offering some face-to-face meetings with clients, where the practitioner and the Service assess, case-by case, that there is a need which warrants the increased risk. Any meetings take place with strict adherence to social distancing rules and hygiene measures in line with new guidance issued to Clients.

Description of additional activities introduced during lockdown

As outlined above, the activities we have introduced have been alternative rather than additional.

What you learned from the changes and what you might continue or develop as a result

For clients in the Isles/who live alone/have been shielding, online working has offered a lifeline and many have expressed surprise at how effective the sessions can be. Many of our isles-based clients find attending meetings in Kirkwall difficult due to the cost and travel time, so we will look to develop online working in future - where appropriate to the individual circumstances. This has also increased the capacity of some of our practitioners to offer additional hours, which helps to reduce our waiting times.

Some practitioners were initially sceptical about how much therapeutic work could be de-livered effectively online. While there are limitations, e.g. for clients dealing with trauma, we have been surprised by how effective online working has been. This may allow us in-creased flexibility in the way we provide services in future.

Furthermore, access to CPD online has enabled our practitioners to continue learning and developing their skills. While some forms of training will require face-to-face interaction, the availability of high quality online training should enable us to save on travel costs in future, as generally this training is provided in the Central Belt.

Service User Feedback

Individual counselling client:

“I don’t know where I would be without counselling, especially over lockdown and not being able to go out for weeks. I needed the counsellor to vent to. It has definitely helped.”

Relationships counselling client:

“The whole counselling experience has been really good for us, we were on different pages, not hearing each other. I was really worried about counselling but it has been a really positive experience. Lockdown was also a key to us having time to reflect, learn about our own and each other’s boundaries and put in place what we have learnt through the process even through Zoom, thank you so much”

