

WHAT WE DID DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN MARCH – JUNE 2020

SEPTEMBER 2020

yorkcvs

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Introduction

On 30 January 2020 the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In March, the UK government imposed a lockdown. All "non-essential" travel and contact with people outside one's home (including family and partners) was banned, shutting almost all schools, business, facilities, places of worship. People were told to keep apart in public. Those with symptoms, and their households, were told to self-isolate, while the most vulnerable (people in their 70s and people with certain illnesses) were told to shield themselves.

This report summarises the themes that emerged from the many conversations we had with local people we supported during this lock down.

Please note: all names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Who's 'We'?

This report has been compiled to provide a snapshot of the work carried out by York CVS during three months, March to June 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

'We' refers to all York CVS staff working in collaboration throughout the period described. In normal times, those staff undertake a wide range of roles for York CVS across social prescribing projects Ways to Wellbeing and NHS Link Workers, Healthwatch York, Dementia Action Alliance and Safe Places. See appendix 1 for more information.

What did we do during Covid-19?

Local GP practices added an option to their phone menus, for people in need of non-medical support. On selecting this phone option, callers were put through to York CVS staff (predominantly the Social Prescribing team) to answer calls. We could then provide social, emotional and wellbeing support, and organise practical help.

In addition, GP practices provided us with lists of vulnerable people of potential concern, for us to ring and offer support including a weekly welfare call. These lists included people with dementia (or who were in the process of receiving a dementia diagnosis) and they were supported by the York Dementia Action Alliance (YDAA).

Staff and volunteers (supported and co-ordinated by the York CVS staff team) made weekly welfare calls to vulnerable people, to make sure they had food, medicines and any other essential help.

In May, the Vale of York Clinical Commissioning Group (VoYCCG) asked York CVS to run a Covid-19 Monitoring Hub. This was set up to make sure that individuals who were symptomatic for Covid-19 were contacted regularly. It was recognised that on days 7 to 10 the symptoms of Covid-19 could worsen, and VoYCCG wanted to make sure people had access to the medical support they needed.

Healthwatch York encouraged local York residents to share their Covid-19 experiences via an item in a City of York Council (CYC) leaflet that went to every household.

They also urged local employers to help protect their most vulnerable staff with an article in the York press - <https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/18362063.coronavirus-vulnerable-put-risk-employers/>

York CVS also published weekly updates for the Voluntary Sector within York, to help keep other organisations up to date with York's response to the pandemic. Sharing information and knowledge was key.

What we heard – in summary

This report covers the period from 23 March to 30 June 2020, so the statistics reflect this time period. This data does not include the support we gave through the COVID-19 Monitoring Hub.

During this time frame:

1759 people were supported through the GP Hot Line.

Out of the people supported, **92%** needed social support. Only **8%** needed a GP/Nurse appointment.

1,005 people referred for social support

393 people continue to receive support from the Link worker team or welfare calls

876 Welfare calls were made, by the staff/volunteer welfare call team

The number of calls does not reflect the complex nature of many of the calls, and the high level of ongoing support and contact that some people needed.

Many of the calls that we received were questions about access to prescriptions and food, especially for shielding individuals who couldn't go out themselves, and for individuals who were struggling financially and were struggling to afford the necessities. York CVS staff took action to resolve peoples' problems and reduce anxiety.

Themes

Although every call was unique, clear themes emerged. Here, we explore those themes, with personal stories to illustrate them where possible.

Food and medicines

The Issue:

A large chunk of the calls that came through the hotline were about problems with accessing food and medicines. This also came up many times during the weekly welfare calls.

The reasons for people not being able to access food and medicines varied widely. Many of the callers were anxious about not having food and medicines.

Residents who were shielding weren't able to go into shops and chemists, or to GP practices and pharmacies to collect prescriptions. This meant a large number of people ran out of medicine, were afraid of running out of medicine and could not renew their prescriptions.

Digital exclusion was a significant barrier for many. Not being online or digitally confident meant that they were excluded from doing online food shops, online repeat prescription ordering and accessing online support groups (such as local Facebook support groups offering help).

We also spoke with many who were struggling financially. Some had been struggling before the lock down, and relied heavily on Food Banks and places like 'Pay as you feel cafes', that weren't open in their usual ways. Others had suffered financially due to Covid-19 which created serious problems and major anxiety for people and their families about accessing food and necessities.

How we worked to resolve this issue:

These issues were particularly challenging to deal with in the first few weeks of the pandemic and over bank holidays. Demand was high and there was widespread panic. Adequate help simply wasn't available at this point. As a result, York CVS staff delivered food and medicines to people who were really struggling, and had no other sources of help.

We worked collaboratively with Move the Masses, a charity that worked to deliver prescriptions to shielding people, or those who were self-isolating throughout the lock down. We sent many referrals through to Move the Masses, for their volunteers to deliver medicines, which was a very reliable service.

Once the CYC Food Hubs were established, we worked with them to get emergency food parcels to people and their families who were shielding, struggling to get to shops or who didn't have enough money for food.

Using the local food hubs meant that we could get food to people in need. We were able to depend on them in a way that was not possible with the Government food hubs.

Personal stories:



Michael was very unwell with Covid-19 symptoms and was unable to get food for his family due to feeling unwell and having to self-isolate. We provided support to the family and arranged for them to receive a food parcel. Michael told us that without our support he would have struggled to feed his family. He was very thankful.



Margaret is an older woman living alone. She registered with the Government scheme for food parcels and was hoping to get a priority slot for their online shop, but heard nothing back. She was already tearful and feeling anxious about Covid-19. We provided the number for Morrison's doorstep delivery in the interim while sorting them a food parcel. We then called back the following week for a chat and to make sure Margaret was doing ok.



Jacob's prescription was ready to be collected from his nominated pharmacy, but he was shielding. Jacob rang us as he was worried about how he would be able to collect it. We sent a referral to Move the Masses (MTM) and arranged for a volunteer to deliver the medication. Jacob was really happy with the help from both York CVS and the volunteers from MTM.

Access to routine care

Many of the calls we received highlighted the impact on individuals when routine care stops.

Dental Care

We received calls about the impact of lack of dental care due to dentists being closed. When people rang in need of urgent dental care, we signposted to NHS 111. Many people we spoke to found this process frustrating, confusing and not always resulting in appropriate care.



My COVID story is that from day 1 of the lockdown I have needed a tooth to be extracted, but all the dentist will do is give me more and more antibiotics. It aches and makes eating very difficult. All my food needs to be soft so that I don't need to chew anything. It gives me earache and the glands hurt. I'm not getting any information about when, if ever, I might be able to have the tooth extracted. I'm in my 70's.

Further into lockdown, emergency dental hubs opened in York, but people found it very hard to access this service due to capacity and a lack of information about how to access. When people did manage to access the care from the hubs, they found them very efficient and helpful.



I contacted NHS 111 as I developed severe toothache and accessed care from a dental hub. I was quickly (less than 24 hours) diagnosed with an infection and antibiotics prescribed. I was very happy with the service provided.

Toenail cutting

The closure of podiatry and nail cutting services in lockdown caused many issues for people who use these services. We received many calls from people who were in pain, struggling to walk and had balance problems. Their risk of falling increased. People were also anxious about when their next appointment would take place and were worried about other health conditions caused or worsened by their toe nails not being cut.

How we worked to resolve this issue:

We had a lot of communication with White Cross Podiatry Service (NHS) who were keeping in touch with their regular patients, checking in to see how they were managing. They were offering self-care packs, posting out equipment to patients and explaining how to use them over the phone. They were also offering emergency face to face appointments for patients who had broken skin, in-growing toenails or were in severe pain.

Some private podiatry services were offering face to face appointments for a fee. For people that called us who weren't struggling financially and were willing to pay for care, we signposted to these services.

Blood tests

We heard multiple examples of people getting confusing or incorrect information about blood tests. For example, getting sent to the wrong locations, not having the correct paperwork for the tests or not being in accessible locations (such as being suitable for people with mobility issues, and people with autism).

When people were given the correct information, the majority of people we spoke to found that Nuffield Hospital worked well as a location for blood tests.

Shielding and self-isolating

At the start of lockdown we heard from many people concerned about shielding, the most common worries being:

- needing to shield, but hadn't receiving a shielding letter
- receiving a shielding letter, but feeling they had no need to shield
- having to shield but then were not receiving any help with managing foods and medicines
- worries about what to do if one person in the household had to shield and the others didn't

We gave people classed as vulnerable and needing to shield the appropriate Government advice. We also arranged for people to speak to their GP's for medical advice when they had other concerns and confusions as to whether or not someone should be shielding. We also arranged for shielding letters to be sent to people who should have received one but hadn't.

Mental health and wellbeing

A large proportion of our calls were from people struggling to cope with poor mental health, often linked to being lonely and isolated in lockdown.

Many people were finding it very hard to manage high levels of anxiety. For example, people worried about catching the virus, and how life would be after lockdown. Many of these people had no previous experience of mental ill health before Covid-19.

We also heard from people with previous experience of mental health support, whose mental health was significantly deteriorating. They described the support networks and coping strategies they normally rely on being knocked due to services closing because of the pandemic.

We also had feedback from the Covid-19 Monitoring Hub highlighting an increasing number of people experiencing mental ill-health related to their experiences of contracting Covid-19.

How we supported people struggling with poor mental health

We offered weekly welfare calls to people who were struggling (most often this meant they were feeling lonely, anxious, depressed) and who would benefit from someone checking in on them.

We are particularly proud of our work here. Set up in rapid time shortly before lockdown started, our welfare call work was hugely successful in terms of uptake and efficacy.

- **223** people were referred to the welfare call volunteers
- **876** welfare calls made

We were able to keep an eye on those who seemed to be deteriorating (mentally and physically), or were otherwise giving cause for concern - offering extra support when needed, and also giving lots of practical support.

We signposted people to other organisations and charities; shared self-care tips, information on mindfulness and how to look after your wellbeing when stuck at home.

One Social Prescriber also set up a mindfulness group after lockdown began. The aim was to help people who were feeling lonely or anxious, and those interested in meditation. The group, called 'Breathing Space' is a weekly volunteer-led online mindfulness group. Members have a catch up, then are led through a meditation practice, followed by a further opportunity to talk and reflect. It has given the group members a safe space to chat and socialise, as well as an introduction to mindfulness and meditation. Several members of the group are hoping they might be able to meet up face to face one day soon.



Pat was a very isolated woman who was referred to us by her GP. Living alone with her cat, she spoke to nobody other than her York CVS welfare caller. As well as the support she got from the simple human contact of our weekly calls, we were also able to discuss practical ways to manage her mental health at home, introducing her to new coping techniques and resources. We searched online for community-based alternatives and she has now started watching the National Theatre at Home plays online each week. Crucially, this also enables her to chat with others who are online.

We also explored ways to stay physically active at home, and how to manage anxiety with online yoga. A referral to York Mind's adapted 1-1 emotional wellbeing support over the phone means she's getting more practical tips to manage her anxiety and mood.

Her anxiety caused her to be very worried about what would happen if she or her cat became unwell. Through our weekly calls, she was much reassured to discover that Move the Masses could deliver her prescriptions, and that she could order food delivery online.

She now has a whole suite of coping strategies to use, and a new online social community. Her anxiety has lessened because she knows help is out there if she needs it, and she knows how to get that help.

Dementia

We spoke to many people with dementia and to their families and carers, both via our hotline number and through the lists of vulnerable patients that GPs gave us. The loneliness and social isolation felt by many people with dementia has become even more apparent. There is also an understandable unease about returning to 'normal' life as lockdown restrictions slowly lift.

Concerns about loss of confidence, confusion about what 'rules' remain in place, and worries about loss of skills mean that many are even more fearful of the future.

Many people with dementia have seen a decline in their cognitive and physical health following lockdown. The loss of routine, and regular social interaction, has had a catastrophic effect on many, and those in relationships have experienced additional stresses from spending long periods of time together in the confines of their home without respite.

It is likely that York will follow national trends, in seeing a disproportionate amount of deaths of people living with dementia during COVID-19 -

https://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/fifth_deaths_covid_dementia/



Fred rang the GP hotline out of concern for Ellie, who was struggling with memory loss and confusion about lockdown rules to a worrying degree.

We found out that Ellie had been in the process of getting a dementia diagnosis, but due to the pandemic her appointments with the Memory Clinic had been cancelled.

We offered support to both Fred and Ellie. We made weekly welfare calls to them both, posted out information about dementia services in York, and arranged for weekly food parcels to be sent to Fred, who cooked meals for Ellie. We also organised a face to face GP appointment for Ellie, to rule out any medical issues potentially exacerbating her symptoms (such as a urinary tract infection).

Fred expressed deep thanks for our help, describing how reassured he felt now that he had somewhere to turn if needed.

Learning Difficulties

We took calls from a number of people with learning difficulties, both living alone and in supported accommodation. Many were shielding and lots felt very confused about the changes to their normal routines, sudden lack of support, activities and places to go.

We arranged food deliveries for many, made regular welfare calls and helped arrange practical support. We also sent craft packs to those who were struggling to occupy their days, and set up a letter-writing scheme using Healthwatch York's freepost address.

Carers

Many carers highlighted how the pandemic had cut them off from their usual sources of help and support. These could be formal, such as social care services and schools, or informal, through friends, family and peer networks.

We also heard multiple reports of people's mental health or behaviour deteriorating due to the impact of lockdown, increasing the challenges for the carers supporting them.

We spoke to many carers, sharing information and offering welfare call support where appropriate. We directed many to York Carers Centre, who were offering support online, over the phone and via Zoom.



Louisa is a parent of two: James, a teenager with autism and learning disabilities, and his sister Erin who has developmental issues. Louisa told us that the family normally feel well supported with informal support from family, the local community and James' school. For James, routine is very important, as is time outdoors. In lockdown, all of this stopped.

The direct impact of this was an escalation of challenging behaviours, especially when only able to leave the house once a day.

Both children became very anxious about leaving the house, and there was a lot of verbal abuse. Erin struggled a lot with the change in routine and James' worsening behaviours.

Louisa has mental health issues which are normally well managed with support from family and friends. However, once all this was removed she struggled to cope. She felt the children's schools provided little support at first, in terms of contact, school work or support. She felt they were just left to get on with it.

Eventually the family was referred to the school welfare worker who was very supportive and helped facilitate discussions to get James back into school part time.

Work and Money

During the first few weeks of lockdown, we heard from a large number of people worried about work. This included people (including key workers) who were unable or afraid to go to work for fear of putting a vulnerable loved-one at risk. We also heard from people who were self-employed, stressed and anxious about shielding, isolating, work and income. Some callers only needed information about how to access sick notes or get confirmation that they should be shielding.

The Government introduced Isolation Notes - a form of sick note for people with Covid-19 symptoms and who were isolating. GP's didn't need to sign off Isolation Notes, thus reducing pressure on surgeries struggling with the high number of people calling. We were able to complete Isolation Notes for people who were unable to access them online.

It became apparent that some employers were failing to fully understand their employees' circumstances, and the impact of shielding. This was resulting in workers having to decide between protecting their health (or the health of their families), or having an income.

Financial difficulties were a predominant issue throughout the pandemic. The food parcels were vital in helping people and families who were struggling (especially those who relied on free school meals).

One of the most frequent interventions we carried out was helping those struggling to afford or get hold of food. We referred a significant number of people to York Food Bank, local Pay as You Feel (PAYF) Cafes such as Planet Food, local mutual aid initiatives such as The Supper Collective, plus CYC food hubs.



Betty phoned us seeking financial help. She explained that she was retired and on a half pension, and had no food. Betty depended on her local weekly PAYF café and was struggling without it. We helped Betty speak to Citizens Advice York, who secured her more financial support. We signed Betty up for regular food parcels, and gave her information about Morison's Doorstop Delivery service, who could help her with any other necessities. We rang Betty weekly and she was very thankful for this support.

Technology

We supported a huge number of people to set up online prescription ordering, and provided information about how to register for online food delivery.

There was also much confusion about (and help needed to use) the NHS app for ordering prescriptions, choosing a nominated pharmacy, and making GP appointments.

We also sent lots of information by post (for example details of food delivery services). We did this as we didn't want digital exclusion to impact people's knowledge and to affect those needing to access services.

Technology came up as an issue for children and families in lockdown, especially those who were home schooling, as so much of this was expected to be done online. This put huge pressure on those families who couldn't afford the equipment or Wi-Fi, or had multiple children all needing to do school work.

Transport

We dealt with many calls from people unable to find transport to and from appointments. There seemed to be an assumption amongst health and care providers that everyone can travel easily.

People were unable to access transport for many reasons, such as shielding, not being able to access public transport, facing financial barriers and not being able to mix households.

We worked closely with Dial-A-Ride, who provided an excellent, reliable service. We could refer and arrange transport for people who needed to get to appointments. They used their mini-bus which meant that social distancing measures could apply for those that were shielding, and it meant that people who were struggling financially didn't have to worry about affording a taxi.



Peter had learning difficulties, was confused by the lockdown and needed transport for an urgent GP appointment. We worked with the surgery to change the time of the appointment so that Dial-a-Ride could do the pick-up and safely get Peter to and from his appointment. Peter was really happy with this service and felt reassured.

Complex situations which included many of the themes above

We heard from many people whose situation involved several of the themes above. There were particular challenges in living through the pandemic for people whose situations involved:

- Homelessness or rough sleeping
- Insecure and inadequate housing conditions
- Domestic violence and abusive households
- Being a single parent and juggling working from home and childcare
- Regular drug or alcohol misuse
- Safeguarding issues
- The sudden lack of care for those with Learning Difficulties
- Pre-existing health conditions
- Previous regular access to respite care

There was also a lack of guidance for agencies trying to support individuals. For example, it is dangerous for someone who drinks every day to stop drinking suddenly without support, but there was little information available about what support could be offered to someone who is reliant on alcohol.

We signposted people to the relevant services, in addition to providing telephone and practical support.

Reflection



Alison Semmence

Chief Executive, York CVS

The speed at which lockdown happened meant we had to respond extremely quickly to ensure people who needed support were not let down. Faced with a whole range of challenges the team were not phased – they went the extra mile to ensure people got what they needed. It hasn't been easy but they have done a fantastic job!



Christine Marmion-Lennon

Social Prescribing Manager, Ways to Wellbeing

It is hard to summarise our response to Covid-19. From ensuring the delivery of food and prescriptions at the height of the Pandemic, delivering cards made by young people in the youth justice system to reduce feelings of isolation, to supporting those with the most complex and enduring health conditions to access the support they needed and everything in between. All done as a collaboration between the social prescribing team, Primary Care, Healthwatch York and fantastic local volunteers. By working together we were able to co-ordinate a joined up response to provide care and support to those who needed it most.



Sian Balsom

Healthwatch York Manager

Everyone pulled together to make sure no-one was left alone and in need, whether on the front line or behind the scenes. I could not be prouder of my team and my colleagues both in and outside York CVS.

Conclusion

York is a city where the relative affluence of the majority of its population masks the challenges faced by those with less. For us, supporting people during lockdown brought the ongoing issues faced by people with less advantage into sharp focus.

We are proud of many elements of our response to the pandemic:

- The speed of our response in the early stages
- How well staff worked together, adapting to rapidly changing circumstances with flexibility, initiative and drive
- The large number of people we supported across the city
- Our ability to swiftly identify gaps in provision and those in most need
- Our volunteers; the support they provided and the way we were able to support them
- Of how we were able to work in collaboration with the VCSE sector, pull together and put people in York at the heart of our response
- Our recognition of the risk of harm to people when intense support suddenly stops, and the measures we put in place to make sure nobody was left without support (for example, continued support from Social Prescribing Link Workers)

Next steps

We have learned a great deal from this experience and have had a rolling conversation to explore how the VCSE sector, City of York Council and other partners can work even better together, in the event of a second wave.

To this end, York CVS organised and hosted an online planning meeting on 23rd September 2020. This event brought together 50 people from the local VCSE sector, NHS Responders, City of York Council, North Yorkshire Police and York Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust to discuss planning for a possible second wave and lockdown due to COVID-19. During the meeting we explored gaps in provision experienced during the first lockdown, and discussed what support organisations can offer if we go into a second lockdown, the sustainability or transition arrangements

as we revert to 'business as usual' and messaging for volunteers in order to manage expectations.

The main concern was about welfare/emotional wellbeing as we are already hearing from people who are feeling isolated, anxious and mental ill-health is increasing. Other issues were around access to accurate information about who was providing help and support. Another key concern is that the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people are being missed – we need to do more to creatively reach people who cannot use computers, phones, etc.

York CVS has committed to issue a simple survey to collate information about the local offer in the event of a second wave. This information will be available on our website and will be circulated widely.

We will organise an event with the NHS Responders to develop the relationship and understand what they can offer to York.

We will organise a session specifically focussing on the welfare response.

We will organise a session focussing on Christmas.

In addition we commit to:

- continuing to listen to people's experiences
- highlighting the problems they face
- working with our partners to meet the needs of our community.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Glossary of abbreviations

CAY	Citizens Advice York
CYC	City of York Council
MTM	Move the Masses
VoYCCG	NHS Vale of York Clinical Commissioning Group
VCSE sector	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector

Appendix 2 – Organisation that are within York CVS and worked together throughout the pandemic



HWY provide information about local health and social care services. They also listen to your views and experiences about these services to make sure voices are heard and taken into account. They want to know what is working well and what is not working well. HWY can also signpost you to independent complaints advocacy if you need support to complain about a service.



Ways to Wellbeing is made up of a team of Social Prescribers. Social Prescribing aims to improve wellbeing by connecting people to activities, services and support networks in their community. We support individuals to identify what is important to them and work together to achieve the individual's goals.



Primary Care Link Workers are based in GP Surgeries across York. Often individuals access their GP for what is primarily a social issue; such as loneliness, isolation or financial problems. Social Prescribing provides an alternative to a medical intervention. The Primary Care Link Workers are well placed to address the root cause of these difficulties and work together improve an individual's health and wellbeing.



York Dementia Action Alliance is a group of around 60 businesses and organisations for the public, private and voluntary sector who are committed to making York a better place to live, work and visit for people affected by dementia. YDAA is coming to an end in September 2020.



Safe Places are located in buildings in York, like libraries, shops, cafes and museums that are open to the public and are accessible. They have agreed to provide a safe and supportive place if someone who is vulnerable needs to ask for help while out and about.

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