



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How three new digital services were introduced by Who Cares? Scotland for care experienced people across the country

What was the challenge faced?

As the UK and Scottish Governments started imposing wide-ranging lockdown restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Who Cares? Scotland, a national membership and campaigning charity providing independent advocacy for Care Experienced people, started receiving a number of emails, phone calls and social media messages relating to concerns about increased social isolation, financial hardship, insecure housing tenures, mental health worries, and disconnection from family, friends and other important relationships from many within the community.

What change in practice took place?

Having heard the worrying concerns from care experienced people, Who Cares? Scotland took immediate action and introduced three distinctive services available to care experienced people across Scotland. Firstly, a new Helpline was opened. Originally supported with a rota of over 50 members of staff, open seven days a week and available on the phone or through email, this provided emotional and practical support for care experienced people and their kinship and foster carers, including grocery shopping and help with housing issues and financial concerns such as phone top-ups, bills and rent support. At its peak, the helpline staff were taking over 30 calls a day with many lasting over two hours. The range of issues raised were so diverse that it often required liaising with the policy, advocacy and employment teams. As the impact of the public health crisis became more severe and several of the organisation's events were cancelled, including its Summer Camp, attended by over 100 care experienced people each year, Who Cares? Scotland decided to trial something online instead and came up with the idea for a Digital Festival. Over 30 unique opportunities were developed for young people to engage with and nurture a sense of belonging with the wider care community. It was something the community could look forward to during lockdown and it attracted interest from almost 200 care experienced people from age eight to over 50, from all walks of life.

Delivered over three days in May, the festival increased participants' sense of inclusion and strengthened their relationships with each other. At the same time, through the helpline and the advocacy relationships, the organisation recognised that, at times, emotional and financial support was not enough. Some care experienced people needed additional support. So, at the beginning of May, a new counselling service was made available to connect care experienced people with a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist (of their choice) who was registered with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. All therapists specialise in different areas, so, consistent with a trauma-informed approach, each person has a choice in who and what works best for them.

Who was involved in making the change?

Recognising the devastating impact of Covid-19 and hearing harrowing stories of care experienced people not being able to provide food, pay for electricity and bills, for the first time in its history, the Who Cares? Scotland Board agreed to change their services over the immediate terms to provide a new response. When it was recognised what kind of support would be needed, including that the impact of COVID-19 was having a negative impact on people's mental health, the organisation worked with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Youthlink, Youth Scotland, and national policy makers, third sector organisations, local authorities, independent artists, tutors and therapists in Scotland, to ensure the level of support provided was evidence-led and shaped by good practice.

What difference did this change make?

Since the lockdown began nearly 800 children, young people, their families and adults have been supported via the helpline and nearly 100 care experienced people have been referred to counselling. While the lasting impact of COVID-19 is still to be evaluated, the Who Cares? Scotland's experience has suggested that connection, practical support and a counselling service have become a lifeline for many care experienced people struggling in these difficult times. The organisation has further developed its helpline service, which now provides advice on rights, entitlements and emotional support to care experienced people while still serving as a source of connection for the care experienced community.

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