

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



Embedded in the Bognor Regis community, My Sisters' House Women's Centre works across the coastal area of West Sussex.

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We provide a range of support needs to women from all backgrounds facing all kinds of issues where their strengths are recognised, their difficulties acknowledged and where they can achieve positive change, they are proud of.

Julie Budge CEO Founder

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What were the immediate challenges?

My Sister's House had to close the drop-in centre. Around 71% of their clients used these services. As the face-to-face services had closed they moved swiftly to setting up three telephone support lines for employment advice, domestic abuse and chatter lines which were open 10-1pm. Live chat was open 8-10pm until the end of September and will then be 5-8pm for the next 6 months as this is very popular.

Staff moved to working from home, as only two people could work from the centre. To enable this they purchased from reserves six laptops and telephones to get things up and running quickly. They also had to *change the hours of staff so that they could manage childcare, home schooling, outside distractions and so on and support the phonelines. They had a lot of goodwill from staff to fill gaps.* The calls increased week by week and increased in complexity.

“ A call that would previously take 45 minutes became over 2.5 hours. This just showed the level of emotional distress the Lockdown was causing. ”

They also set-up virtual Zoom groups and found that people joined from a wider geographical area - Petworth, Midhurst, Selsey, - but lower numbers than previously. *It showed the difficulties women had to participate when in the same space as the difficult relationship.* They have used Zoom, SKYPE and Facetime to repond to solicitors regarding housing issues, universal credit and rents. All counselling and advocacy services moved to virtual.

“ They have been supported by Dame Julie Walters, who has supported with media information about the centre. ”

They have had 2-46 volunteers supporting during the pandemic, but have remained in contact will all through Zoom. The biggest challenge has been keeping volunteers motivated and have people who help to keep up moral and laugh.

How has COVID affected their finances?

My Sister's House did not furlough any staff but did have to redeploy staff. Initially, they spent £9,000 initially from reserves, but later this was reimbursed from the National Lottery, for IT equipment to set-up new ways of working and home working.

They have spoken with their main funders about what services can be provided and reported staff figures to them each week, including the Ministry of Justice.

They have received funding from Sussex Community Foundation COVID-19 fund for extra hours to support advocacy for Universal Credit. A further seven applications have been made and a successful *Crowdfunder* raised £10k. 5 applications were successful, (£30k) and they received £50k from the Government £2M fund via Sussex Police & Crime Commissioners.

“ We have continued to distribute toiletry packs and food vouchers about 30+ a week. ”



These emergency pots of funding are most welcome but what will happen once the Lockdown eases, as they will still need funding for ongoing provision of services.

They have cancelled and lost funding from events during the pandemic for unrestricted funds. They had six events planned which were cancelled a loss of around £6,000 - £7,000.

How have they begun to Forward Plan?

The organisations priority is to re-open the centre. They had strategically factored in 12 weeks until mid-June and do not expect things to return back to normal until the New Year. As all staff are deemed key workers there is the expectation that need will increase and so too will the staff team.

They are expecting more women to come through the centre doors and have begun funding applications for mental health provision. Advertise two new posts to deliver mental health peer groups. As yet unsure when these sessions will be delivered.



Last year, one woman was held at knife point by her partner. She hid in the bedroom whilst her partner went to burgle her brother and she called the Police. When the Police came to take her partner away, she went into the recycling bin and dug out our leaflet and she was on our doorstep the next day.



It is anticipated that My Sister's House will continue with the Out of Hours services for the foreseeable future and retain the 'LifeChat'. As this is something they have wanted to do for some time.

My Sister's House have just opened 3 evenings per week as the first 'drop in' without appointments. They are offering appointments from mid-august. Already they are supporting highly complex cases. The funding secured have enabled new staff and increase in hours and are opening an extra two evenings each week.

What are the concerns for the future, post COVID?

They are concern about domestic violence as it has been a slow drip which is building up and will get worse the longer the Lockdown goes on. Young people are traumatised by having seen their mother being abused during the Lockdown.

While the schools are closed women have to deal with the brunt of the childcare. This makes it harder for them to get back to work.



They are hearing about increases in job losses, unemployment, poverty. It is likely there will be increases in divorce and a rise in unplanned pregnancy.

Mental health issues have been exacerbated during the Lockdown and the longer-term impact will be huge.



We are a key player in the landscape. We are local and provide an outside perspective. People come to us for *food vouchers* and this is a more effective way to start a conversation and to respond to the underlying issues. We support people with rehousing, counselling, 1-2-1, back into employment in a person centred and gender specific, trauma informed and co-produced way.



My Sister's House took part in a BBC1 Panorama Documentary 'Escaping Your Abuser' filmed at the centre over many days and showcased their services during the Lockdown. It was shown on BBC1 at 7.30pm on Monday 17th August and their website hits went up 300% in just that half hour. Social Media had 24 shares.

Contact details

To learn more about call **01243 697800**

Email office@mysistershouse.info

Or visit their webpage <https://www.mysistershouse.info/>



Voluntary Action Arun and Chichester

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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:



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Email - helpdesk@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk



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