**Tell me what you do.**

I am service team leader for a childrens charity, we have the contract to run a Young Carers Project for two local authorities in North Wales.

**How has it been for you during Covid-19, are you working from home?**

Yes I am, we are able to go into the office on a rota system because it is only a small office. You know, we are only a small team so we can only have a certain amount of people in the office at any one time. So apart from nipping in and out I’ve mainly been working from home since March.

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**How have you found it? Do you have children?**

I do yes, one daughter who is 12 and one who is 7. I’m used to working from home because I did it one day a week anyway, but its very different when your children are around. Its been more challenging for sure.

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**Definitely, for me, I’ve moved house towards the end of lockdown, that was really challenging not having the help with the move.**

I can imagine! Our organisation are really good at keeping up to date with technology, the modern way of working. Its worked to our advantage because we were already doing video calls and we were quite tech savvy, although we did still offer the face to face meetings. So it kind of forced us to go a different way, but we were okay with it and we were able to adapt quite quickly you know?

**So what kind of things have you started doing?**

So the things that we have changed since lockdown is we now do Young Carers Assessments by video calls or telephone calls, we are not visiting the homes to do those.

We do 1-1 emotional support sessions, again, video calls or telephone calls.

Telephone keep in touch with all our young carers. But since the lockdown restrictions have eased we have been able to physically meet with some young carers. So those young carers who are really struggling, the ‘high end’ young carers, we’ve actually started meeting those. Like walking and talking therapeutic sessions, all done socially distanced, we are not transporting anybody. We will meet them at their home and we will go for walks with them. These are the ones that really need to get out of the house and need that face to face contact. We’ve done a few of those, even before the lockdown came to an end really, and we were able to do that social distanced.

The groups, we usually run young carers groups on a monthly basis, different groups across both counties. We are not able to do face to face groups, but we’ve done digital groups. Its…I’m not saying hit and miss…but the attendance of the digital groups varies. Some young carers have told us ‘no it’s not for me’ I don’t like that way of you know, and these are young carers that would come to the groups regularly they’ve said ‘no, the digital group isn’t for me, I’ll ring you if I need anything, I’ll leave that’. Some young carers have really really benefited and have attended the digital groups constantly. So what you can do digitally is not the same as what you can do with the face to face groups, but that support for them is there, the opportunity to meet other young carers is there, giving them a break from everything else and you know, giving them some ‘me’ time. So like I say the attendance for the digital groups varies, its just depends what people have on. You know yourself its quite difficult to remember sometimes when things were online you know. But…so, we offer them and we have children coming to them.

So, I’m just trying to remember what else we do, all meetings we do now with young carers are digital, any consultation is digital, I’m trying to think what else. We did have a Facebook Page anyway so we are constantly sharing information to families via our Facebook page.

Our charity have a parenting support section on the our website and we’ve made links, because one of things that has come out of this for us, is that where we support the young carers, the whole family has really struggled and found it difficult to cope. So we are not just supporting the young carers, we are supporting the whole family.

One thing that has been really good is that by saving time on transport, you know the time it would normally take to get to and from places because all the meetings and everything are online. We’ve been able to keep in touch with our families, some families have had more contact from us, than they did before because of the new way of working. And because of that we’ve really got to know our families, we’ve got to know exactly what’s going on for some of them you know. Whereas some families you thought were okay, well I think families have opened up a lot more.

Before we would ring, of course, when we do the initial assessment, we would meet the family (prior to lockdown this was) and we would get to know the parents, but from then on it would literally just be the arrangements done with the parents, we wouldn’t really be supporting the parents. If anything came up, of course we would signpost the parents and refer for further advice. We’ve really been more involved with the whole family over the lockdown, and its made a real difference to everyone. You know if you have someone who is at home, unwell with an illness or a disability of affects everyone in the family and we’ve really seen that over the lockdown.

**You’ve given some great examples there, just in summary you’ve increased digital contact, stopped face to face contact, and restarted face to face with those who are most in need and most vulnerable really, through walk and talk sessions.**

The walk and talk sessions are not formal, it’s quite relaxed and I think we’ve got a lot out of them. Over the lockdown, what we’ve noticed is a lot of our young carers haven’t left the house at all you know. They’ve not even had any sort of physical exercise or anything, and as we know there is a real link between physical exercise and mental wellbeing. So for those like I said that are really really struggling and its having a real impact on their wellbeing, that’s one of the reasons we’ve said ‘we can do this now, social distancing, we need to take them out’ so its like, you are benefiting two things really. 1. You are getting them out of the house, they’re getting some physical exercise which helps in terms of mental wellbeing and then it does give them that opportunity to talk to you know?

Aside from that as well, we’ve done, I don’t know if you’ve heard of the Blues Programme?

**No**

No, well its an evidenced based programme, I think its American, Our charity have adopted it and trained staff to deliver it. It’s a school based programme aimed at young people aged 13+. It’s a programme to support young people who are suffering low mood, anxiety, stress, sort of depression and the aim is to try and you know improve the way they feel. Usually its done in a school and the school are on board, and we have a North Wales Blues team that deliver it to the schools across North Wales, and that’s been really successful. But as a young carers project we felt we wanted to give our young carers the opportunity. So when we do it in school anyone of that age who meets the criteria can take part in it. But we wanted to do it for our young carers. So a few of our staff are trained in the Blues, so because of everything going on we weren’t able to deliver a group type with young carers face to face, so we did a digital Blues Group.

So what we did was, we sent information out to all our young carers of that age range 13+, explained to them what the Blues Programme is and if they were interested to let us know. We ran one group, we’re on our second one now. They’re not large numbers but it’s a small group of young people who perhaps aren’t getting any support from anywhere else with their wellbeing and who are really desperately needing that support.

How it works is we give them a questionnaire, everything is done online, they fill in the questionnaire at the beginning and they fill in that same questionnaire at the end of the six weeks. It covers how they feel and we’ve seen a significant change in some young people who are demonstrating some major depression to low level really. So its really really been positive. It goes on the basis of CBT, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy so its looking at changing the way they think, the way they feel, the way they behave and the things that they need to do are things they can easily do at home, that don’t cost a lot of money, so it’s a really nice programme. So like I say we’ve ran one, which was really successful and we saw really good outcomes for young carers and we’ve just started our second one. So that is another thing that we have offered over the lockdown.

Aside from that we were fortunate enough to receive some additional funding from a local authority only where we have been able to pay for a therapist to do some family therapy. So for those young people perhaps, they would need more than what the Blues Programme can offer, or they would need more 1-1 therapeutic, we have now a therapist that works one day a week for us and they will offer that 1-1 support to young carers, but also can work with family members as well. Because you know, what we’ve seen is a lot of relationships broken down and you know the therapeutic intervention is supporting parents as well as the young carers. So that’s new, the actual therapist has only started working since July, so I’m really excited to see how they go.

That’s fantastic

Yeah it is, the main thing for young carers is well being, caring has a real impact on their wellbeing, we have a high number of carers coming to us that are struggling with their wellbeing. You know that are self harming, that have suicidal thoughts, that are really depressed – they have increased over the years. Unfortunately some of them don’t meet the criteria for statutory services and it’s a case of well, who is going to support them? We think we’ve got a good relationship with our young people, they feel comfortable coming to us, why can’t we offer them the support?

So like I say the therapeutic service is relatively new for us, but I most definitely think it is the way forward.

**Wow, you’ve given so many examples there, if you were going to sift through those, which do you think has had the most positive impact during Covid on a young person?**

I just think keeping in touch with them is the main thing, for some of these young people they haven’t got a lot of family round them, some of them their friends, perhaps they’ve only seen in school, some of them might feel quite isolated. So keeping in touch with them, in no matter way shape or form, if it’s a phone call, if its joining a group, or a face to face walk and talk session, that is invaluable. I mean they know. One mum said how grateful she was for keeping in touch with them as a family, she said they nobody else had kept in touch. This is a family where they really struggle. Actually it was really sad, because last week we found out that mum took an overdose because she was really at the end of her tether. That we’ve kept in touch with them has been one of the main things that have kept them going. Just having someone there you know? That is the main thing. Obviously what we offer then, is how it sort of helps them, just knowing someone is there is what I would say, and they have said helps them most.

One of things we have been able to offer as well is Our charity have an emergency grant, for families out of lockdown. We’ve seen parents out of work, children not having any social interaction or any opportunities. So we had a grant we were able to offer families, it was up to £250 per young carer or family really. We were able to help and support with lots of things. So I’ll just give you some examples.

Some families couldn’t afford the food shop, we would give them food vouchers.

Some families didn’t have anything for the children to do at home, in terms of…you know we had really nice weather didn’t we? So we could buy like, play equipment for families

We were able to, I am just trying to think what else, some families were really severe like, some children didn’t have beds. One family they didn’t have a sofa at all, they had two chairs. When you are at home constantly and can’t go anywhere else, we just thought, ahhhh, we need to try and make things a bit better for them. So it ranged really from fun things to play equipment in the garden, to quite important things like food shop and beds.

**So the basics…**

The basics, absolutely. So we were able to support quite a lot of our families across our area. And across our charity , it’s not just for us, it was our charity Emergency Grant, where families were really grateful for it really.

**Of all of the personal stories, which do you think has been the most significant to you and why?**

The one that I’m thinking really is a mother and daughter, mum has lots of physical health conditions, mum and daughter live on their own and daughter is eight years old. She is the carer for mum because of her conditions.

Mum has a business, but there was no income coming in because of lockdown. Because of her caring needs, family members felt they couldn’t care for her because her caring needs were quite high, but having said that, the little girl who was eight, they were quite happy for her to do it.

It was mum that contacted us actually for support throughout the lockdown, someone had mentioned us to her. We did an assessment with the little girl digitally and she did do a lot of caring for mum and they were really struggling financially.

First of all we were able to get them a grant for food shopping, for fuel they had an open coal fire. Mum was going for treatment and because of her condition was cold a lot and she was using lots of coal for the fire, so we were able to purchase coal to keep them going.

We then looked at the little girl’s needs, she was kind of fending for herself. When mum wasn’t well she was preparing meals for herself. Because of her age what she could do was only things like Pot Noodles and unhealthy convenience foods, which mum felt really guilty about because she wasn’t well. We were able to support to put an application in for some benefits, mum is still waiting to hear but is hopeful she’ll get so she can use that money to pay for meals on wheels so they get healthier food coming into the home.

The little girl was able to join our digital groups and other things that were really positive.

A couple of weeks later we had a call from Citizens Advice, mum had obviously contacted them. We didn’t know this but mum had gone in for surgery and had been discharged from hospital and really needed a lot of care. She had a wound that needed keeping clean and bathing and mum wasn’t able to do it really. It seemed she had been discharged without consideration of who was going to be caring for mum at home, because the only person that was there was her eight-year-old daughter.

Daughter was really finding everything too much now, it was impacting on her wellbeing and there was a change in her behaviour because it was asking her to do something that a paid carer would be doing. So we contacted Social Services adults team, made them aware that she should never have been discharged home without a package of support at home for her. We were able to sort that out, from the phone call on the Friday I think she was getting support by the Saturday with a reablement package. From that, social services became more involved and realised she needed more long term care, so they are assessing her for the longer term.

So all of this has come from lockdown and mum contacting us.

One of the changes is that this was all done quite quickly, the digital assessment was done quickly, we were able to provide support quickly, quicker than we usually would.

Regarding the most significant change you have described above, what was it like before, what is it like now and what do you think brought about the change?

It was really sad, just mum and this eight-year-old little girl doing inappropriate levels of care. And many agencies and health professionals hadn’t picked this up, particularly in hospital, discharging someone, you should always be knowing who’s going to be caring for that adult if they need care when they go home.

Not being in school as had a real impact on children we support and their wellbeing. For a child who is 8 years old, it’s not the same as teenagers who might ring each other or FaceTime. So she felt quite isolated because we were her only social contact really.

Things are much better, they are so grateful for the financial support, emotional support, mum is receiving care, the little girl now is able to access carer support groups and have a bit of fun and a bit of ‘me’ time. Her wellbeing has improved because she has something to look forward to as well.