

Spotlight

Adaptation

Featuring:

Chilli Studios and ReCoCo

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About this magazine

The Connected Voice magazine is published four times a year by Connected Voice. We aim to make sure all information is correct and up to date but we do not accept liability for any mistakes that may inadvertently appear. Views and opinions in this magazine are not necessarily those of Connected Voice.

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Cover photo courtesy of Chilli Studios: 'Chilli-tunities' care and support boxes.

Issue 5: Adaptation

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring unprecedented challenges to the VCSE sector. How have our local organisations adapted and adjusted their approach to still meet the needs and wishes of their beneficiaries and continue their essential work? What has 'doing things differently' looked like, and will it fundamentally change the way they work in future?

In this packed edition of Connected Voice magazine we hear from organisations across Newcastle and Gateshead who have developed creative and innovative approaches to delivering their services under the constraints of the pandemic, with inspiring Spotlights from Chilli Studios and ReCoCo.

What challenges have disabled people in our communities faced during the pandemic? We've insight from Difference North East about

the disproportionate impact on disabled people and how they've adapted their campaigning to ensure that their voices are heard when never more needed.

We hear from Haref Network Member, North East Solidarity and Teaching (N.E.S.T), about how they have successfully driven forward their work to support and empower refugees and asylum seekers by using new online tools; and how Connected Voice Advocacy has utilised digital technology to continue to make sure that people's voices are heard, inequality is addressed, and rights are respected throughout this time.

And with our sector facing widespread funding challenges, we discuss the intensive fundraising support we've given to local organisations to help them achieve funding success. ●

Adaptation

Lisa Goodwin
Chief Executive



Adaptation seemed like a fitting theme for this edition of our magazine as we've been humbled to witness the levels of adaptability, flexibility and resilience that VCSE organisations have shown in the past eight months. We are proud to highlight just a few examples of those adaptations in this edition.

Resilience is an over-used term at the moment, and it's important to acknowledge that as a sector we have already been resilient in dealing with 10 plus years of austerity and stepping in to provide services as the state retracted.

“We are working harder than ever as a sector to support our local communities but the situation around us continues to get worse”

People are now tired and resilience is being tested as many organisations continue to meet basic needs such as food, rather than being able to focus on their main charitable purpose.

We set up the Spirit of Christmas appeal with Gateshead and Newcastle Councils recently, after discussions with many of our members who were really worried about what Christmas would be like for the people they support. Local businesses and residents have been amazingly generous. We have been inundated with applications to the fund, from

Rising to the challenge: Adaptability, flexibility and resilience

organisations who just want to ensure that the people they support have access to something special at Christmas – whether that's a virtual activity or a box of chocolates.

It is heartening to see such wonderful Christmas spirit across Newcastle and Gateshead - but at the same time it's frustrating that this needs to be done at all.

Child poverty is now at a horrifying level in the North East – 35% - and unemployment is rising quickly due to the impact of COVID-19 on our economy.

I would never have imagined back in February that Connected Voice would be involved in raising funds from the public and in making grants directly to VCSE organisations.

Like the rest of the sector, we have had to adapt to use our resources as best we can in a world that none of us have encountered before. It is heartbreaking to hear about the levels of need that many of our members now deal with on a daily basis.

We are working harder than ever as a sector to support our local communities, but the situation around us continues to get worse.

We must keep fighting for the policy change that is needed to ensure that fewer people are financially vulnerable, and to enable charities to focus again on positive impacts and building capacity in communities, rather than providing a sticking plaster. ●

Spotlight: Chilli Studios

Bob Malpiedi
Chief Executive



Set up in 2004 in Newcastle, Chilli Studios is a vibrant inclusive community space near the centre of Newcastle.

It delivers services to those who are, or are at risk of experiencing diagnosed mental health problems, and those who experience other forms of social exclusion in their communities.

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Photos courtesy of Chilli Studios

What does your organisation do?

Chilli Studios offers a broad range of activity within a flexible learning model for people who are struggling with their mental health. Before the COVID-19 pandemic our studio was open five days a week and hosted a range of arts-based workshops and activities. Over the years, we have worked with many hundreds of registered members (our preferred beneficiary term), and every year, approximately 250 people would engage regularly.

What affect has the pandemic had on you and your beneficiaries?

Our talented and passionate team have adjusted exceptionally well to remote working. Furthermore, I must add all our funders have shown real flexibility and support. However, like many VCSE leaders, I am deeply concerned about the economic fallout landing on the shoulders of the most vulnerable heaviest. Therefore, I believe it is critical to plan for an uncertain future.

It's hard to generalise members' wellbeing over the last six months, as no set of circumstances is the same. Nonetheless, through the challenge of increased isolation many have shown incredible strength, resilience and resourcefulness in finding and engaging in new support methods. However, as the second wave hits, I have sensed feelings of hopelessness creeping in, for this reason, we are now particularly keen to revitalize our offer and make things feel fresh and engaging again.

I think it's important to remember that over the last few years our members have seen a great deal of financial hardship and the roll-out of Universal Credit and its conditionality has had a devastating impact. Recently with welfare assessments restarting this has predictably resulted in a spike in anxiety levels.

What are the biggest challenges this situation has presented?

I think trying to provide something comparable to what we had before has been the biggest challenge. The studio environment at Chilli is an extraordinarily positive space.

In the most part I think the community spirit has been successfully transferred onto the online platform, creating an immense amount of shared values and camaraderie.

At times there have been understandable gaps in technical knowledge amongst staff, volunteers and members. Still, overall, most have been surmounted, and when online hasn't worked our phone and postal based work has provided a vital backup for connecting. Recently, we have started safely delivering our creative and wellbeing support packages by hand to our members, and this has appeared to help morale.

How have you adapted to respond to those challenges?

Since the emergence of the pandemic back in March, our service has had to change drastically. Before we closed



the studio's doors, we gathered information from members about needs and wishes and then created a new online offer of virtual workshops and forums.

Between March and Oct 2020, Chilli studios have provided approximately 370 well attended facilitated sessions online.

Fortunately, and with the support of a partner organisation

population that includes a variety of circumstances, and needs that require a range of solutions. Therefore, and with consideration of our successes online, we have teamed up with local partners and started developing plans for a new combined platform. We hope that by embracing digital advancements, we can ensure learning is not lost but becomes an additional component to local mental health service delivery.



“ In the most part I think the community spirit has been successfully transferred onto the online platform, creating an immense amount of shared values and camaraderie

called North East Wilds, we have continued to offer some safe outdoor-based activities throughout most of the pandemic. Together a group of our members have developed a space, kindly provided by Byker Community Centre, as a kitchen garden.

As the infection levels decreased over the summer, we started offering creative based outdoor opportunities whilst preparing to open the studio. However, with the second wave hitting Newcastle and Gateshead hard, our plans had to be postponed.

Have there been any benefits in 'doing things differently'?

I'm aware that the virtual online offer will, for many, be less engaging than our regular studio. However, we cover a large

What have you learned during the crisis that may change the way you work in the future?

Personally, and with the full awareness that my knowledge is limited, I expect a level of risk to continue for many more years. With this in mind, services like ours - based on a social interaction model - will need to consider a variety of engagement methods.

Finally, over this period Chilli has used the online experience to develop a new commercial venture that will hopefully support the charity's sustainability well into the future. Our 'Chill out Box' subscription business, based on our website, is selling creative wellbeing packs to the market whilst promoting our valuable work. ●



Positive about difference

Richard Boggie
Development Manager
Difference North East

Shining a light on disability discrimination and promoting inclusive practice



In March I started work as Difference's new Development Manager. Five days before we went into the first lockdown, with a background in HR and having not heard of my new employer until I read their vacancy advert. Nevertheless, I was excited by the role and convinced of the need for Difference, a charity that would speak up for the needs of disabled people, shine a light on discrimination and promote inclusive practice.

Our initial aims seemed clear enough – build awareness, grow our membership, and organise a celebratory launch event, engaging with disabled people and organisations from across the region. Straightforward enough, eh? Or so we thought, until a certain virus came along and changed...well...everything.

At that point, we had two choices – put everything on hold, use the furlough scheme and wait for better times to return, or adapt our plans and carry on. Thankfully, the pause and wait option was never a serious consideration for us. We had entered the COVID crisis already knowing that there was a lot of work to do.

- **14.1% of disabled adults in 2019 were victims of domestic abuse, compared to 5.4% of non-disabled adults.**
- **The proportion of people feeling lonely often or always was almost 4 times higher amongst disabled people – 13.3% compared to 3.4%.**

Bearing in mind we live in the region with the highest proportion of disabled people in the UK, around 28% according to DWP data, then you can appreciate that we wanted to get to work.

Then we began to see the impact of COVID-19, a virus which the politicians kept telling us does not discriminate, but which the data clearly shows has a massively disproportionate impact on some groups, with disabled people being among the hardest hit.

It seemed to us that disabled people in our region needed to be heard like never before. Our rights and protections were being withdrawn, services cut back and a focus on the 'vulnerable' that seemed to ignore the needs of the disabled.



Photo credit: Laura Tindall at PaperBoat Photography

- **We have a massive employment gap, with only 53.2% of disabled people in work compared to 81.8% of non-disabled people.**
- **Median pay for those disabled people in work was 12.2% lower than their non-disabled counterparts.**

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Photos courtesy of
Difference North East

Our Response

It was clear to us that disabled people were not being heard, and we set about talking to our partner Disabled People's Organisations who were run off their feet adapting their own services to their users. From an early discussion with Disability North, we started forming a campaign - our Manifesto for a Better Normal.

We wanted to shape the 'new normal' to learn from the experiences of disabled people. We wanted to put this user-led learning out there, to be on the front foot, rather than waiting to be asked. As a result, we got some good coverage on regional news, with disabled local people explaining the impact of COVID on their lives. We also got the opportunity to contribute nationally, meeting with Lord Shinkwin's Disability Commission.

At the same time, we still needed to build awareness of Difference and grow our membership. Our launch event, planned to be held at the Newcastle Eagles Arena, could have been great, but we had to take the difficult decision to abandon it and replace it with an online alternative. This was really disappointing, but as the world began to adjust to virtual reality, we also began to see the positives. Our launch could be way more accessible - no need to worry about the usual barriers - building access, transport and dietary requirements.

We could bring people together easily, cheaply and with minimum carbon footprint. Of course, we still had to carefully consider access needs. You can read about what we learned from the experience and our top tips for accessible E-vents in my blog on the 'Better ConNEcted' website: www.betterconnected.org.uk.

Better ConNEcted is a campaign for digital inclusion. It imagines a North East where digital inclusion is a right enjoyed by all. We want people to have the skills, technology and internet to access goods, services and information online, in order to close the digital divide. We felt it was important to be involved in this work as digital access is such a vital enabler for many disabled people, and even more so during the COVID crisis.

The Future

Like many charities, a key focus now is on securing more funding that will allow us to embed the work we have started. Further waves of COVID, social restrictions and a recession are all going to hit disabled people hard.

We hope that next year's promised new national disability strategy will offer some hope that central government is listening. However, we will continue to develop a strong regional voice and, pandemic or not, make the North East a fairer and more equal place to live, work and study. ●

Our Values: We inspire change

Giovanni Spatuzzi
Strategic Partnerships
& Operations Manager



On the theme of Adaptation it feels fitting to next look at how 'We inspire change'.

Courageous, resourceful and determined, we are not afraid to challenge unfairness and ask difficult questions.

Working effectively and accountably to instil confidence, we aim to become stronger and more sustainable to inspire positive and lasting change throughout our community.

Connected Voice has a long and rich history of inspiring change. Since our establishment at the start of the Great Depression in 1929, we've been courageous, resourceful and determined; not afraid to challenge unfairness and ask difficult questions. Our behaviour and actions have best demonstrated these characteristics by creating many pioneering services and organisations to respond to the needs of people and communities across Tyneside in alleviating the effects of poverty.

For instance, in 1929 the most urgent need was to fight the misery of mass unemployment. Our organisation set up 30 occupation centres for keeping unemployed people fit through activities including cobbling and carpentry lessons. In the same year, we also set up the 'Poor Man's Lawyer' in Gateshead - the forerunner to Legal Aid.

During the war years our organisation established 18 Citizen's Advice Bureaus, 20 'help and information centres' - which aided 2,000 people facing personal difficulty - and launched a network of 'friendly visitors' to older people and 'Over 60s' clubs.

After the war our personal welfare work developed further to meet the new social needs, including the development of 34

In each edition of Connected Voice, we are sharing one of our values and how this relates to who we are

women's clubs, 52 over 60s clubs and more than 100 'old people welfare committees', which became part of Age UK.

Our work in the 1960s mirrored the changing society, including the launch of the Newcastle Council for Disabled People, which later became Disability North, and the Volunteer Bureau.

Fast-forward to recent history, in the 1990s we established a trading company now called Connected Voice Business Services to offer specialist and affordable finance services to the voluntary sector. In addition, we set up our Advocacy service. Through this, we were the first organisation in the UK to offer specialist support for people with neurological conditions, and specific health and social support for people from BAME communities. As we near

“Challenging injustice, supporting the vulnerable and advocating for change at a personal and policy level is important to me and I get to do this every day

the end of a year which has caused the most disruption in living memory, we've led by example, along with other VCSE organisations, in adapting and innovating our services. By moving our events and training online, we've increased our reach and the number of people accessing our services. We've worked in partnership with regional and local authorities to bring new money into the sector. Adapting our services has ensured we continue supporting people and upholding their rights.

Led by our values, we will continue to inspire change through our optimistic, proactive and supportive behaviour and actions, carrying on the vital work we've done throughout our 90 year history. ●

Uplifting & empowering voices

Jemima Elliott, Volunteer
North East Solidarity &
Teaching (N.E.S.T)



Haref Network member, N.E.S.T, is a student-run volunteer project which offers free English lessons to the refugee community

Across the UK and in the North East there are countless groups, organisations, and individuals doing their best to dismantle racism and to uplift the voices of Black people. One such organisation is North East Solidarity and Teaching.

Haref Network member, N.E.S.T, works to support and empower refugees and asylum seekers in the North East through a wide variety of activities, including English language classes, art sessions, sports, activities for children, and trips around the region. These activities not only aim to improve learners' English capabilities, but also to support them socially by providing fun avenues to express themselves, meet new people and make friends, relax and to see the North East. It was also founded and is run by students.

On the weekend before Newcastle University closed its campus in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, N.E.S.T held its last in-person sessions for the year, and shifted all activities and services online in a move called Operation Charlie. Within a week, all of N.E.S.T's sessions (apart from sports) were now being carried out via YouTube livestreams, and available for learners to watch wherever they were able to get an internet connection. Through an increased programme of projects introduced after lockdown (including a Pen Pal service, Zoom juggling sessions for children, and new socials for volunteers) N.E.S.T has aimed to combat loneliness and reduce isolation, especially as our learners are more likely to have reduced access to public services and other forms of socialisation.

Regular phone calls have provided vital social contact and acted as welfare check-ins to ensure that learners are getting everything they need if isolating and are aware of any changes to lockdown restrictions, as well as being opportunities for volunteers to receive feedback on ways the sessions could be improved and be most beneficial to the learners.



Photo courtesy of N.E.S.T: Volunteers pictured prior to COVID-19 pandemic

At the end of the academic year, 600 student volunteers were supporting 700 learners in Newcastle and surrounding areas – our biggest year yet and we are still growing. In May, 100% of N.E.S.T's learners said they were able to understand English better as a result of N.E.S.T's support, that they felt more confident accessing public services after sessions, and – perhaps most importantly – that they felt happier after attending a N.E.S.T session. Now more than ever, N.E.S.T is not only about improving tangible skills but about improving the wellbeing of all involved in its family.

We are looking at new ways to innovate, grow and adapt to new challenges and opportunities. After all, North East Solidarity and Teaching is only a small part of the campaigns we are seeing across the world to end racism and create a more equal society. As the students who are its beating heart graduate and move on to other spheres in the North East, the UK and indeed globally, they bring the spirit of N.E.S.T with them: a determination to do more to support others make the world around them a kinder place. ●

Visit them on Facebook: @N.E.S.T.NUSU or email: nest.union@newcastle.ac.uk

Special feature: Children & Families Newcastle

Sarah Kerrigan
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We want Newcastle to be a place where our children and young people are supported to thrive and achieve. A city where together we strive to use all our resources to get the best outcomes and families can flourish.

Through Collaborative Newcastle and with wider partners including schools, voluntary and community sector organisations and children, young people and families we are creatively re-designing a better integrated approach to early intervention and prevention. Central to this is building on the strong community support available to children, young people and their families.

66 Looks very exciting and the right way forward for children, young people and families in Newcastle

Newcastle benefits from a breadth of high-quality services, committed and expert staff teams across public and voluntary sectors, strong inter-agency relationships, good resources and community infrastructure.

As a city we are justifiably proud of those positive outcomes we achieve for our children and young people.

However, there are some outcomes for our city's children that we all want to improve. Newcastle has higher rates of children who are

subject to child protection plans and higher numbers of children in care than our comparator cities. Our children do less well in school as they get into the older year groups. Our infants go to A&E more often than national average. We have higher rates of childhood obesity.

To make positive change it is important that services work together - no single service or organisation can improve things on their own. Indeed, the system response needed extends beyond support services.

Newcastle wants a system that builds on individual strengths, recognises the importance of family support networks and connects individuals and families to their local communities. The local VCSE sector is key in helping to shape and deliver this new system response.

Feedback from children, young people and families and those that support them has been of frustration with the complexity of the current system: people having to tell their story multiple times as they are referred on to new services, gaps in eligibility criteria between different services, long wait times and having to journey around the city to access different elements of support. We need to work better together.

We're asking big questions. How can we improve the experience of children, young people and their families? How can we make sure

we are working with children, young people and families in a way that starts with a focus on strengths rather than problems? How can we ensure children and young people in Newcastle achieve their potential? How can we make the best use of our collective resources and learn from each other?

Over the summer and autumn, discussions have centred around 3 'big ideas' for change:

Community Hubs with 'magnets'

Work with vibrant community infrastructure; creating places that people want to go and where they can access a wide range of practical and social activities in their community.

“ I like that this [Family Partner] approach recognises the relationship as being key - often it takes time for families to share their real concerns and issues

Joined up services

Bringing together a range of universal and targeted services into a better integrated offer; creating smoother, better joined up support, recognising that an individual's or family's experience of the system is as important as the support itself.

The Family Partner

A 'go-to' contact for children, young people and families, able to work with families to identify strengths and priorities, connecting them to communities and facilitating access to support.

Many of you will have been involved in these discussions.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Learning from local VCSE organisations has centred on the importance of:

- **Developing trusting relationships – recognising the time needed to build and maintain them.**
- **Tailoring local support to local need and utilising local strengths.**
- **Recognising the various definitions of 'local', including micro-community.**
- **The expertise of the VCSE in creating delivery and environments that are accessible, non-stigmatising and attractive to children and families.**
- **The work done by small, grass-roots, community groups in providing day-to-day support for families.**

The close community links, strong commitment and professional expertise within the VCSE sector is key to the vibrancy of the support provided to families.

Tell us what you think...

Consultation on the new model for delivery is beginning shortly and your views will be invaluable. For more information on how to access the consultation documents please contact Sarah Kerrigan on email: sarah.kerrigan@newcastle.gov.uk

Next Steps:

Feedback from this consultation will inform a new model which we hope to launch in Summer 2021. ●

Collaborative Newcastle is an innovative new partnership which aims to improve the health, wealth and wellbeing of everyone in the City.

Through new ways of closer working between some of the City's largest organisations, including hospitals, council, CCG, GPs, care homes, universities, mental health trust, Primary Care Network and voluntary sector, Collaborative Newcastle aims to reduce inequality and provide better opportunities for all – children, families, adults and the elderly alike.

The funding challenge

Jack Summerside
Support and Development
Officer



Fundraising success with Connected Voice Support and Development Team

Since the start of restrictions in March, the Support Development Team have helped organisations bid for £1,195,048. As of 17 November £576,996 has been successfully awarded, with the decision on £509,797 still pending.

Early in lockdown, we moved quickly to change our usual support offer to enable much more intensive support to those organisations providing vital support of food and essential supplies to vulnerable people. Much of this work was carried out by the newest member of our team, Chris Avanti. You can read more about him, and what it means to offer enhanced support, in his profile (p13).

We provided enhanced fundraising support to local organisations including:

- **Age UK Gateshead: More than £90,000 with grants ranging from £50,000 from the NLCF to £2,000 from the 1989 Willan Trust.**
- **The Comfrey Project: Just over £60,000 from the NLCF COVID-19 Fund.**
- **Bill Quay Community Church: Just over £15,000 from the Community Foundation and NLCF.**
- **2 Way Tenancy Solutions: £27,000 from Comic Relief and the Social Enterprise Support Fund.**

These are just a small number of examples. In future editions, we'll provide you more examples of work with specific organisations to help them achieve funding success.

We offer some free funding support to VCSE organisations serving Newcastle, Gateshead or both through our infrastructure support services which we are contracted to deliver by Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council.

Funding Sources

Our website provides a quick and easy-to-use digest of potential funding sources, continuously updated with funding opportunities that we know will be of interest locally.

Training

Designed to help you develop your knowledge and skills around fundraising. This includes sessions on developing a fundraising strategy, effective bid-writing and monitoring & evaluation.

One-to-one support

Our team are available to offer funding support, advice and guidance in being ready to fundraise. We can help guide you to appropriate potential funding sources. You'll need to be ready to answer a number of key questions in order for us to give you the best possible support.

These include things such as:

- **Your organisation's legal structure (if you don't have one, we can advise you on which to choose, and our support offer to achieve it).**
- **Your turnover.**
- **What your charitable objects or aims are.**
- **Your current up-to-date policy framework - especially for things that funders expect to be in place and will ask to see attached to any funding bid.**
- **Do you have a bank account?**
- **Do you keep a log of existing and past funders, whether your bids have been successful or not?**
- **Have you sought meaningful feedback from funders about unsuccessful bids?**

Team member profile

Chris Avanti

Chris joined us just before lockdown in March. A member of the Institute of Fundraising, the professional membership body for UK fundraising, he brings with him a wealth of specialist knowledge and experience from many years in his own freelance practice.



Chris says "It's been a very exciting time to be joining Connected Voice, but not without its challenges." Being able to offer more intensive support to organisations helps us really get 'under the skin' of an organisation, and focus on finding appropriate funding sources. "I'm able to really understand the organisation, and so better help them describe and frame their case for support".

It also allows us to have a much stronger sense of the skills and people within the organisation, in particular an understanding of their monitoring and managing capacity. This is vital in framing the outcomes, outputs, and setting out how these can realistically be measured to report back to funders. It's important not to over-promise what success measures can meaningfully be captured.

Chris adds "What's important to me is meeting the needs of our members. Their needs vary, from simply chatting about fundraising tactics to co-authoring the grant application. It's important we tailor our support for each organisation. Knowing that this support helps our members improve lives in Gateshead and Newcastle makes me proud to be a fundraiser."

This enables smarter searching for funding opportunities. Funders seldom call for applications that relate specifically to your exact proposed outputs, which is why we work with organisations to drill down on the outcomes you want to achieve.

Clearly planning and budgeting your project, or individual elements of it, gives you a reference for any future funding bids, instead of starting from scratch each time - similar to having an up-to-date CV that you might use to write a job application.

“We're particularly keen to help organisations develop their wider fundraising capacity, skills and make best use of existing resources

Looking at previous applications can help you hone the way you describe what you want to do. A second pair of experienced eyes can help refine and craft your case for funding into a more clear, compelling and persuasive case for funding, and identify the things that aren't clear, which bits have gone into too much detail, and which haven't – and crucially,

any elements that might inadvertently raise uncertainty or ring alarm bells.

We're particularly keen to help develop your wider fundraising capacity, skills and make best use of existing resources. For example, making better use of your Trustees' and Board members' skills, connections and networks. We also want to help organisations diversify their funding base beyond the better known charitable trusts, foundations and other sources.

We have a commercial funding support service where we can provide additional support and draft applications for a fee. However, our focus is on capacity building and enabling you to improve your funding success without our support in the longer term – so this is something we will only recommend if time or capacity is an urgent issue.

In the very tough times we are all facing, please do make use of our free support, and contact us if you want to talk through your options. ●

Email: connect@connectedvoice.org.uk or call: 0191 232 7445.

Spotlight: ReCoCo

Alisdair Cameron
Co-Director at ReCoCo

Maintaining connections and developing community during the pandemic



ReCoCo is the Recovery College Collective based in Newcastle.

ReCoCo is both a charity and collective and has partnerships, joint working, co-produced groups or alliances with over 60 other organisations, including several for whom they act as a host.

Mutuality lies at the heart of everything they do.

They also deliver broader community development, system improvement, multi-agency collaboration and citizen activation. Mental Health is at the core of their work, but positive citizenship is their outcome, going far beyond typical mental health silos.

What does your organisation do?

We nurture a community of literally thousands of troupers and troopers, strivers and survivors, all moving towards a sense of belonging and acceptance for whom, what and how they are. ReCoCo provides a peer led, peer delivered education and support service where people can learn from each other's insights, skills and lived experience. We are led and directed by people who use mental health services/ have experienced mental distress, interpreting mental health in a broad inclusive fashion. In doing so we acknowledge crossovers with drug and alcohol issues, dysfunctional family situations, poverty, learning disability and autism spectrum problems, domestic violence, physical health issues, societal prejudice, etc. Mental health problems do not exist in a vacuum.

People come to us with a whole range of these and other intersecting issues. Some with a full house of disadvantage and misery. Those who are worse off are more likely to access ReCoCo for support, education and opportunity because we look like them. We sound like them. We are them.

What affect has the pandemic had on you and your beneficiaries?

The people we serve were already disproportionately suffering from years of austerity, from discriminatory policies, from entrenched disadvantage. COVID has exacerbated these inequalities

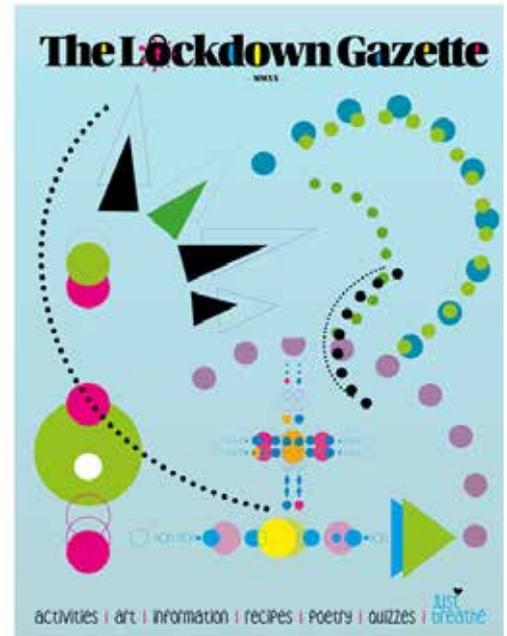
horribly. Our modus operandi is all about connection and community development, aiding people to identify and recognise their innate strengths and talents; their ability to help others. Pre-COVID this was overwhelmingly in person, but we had to very rapidly move online: Zoom drop-bys, Zoom mindfulness, Zoom self-esteem, a YouTube channel, our website, plus Twitter and Instagram.

What are the biggest challenges you've faced?

Capacity to maintain connection. Staff and volunteers were redeployed from in-person work to provide the online content and courses, but we must now also look to resume in-person work. This presents us with an issue of capacity and how we can both provide in-person and online at the same time.

An obvious issue has been digital exclusion. With all kinds of collaborators, we decided that one way forward is a free, hard-copy, physical newspaper - The Lockdown Gazette - which has had two editions to date, each with print runs of over 5,000.

In recognition of the role of frontline workers in the pandemic, we also designed a special wellbeing package for hospital staff at risk of COVID burn-out, delivered in our secure yet reassuring premises in Saltwell Park. There is no hard and fast divide between service user and service provider in times like this. Six full cohorts of staff benefitted greatly.



How have you adapted to respond to those challenges?

The clear route forward that fits with our ethos has been sharing our physical spaces, sharing our materials, sharing people and expertise.

We do have a tremendous new building with lots of space which has allowed small socially distanced group activities to address well-being issues and combat social isolation in a COVID-secure environment. Likewise, our Gateshead space in the park has proved eminently adaptable for the new circumstances.

The people whom we serve have rich, varied lives and so present with what services often term "complex needs", but those needs are only complex because of the compartmentalised way in which organisations and sectors work and the barriers this throws up.

To us, it doesn't matter where you're from, it's where you're at. We want what we have to be deployed to do whatever is required to help the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people of Newcastle and Gateshead. "Our" spaces are there for all kinds and types of canny folk to use. Just get in touch.

Have there been any benefits in 'doing things differently'?

It's reinforced that if you allow someone the opportunity to make a difference to someone else, help them, everyone flourishes. Using our superpowers for good and recognising the resilience that has kept us alive, despite it all. The previous way of doing things simply can't be revived, which the mental health system is having trouble comprehending. Users and survivors on the other hand are better equipped to cope with the loss of what others have found normal. Maybe we never had it, or we saw it for the double-edged sword it was.

We wish to use our knowledge to benefit communities. Not merely communities defined by deficits or difficulties, but up-ending that conversation, to show how valuable expertise through experience is.

What have you learned during the crisis that may change the way you work in the future?

It's not about grand plans, as they can be readily derailed by events. It's all about people. People helping people. Everything flows from that. Give out and you get back. That requires trust and faith in others, and building that is the key. ●

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Illustrations courtesy of ReCoCo

Valuing voices and protecting human rights

Melissa Girling
Advocacy Information
Officer



Similarly to other health, social care and voluntary services, the way independent advocacy support is delivered had to shift dramatically almost overnight in March 2020.

The pandemic required an immediate change to the sector's preferred approaches to supporting people. It also shone a light on and exacerbated inequalities. There has been avoidable loss of life and many people have experienced dreadful conditions. As we move forward in our 'new normal', effective advocacy is ever more important as a tool to make sure that people's voices are heard, inequality is addressed, and rights are respected.

“ At a time when challenges are so profound, respect and protection could not be more important

At Connected Voice Advocacy we knew from our experiences of delivering advocacy that people who use health and social care services were being specifically disadvantaged by the restrictions we all faced. We were part of a group of advocacy organisations from across England and Wales which came together and has met regularly to support each other and lead the sector through the crisis.

This group of advocacy providers welcomes leaders from large national advocacy providers and small advocacy groups. We have been working alongside key advocacy partners such as Rethink, Empower and Voiceability and many more since March to discuss the concerns over the way the pandemic was impacting on the delivery of advocacy. As well as sharing concerns and

Advocacy through the pandemic - adapting to the 'new normal'

good practice, the group has been proactive in finding solutions together.

Over the last eight months the group has actively campaigned for advocacy through the pandemic and we are proud to be working alongside partners in this way. Initially the group developed myth-busting statements to use in social media campaigns - a clear message to the Health and Social Care sector that there were no changes to advocacy provision during the pandemic.

This campaign helped advocacy providers challenge when advocates were being refused access to Mental Health Tribunals or Care Homes to exercise people's right to recourse through the Court of Protection. Rather than reinventing the wheel across each organisation, this group developed template letters for advocates to use to challenge Local Authorities who were unlawfully using the new Coronavirus Act to reduce services to people.

By getting together regularly the group realised that advocates across the country were experiencing the same concerns for their service users, so a large scale survey was developed with support from the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi). Despite their busy workload, impressively, 435 Advocates from across England and Wales took part in the survey to share concerns over restrictions resulting from pandemic. NDTi pulled together the survey results in this report:

Valuing Voices: Protecting rights through the pandemic and beyond

This report reflects not only the restrictions that the pandemic brought but also wider attitudes towards people who have additional support needs. Those who are most negatively affected by inequality, poverty and discrimination have

Upholding rights and valuing voices: Advocacy principles for coronavirus and beyond

A set of Operating Principles was developed by and for advocacy providers to highlight the essential role of advocacy during the pandemic.

These principles take into account what we learned from the Valuing Voices report and our experiences of recent months. They are designed to shape our collective responses and ensure that no-one who needs our support is left out, that people's rights are respected and nobody goes unheard.

also been worst affected by the pandemic. There are widespread and profound concerns about its impact on the human rights of people who use health and social care services. Responses indicated frequent failures to provide people with the support to which they are legally entitled, and weaknesses in the safeguards needed to prevent and address these increased risks of abuse and hardship.

Lindsay Graham, Advocacy Director at People First, said: "The pandemic has shone a light on the health inequalities people are facing on a daily basis. For those experiencing social exclusion, who have difficulty communicating and experience discrimination, this is particularly so. The law is clear. Even in times such as this, it is unacceptable that so many people are being denied their legal rights to appropriate care and treatment – and even their liberty. At a time when challenges are so profound, respect and protection could not be more important."

Advocates worked together to respond to the needs of those they support in an exceptionally unusual situation. Whilst the right to advocacy remained unchanged under the Coronavirus Act and good support continued for some people, the restrictions meant that others could not get the support they needed.

Madeline Cooper-Ueki, Programme Lead at NDTi said: "It is imperative that advocates should continue to have direct access to those who need them at a time when there are even greater restrictions on people's lives and pressure within health and care services."



We will make sure that people are heard, and their rights are respected.

We will communicate effectively and safely meet with people in person.

We will make sure that people can access advocacy.

We will take positive anti-discrimination action.

We will work together to promote systemic change.



#advocacyprinciples

The report demands a rethink of our approach to health and social care and sets out concrete recommendations for government, health and social care providers and Local Authorities.

These include improving public health strategy, addressing health and social care inequalities and a focus on human rights that recognises individual choice and control.

The group is liaising with Local Authority leaders through ADASS to share the findings from our national consultation and has suggested recommendations for councils to rethink the commissioning culture.

The recommendations request Local Authorities to work with us and use this data to improve referral pathways, improve monitoring processes to address structural inequality and improve access by more effective promotion of advocacy.

Jonathan Senker, Chief Executive at VoiceAbility said: "We must use the benefit of hindsight to ensure that the deeply disturbing practices revealed in our survey are not repeated now we are experiencing a resurgence of the virus. We need government direction and investment to guide and encourage this so that we have good, safe, personalised social care for people who require it." ●

To read the full reports and for more information about Connected Voice Advocacy services visit: www.connectedvoice.org.uk/advocacy

Digital adaptation across Connected Voice Advocacy

Jane Kingston
Advocacy Manager



Our strapline states we are 'shoulder to shoulder' with our service users. We normally meet people in person, build rapport, identify their views and wishes and advocate on their behalf. Some people cannot instruct their advocates due to brain impairments or communication issues.

So advocates use a watching brief approach and research about the person, spend time with them and use all their senses to gather information (you can tell a lot from the way a care home bedroom looks and smells). All of this used to require time with a person face-to-face.

66 **Advocacy plays a crucial role in giving people a route out of situations where they feel trapped or unhappy**

Since March, social distancing rules during the Coronavirus pandemic have changed the way advocates work and the majority of our work is now delivered remotely using technology.

To protect our advocates we bought everyone laptops and developed guidance on how to work safely from home, ensuring people feel connected to colleagues, know what is expected from them while they are working in their home and keeping people socially

connected with a variety of team building exercises carried out over video link. "You are on mute" became the new 2020 catchphrase!

To protect our service users we bought in PPE, delivered welfare checks to ensure they were okay, and created more comprehensive risk assessments to allow for the essential face-to-face visits.

We quickly found ways to see people in a new way. We use phones and laptops to speak to/ video call our service users. There have been some positives to this. Some service users enjoy the video calls and feel on equal footing with their advocate who is also stuck indoors. There are tangible efficiencies and environmental benefits. We are now an almost paperless service and total up fewer car miles. We can 'remotely visit' more clients in a day. We can 'virtually attend' more tribunals and court hearings. Team meetings are shorter and more focused when in video mode.

However, this has had limited success on the ground and advocates feel frustrated with the 'new normal' and think that remote advocacy is dissatisfying and carries significant risk for our service users.

Advocates have the right to access records and see service users in private. This is a key part of our role as independent representatives. Remote advocacy is compromising this independence. In order to challenge care providers if care and treatment is sub-standard, or if a person is being overly restricted, an advocate needs time to review the records and listen to the person's candid story without staff in the room.

For more information about our Advocacy services visit:

www.connectedvoice.org.uk/advocacy

Please get in touch if you think an advocate can help you or someone you know.

Email:
advocacy@connectedvoice.org.uk

Tel: 0191 235 7013

Confidentiality and privacy are compromised if other people are there facilitating the call and holding the phone.

Due to COVID-19 institutions stopped allowing visitors. This included family/friends, CQC inspectors and, in some cases, advocates. Advocacy plays a crucial role in giving people a route out of situations where they feel trapped or unhappy. Statutory advocates have powers to help people challenge and appeal when they are restricted inside a Care Home or legally held in hospital when mentally unwell.

Advocates support vulnerable people who need safeguarding and a recent report suggests a 45% reduction in safeguarding alerts were made nationally during March to May 2020 in comparison with 2019. A survey of advocates across the country highlighted that 50% saw people living in Care Homes were confined to their rooms and not allowed outdoors.

As a key advocacy provider in the North East we became concerned about the reduction in referrals to our service as the pandemic took hold.

In response, we promoted our range of statutory and community based advocacy widely and worked with the hospitals and local authorities to remind them of the duty on them to provide an advocate.

We got together with advocacy providers across the country to share concerns on a range of issues including:

- **Increase in breaches of people's Human rights.**
- **Unlawful practice, where authorities were not complying with the Mental Capacity Act.**
- **Care providers making blanket decisions for all instead of taking a person centred approach to decision making.**
- **Overly restrictive practice in institutions with people being kept in rooms with no access to outdoors for months.**
- **Safeguarding risks falling under the radar.**
- **Misunderstandings around the Coronavirus Act resulting in fewer people accessing essential services.**
- **Inequalities in care services.**

Connected Voice has been proud to work alongside local and national partners in the advocacy sector to affect real change this year.

The advocacy sector has rallied together to address some of these issues. Regular meetings with leaders from most of the country's advocacy providers has resulted in some amazing achievements. In the last six months this group has:

- **Collectively agreed Advocacy Operating Principles to ensure consistency of approach in advocacy services in the pandemic.**
- **Created fact sheets to dispel some of the myths that have been circulating which has resulted in people not getting the services they are entitled to, or in some cases breaches of human rights.**
- **Surveyed advocates from the country and produced Valuing Voices.**
- **Campaigned Local Authority leaders (ADASS) to implement better referral pathways for advocacy, improve commissioning processes and pay for community based advocacy, and tackle structural inequality.**

Connected Voice Business Services

Michelle Wright
Connected Voice Business
Services Assistant Manager



As this time of uncertainty continues we've seen some of our customers flourish; almost doubling in size due to demand on their services, and others who have significantly reduced - often because their services are more reliant on physical interaction.

Both of these scenarios can have negative impacts and require very careful financial planning and monitoring to ensure the delivery of their services can continue.

There has never been a more important time to focus on preparing your finances for the months ahead. Making a plan for the next financial year is crucial so that your board and funders are aware of how your organisation is intending to recover or continue to deliver. Even for very small organisations who have never had a detailed budget in place before, funders may request to see one to ensure the organisation is viable and projecting a sustainable future.

Planning for changes in income

Many income streams - for example, room hire or events, particularly at this time of year - will have seen a dip compared to budget and prior years. Being able to project how this drop in income will affect overall performance and planning for how to fill this shortfall will keep your organisation on track. Where organisations have diversified and received funding for new services it's important to create a budget for the new service to ensure it is covering its costs and, if possible, that it is making a surplus.

Being able to access financial data and reports from anywhere with an internet connection through a cloud software - rather than relying

Preparing your finances for the months ahead

on one person to update a spreadsheet and provide reports - reduces risk and means that future planning is much more efficient. Cloud software can provide a suite of reports for forecasting, comparing actual costs to budget, and adjusting budgets for the rest of the year quickly and easily.

It's imperative to have financial policies and procedures in place that are continually reviewed and accurately reflect the needs of your organisation. This is to protect both the organisation and the employees, and to ensure that everything possible has been put in place to ensure cyber security and protect against fraud. Having frequent financial reviews with the board of trustees to review your finances will ensure that the financial position of your organisation is protected, and plans are made to ensure continuity.

Payroll and Auto-Enrolment

Since March the government measures to support employers and protect jobs have continually changed. These included the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme 1 (CJRS1), the CJRS2 and the Job Support Scheme. At the end of October the Job Support Schemes were postponed and the CJRS2 scheme was extended to cover the second lockdown. Then at the beginning of November it was announced the CJRS2 would be extended to March 2021.

We've had to adapt quickly to help our customers navigate through these rapid changes. Through our fully managed payroll service we've been monitoring the changes on their behalf to ensure they have the right information and guidance, making revised calculations and claims, and reflecting these changes in their payroll processes. ●

**Need support with your organisations financial management or payroll? Contact us on
Tel: 0191 235 7020 or Email: cbs@connectedvoice.org.uk**

Contact us

Connected Voice

Support and
Development

Expert support services that enable voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations to set up, be sustainable and informed, achieve their objectives and come together.

connect@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 232 7445 (opt1)

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Business
Services

Quality and cost-effective financial support services that meet the growing needs of charities, community organisations and social enterprises.

cbs@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 232 7445 (opt3)

Connected Voice

Advocacy

Free professional support to individuals to help them be aware of their rights and choices, make informed decisions, advocate for themselves and facilitate their voices being heard.

advocacy@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7013

Connected Voice

Haref

Working with communities and organisations throughout Newcastle and Gateshead to reduce health inequalities linked to ethnicity and culture.

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