



A RESPONSE TO COVID-19 INTERVIEW WITH JO CREASE, CEO

“What we do is so, so relevant right now – we have responded together to a clear and obvious need”

Together Co is a loneliness charity, working in Brighton, Hove and beyond, that creates connections to change lives. With the support of 495 volunteers (2019-20 pre-Covid), they provide a Befriending Service, matching people to create friendships that make life better alongside a Social Prescribing Service to create social connections that are key to wellbeing. Additionally, they share their ideas and expertise nationally with organisations working to end loneliness and isolation to ensure no one is left out.

THE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

There were two specific aspects to the organisational response to the pandemic:

- Continuation of their (pre-existing) regular long-term work in befriending, a cohort of around 1000 who had an existing befriender or who were supported in other ways, as well as short term Social Prescribing support.
- Being part of the city’s emergency response, plus necessary internal reorganisation and development work (including recruitment and training), fundraising and enhanced external partnership working.

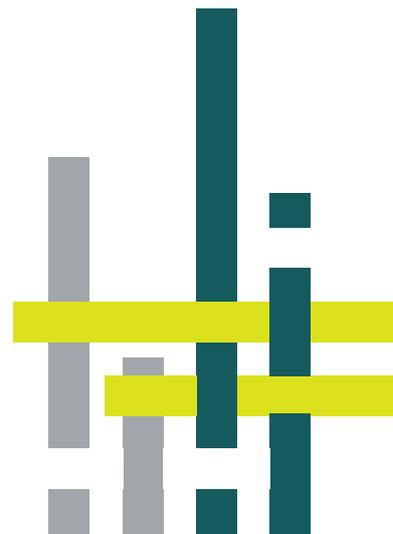
Within a week of lockdown, staff moved to home working, new remote working technology was introduced whilst services were adapted. Over 1,000 members were contacted to understand what help was most needed. The personal relationships with our members were extremely important. Existing clients found the situation very hard – some were in the vulnerable group and so were self-isolating and feeling more cut off than usual. Within a few days Together Co developed a telephone support service, increasing the capacity of existing volunteer befrienders to support more people. Immediate needs were practical, getting food and medical supplies which quickly evolved into the provision of social contact support to help with overcoming isolation and mental health needs.

Changes to volunteer recruitment and training, in quantity, focus and method of delivery were pivotal in supporting the organisation’s efforts as client demand for help soared and interest in volunteering grew by 230%, with an additional 160 volunteers coming on board between April and June 2020. The change in service and the growth in numbers resulted in urgent training needs for existing volunteers to transition to work in new ways and to support new volunteers. Twelve short training videos containing adapted befriending induction training content were created in record time during March and April, with generous pro bono support from local companies, Kineo and Story Tagger. This came about because of an existing relationship between Kineo and Together Co. In the spirit of collaboration and partnership working, the videos were made freely available online to other organisations developing their own volunteer emergency support services.

At the same time, training for Guided Conversation skills which are used in Social Prescribing and other kinds of case work support were produced on a teaching platform for public sector colleagues and other VCSE organisations and groups. This was part of the joint approach to developing the Council’s Community Hub, ensuring the cross-agency team were taking a consistent approach to supporting residents who were accessing support in this way.

A team of half a dozen “super volunteers” with specific skills and sufficient availability supported Together Co in the volunteer recruitment programme- interviewing, taking up references- providing an extraordinary 700 hours of volunteer time during March and April.

Jo describes the impact of the staff and volunteers work as amazing, both in terms of numbers and in terms of quality. There has been much in the way of technical innovation, new training instruments, online learning, staff working from home, illustrating the significant dedicated and motivated work force that has achieved so much in just a few months and continues to do so.



COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

Collaborative working evolved through a cross sectorial approach with existing and new partners, working with amongst others, Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC), Brighton & Hove Clinical Commissioning Group (BHCCG), the Ageing Well partnership, PossAbility People and Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, developing solutions to various aspects of the challenges emerging out of an unprecedented crisis.

In particular, Together Co were able to bring together Covid-19 response work with BHCC with existing Social Prescribing work with BHCCG by proposing that the citywide Social Prescribing (SP) team were made available to support the BHCC development and operation of the Community Hub. This was a change of emphasis rather than shifting resources between agencies, as Adult Social Care can and do already refer to Social Prescribing service. However, this enabled the organisation to offer the time of SP staff with specific skills in supporting people in difficult situations to deliver support to residents accessing help through the Community Hub, placing skilled staff where they were needed during the initial crisis-response phase. This was one small piece of a much larger and more complex Community Hub operation, but illustrates how VCS organisations close to communities can look back at systems and see how being flexible with resources can serve changing needs. Colleagues in BHCC and BHCCG were welcoming of this approach and worked between themselves to enable this.

Simultaneously, Together Co participated in the city's Food Cell, emergency volunteering cell, and Community Works VCS Cell, informing and supporting the development of the city's crisis response. Jo described joining forces with many other local organisations as being important:

“Being part of the local effort was heartening, activating existing connections across the various organisations and statutory services involved made it easier to provide people with the help they needed locally.”

DEVELOPING NEW SERVICES

Following an approach and financial assistance from BHCC, Together Co flexed their existing system, bringing in a Food Response Coordinator (who became part of the befriending team), assessing individuals and matching them to volunteers, within the “Can Pay, Non-Urgent Food Pathway”. Together Co uses Social Prescribing team skills to train Befriending colleagues in the guided conversation approach and in this way, the response aligned with case working, working alongside adult social care.

Alongside this work, Together Co worked with the Adult Social Care team to identify needs and to accommodate demand, contributing views to the design and build of the BHCC case management system which sits behind the Community Hub. This has signified a culture shift in collaborative working with statutory services.

Simultaneously, plans to develop a new bi-lingual support service with Sussex Interpreting Services were brought forward, to widen service accessibility as specific needs emerged.

OPPORTUNITIES AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Jo believes there is an opportunity to build on what became instinctive in developing solution focused systems, working together with greater community connectivity to combine abilities and knowledge. This has created very powerful responses to significant challenges in a constantly shifting environment, with the balance of the relationship between VCSE and statutory services feeling more equal, focusing on the strengths, resources and reach each party can bring.

She is clear that the long-established partnership working approach in Brighton and Hove have stood the city in good stead, making for swift, effective, cross sector solutions, and establishing an opportunity for further collaboration on this framework in the future that can bring wider perspectives to the undoubted challenges that lie ahead. Jo views community connectivity as an imperative, and that investing in community development and sector development work represents investment in whole systems resilience and systems transformation. The VCSE should be involved in at the very early stages of solution and system design to ensure the most powerful solutions in addressing inequalities.

Jo is proud of the city-wide response to the pandemic and Together Co's part in it, and pays tribute to everyone in the collective response.

