

# A Ground Up Approach to Community Based Covid 19 Support.

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Joanna has 12 years' experience in the third sector through direct practice, service development and management roles. At Scottish Autism, Joanna has worked alongside autistic people in supported living and day services, and has managed services that provide vocational and skills development opportunities.

In her current role, Joanna leads on the development of practice both internally and externally providing practice and service development support across Scottish Autism, and partner organisations. Joanna's key interest lies in creating environments and communities that enable autistic people to flourish and that recognise their voice.

## INTRODUCTION

Autistic people and their families already face significant challenges relating to social isolation and lack of appropriate support across the lifespan. The pandemic served to not only exacerbate these issues, but further shine a light on already existing challenges. Since the beginning of the pandemic, calls to our advice line increased by a third in the space of a few weeks. Calls were mainly from families of autistic children now faced with home schooling and working from home, and autistic adults who found previously established networks of support were no longer available or accessible. All of these groups had one thing in common; an often-significant impact on their mental and physical wellbeing.

## WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

This presentation will discuss the impact of Covid 19 on community services in Scotland and how when utilising community insight, services can transform to meet the needs of those using them. We will discuss why 'person to person' services became so important and what the challenges were in delivering support like this during a pandemic. We will also reflect on what lessons were learnt and how these lessons can inform service development in the future.

## WHAT YOU DID

Using data from our advice line we were able to establish keys areas of need; mental health support, support to access food and medicine, tackling isolation, and support to make sense of what was happening and the civic responsibility we all had to undertake during the pandemic.

We expanded the opening hours of our advice line from 10am-4pm to 8am-8pm 7 days a week, to provide ongoing support from a qualified and experienced community advisor. Our advisors understood the complexities faced by many autistic people and their families and were able to translate complex information into a format that suited an individual's thinking style, making this available via our website, social platforms and directly through email and phone. A Live Chat function was introduced on our website. This was for those who had difficulty accessing the phone or did not like to use a phone, ensuring they could still get in touch quickly.

We launched 'Call for Chat' that provided a regular contact call for autistic people and their families. Our advisors were able to act as a conduit between local resilience services and an isolated person, providing routes for emergency medication, food deliveries and that all important connection to someone who understood how they might be feeling.

We ran regular live events via our social media channels that provided both practical advice and emotional support from a variety of national and international experts in the field.

We ran regular online social groups that supported people to access a network of people who shared similar interests, and who identified as autistic. These events whilst relatively low cost provided a life line to people who felt isolated, and are still ongoing today and form part of a lasting community legacy.

## WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CHALLENGES?

Mobilising a response in a relatively short period of time required significant resource and the agility of all stakeholders to ensure meaningful development of services that met the need of those utilising them. This required a significant amount of multidisciplinary and interagency work. Aligning the different elements of this was a challenge at times, in part due to the fact that everyone was designing and redesigning based on emerging guidance and legislation surrounding Covid, and in part due to increasing pressure on these services as the need grew.

A constant challenge was the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic, in Scotland we experienced a significant number of updates and changes to our Covid response based on national and local Covid transmission rates. This meant we had to focus and refocus services and support where the greatest need was, often with only a few hours' notice.

## WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS?

Since March 2020 when the UK went into it's first lockdown and April 2022 when almost all Covid restrictions were lifted in Scotland, our advice line has responded to in excess of 14,000 enquiries from autistic people and their families and carers. This figure is more than triple what we would expect to receive during this period. This included 528 contact calls made to people who were experiencing significant isolation or who needed our support to reach vital services that could provide them with food deliveries or other essential services. Over 150,000 people across Scotland were reached through our online events, ensuring people had access to current and relevant information across a variety of subjects. New and innovative services such as Affinity, Click and Connect and Mindfulness Community group still attract regular participation from across Scotland with new people joining every week.

More significantly, 53 autistic people from across Scotland were able to access help and support in regards to suicide. Support that saved lives.

## RESULTS

More than  LiveChat

# 14,000

Advice Line Enquires from autistic people and their family and carers.



# 53

autistic people from across Scotland were able to access help and support in regards to suicide.



Over



# 150,000

people throughout Scotland engaged with our online events.



# 528

contact calls made to people who were experiencing significant isolation



or who needed our support to reach vital services that could provide them with food deliveries or other essential services.



Over

# 300

online events and social groups



delivered to support autistic people and their families.



## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Insight gained over the last two years gives us an opportunity to rethink how community services are delivered. To consider how we amplify the voices of autistic people and their families within Scotland so that they inform and indeed are at the heart of future service development at a community level.