



The Impact of COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The Greenhouse project is funded by The National Lottery Community fund to develop a pipeline of trained family support workers, recruited from the most disadvantaged local families. One of the outputs of the project is to provide analysis of its impact, the Alice Charity commissioned Staffordshire University to conduct the impact analysis. Following a discussion with the Connected Communities team within the university, it was decided to take a collaborative approach by training two cohorts recruited from the Alice Charity team including lottery-funded trainees to conduct this community research.

The Alice Charity community research team completed the research investigation as part of a 15 credit, Level 3 Get Talking: Community Consultation qualification, accredited by Staffordshire University, accessing the period of January 2020 to August 2021. As this period

coincided with the global pandemic it was decided the research would be based on the impact of Covid-19 on Alice charity's staff, families, volunteers, and key stakeholders. The team bring their experience of working in the community, supporting research participants to talk community, supporting research participants to talk openly and offering a range of experiences and views of the impact of COVID-19.

The research investigation collected information from 19 people, who are linked to the charity.

The research sample group was mainly female (78.94%), full time employed (63.1%) and aged 35-49 (42.1%). 100% of respondents identified as part of the 'White' ethnic group with 68.4% saying they were White English.

Demographic data was not collected from the 35 families who contributed their thoughts to the 'hands tree' at Big Cup.

COVID-19 AND THE CHARITY SECTOR

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of life across the UK since March 2020. Enforced government lockdowns brought with it the closure of businesses and schools, which created uncertainty for people across the UK.

The unprecedented conditions created by the pandemic developed a significant increase in negative experiences relating to anxiety, depression, isolation, loneliness, sleep and stress levels in UK adults, from 20.8% in 2019 to 29.5% in 2020¹. ONS figures identify that the equivalent of 19 million adults in Great Britain report they have high levels of anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic².

Further impacts of the pandemic have also been felt in the large and diverse UK charity sector, which has been greatly affected by COVID-19. Charities have felt the impacts of an increase in demand for charity services, rising by 63% on the previous year³. Additionally, 41% of charities identified the range of the

need for charity sector support is clear to see from the increase of 690,000 people being plunged into poverty due to the COVID-19 pandemic⁴.

IMPACTS ON OUR CHARITY



Steph Talbot- Alice Charity CEO

The COVID-19 Pandemic has had a massive impact on our charity. It's changed all manner of things, especially for our staff and the services that we offer to the community.

The situation at the beginning of the pandemic was so unknown and we didn't know if the charity would be able to survive financially, especially considering we didn't know how long the pandemic was going to last.

The furlough scheme protected the charity, financially but removed a lot of staff involvement.

¹ GOV.UK. 2020. Important findings- Changes in population mental health and wellbeing. [online] Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/2-important-findings-so-far>> [Accessed 20 September 2021].

² ONS.gov.uk. 2020. Coronavirus and anxiety, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusandanxietygreatbritain/3april2020to10may2020>> [Accessed 20 September 2021].

³ Pro Bono Economics. 2020. November 15-20 Covid Charity Tracker Survey results. [online] Available at: <<https://www.probonoeconomics.com/november-15-20-covid-charity-tracker-survey-results>> [Accessed 20 September 2021].

⁴ Poverty During the Covid-19 Crisis. 2020. [eBook] London: Legatum Institute, pp.1-7. Available at: <<http://file:///C:/Users/rf14/Downloads/Legatum-Institute-briefing-on-poverty-during-the-Covid-crisis.pdf>> [Accessed 20 September 2021].

IMPACTS ON OUR CHARITY

This was at a time when demand for things like the Peoples Pantry were so high.

We found that as we moved through 2020 more funds became available, but staff still couldn't fully work because of home schooling. Flexi Furlough helped this massively, as we were able to bring staff members in on a flexible basis to work whilst also being there to support their own families.

The connection we have had with our staff throughout the pandemic has created a supportive space for them, allowing them to break when they needed to, knowing the support was there to help them.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILIES

Community researchers spoke to Alice Charity staff to understand the impact Covid-19 had on them, their own families, and the families they support. COVID-19 has had an impact on the families that are supported by Alice Charity. Alice Charity staff saw an increase in the numbers of families struggling financially. Participants said there was an increase in poverty being endured by families due to the pandemic:

“COVID has reflected and magnified our local community and highlighted poverty in our families”

Face-to-face contact with families reduced dramatically during the lockdown. With this reduction, the mental health of families was impacted by the isolated and uncertain environments caused by the pandemic, leading to increased amounts of anxiety:

“The most negative impact of COVID was the anxiety and stress and worry”

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STAFF

Like the families that they support, Alice Charity staff and volunteers have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many found the experience stressful, especially during the early uncertainty before and during the first lockdown.

“Shopping and [getting hold of food] was difficult [...] There were empty shelves [...] It was easier to get hold of cocaine than it was to get flour.”

The enforced isolation brought uncertainty for some staff members, especially regarding their financial situations and not being able to carry out their usual operations. It was apparent that staff members were struggling with their mental health, as well as having to manage loss and bereavement whilst working from home in lockdown.

“Working from home I felt trapped, I felt anxious, and I questioned myself.”



Alice Charity Community Researchers during Get Talking Training at Staffordshire University

BIG CUP CASE STUDY

Big Cup is a parent and toddler playgroup that helps new families overcome isolation through regular get-togethers across Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent. The playgroup offers the chance for discussion between families about common concerns in a space that is relaxed and friendly.

Due to the Pandemic, Big Cup was adversely impacted as it couldn't open under lockdown measures. It was a hugely used service and people lost this lifeline.

Between 23rd March 2020 and 1st, September 2020 Big Cup operations across the local area had to stop. This meant closing the original 6 groups based in Kidsgrove, Audley, Clayton, Bradwell, Chesterton, Pool fields.

During this time, the Big Cup team reached out to families through wellbeing calls and sent out activity packs to ensure that they still had that human connection with the charity. In total 730 wellbeing calls were made to parents who attended Big Cup.

Big Cup reopened in September 2020, starting with 3 groups- Audley, Clayton, and Bradwell. Due to government lockdown restrictions, Big Cup closed again until the new year.

Returning in 2021, Big Cup reopened its Audley, Clayton, and Bradwell groups but also expanded its services, running new groups in Norton, Shelton, Tunstall, Fenton, Abbey Hulton, Birches Head, and Northwood.

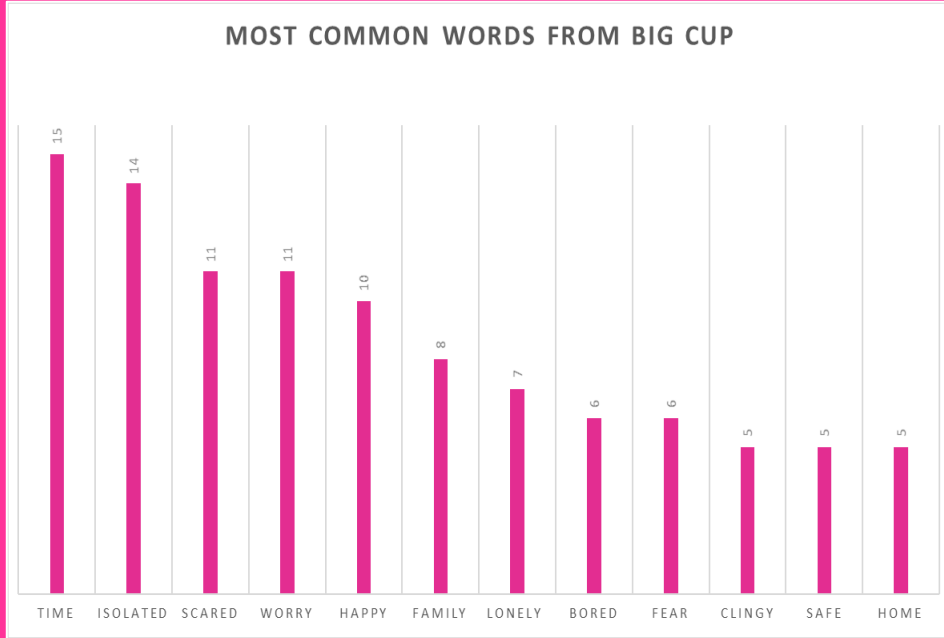
730
WELLBEING CALLS MADE TO
PARENTS FROM BIG CUP

Once some of the Big Cup groups had reopened, it was important to gather the experiences that Big Cup families had had of COVID-19.

To do this a member of the Alice Charity community research team used a creative tool to gather information from 35 family members at the playgroup. Family members at Big Cup were asked to draw around their hands on a piece of paper and write down the most important words that they associated with COVID-19 on the paper hand. Doing this in a creative way allowed them to express how they felt about their time in lockdown and isolation.

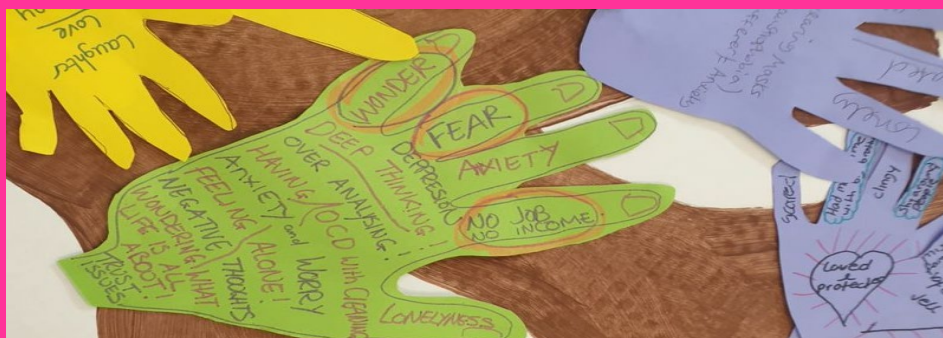
BIG CUP CASE STUDY

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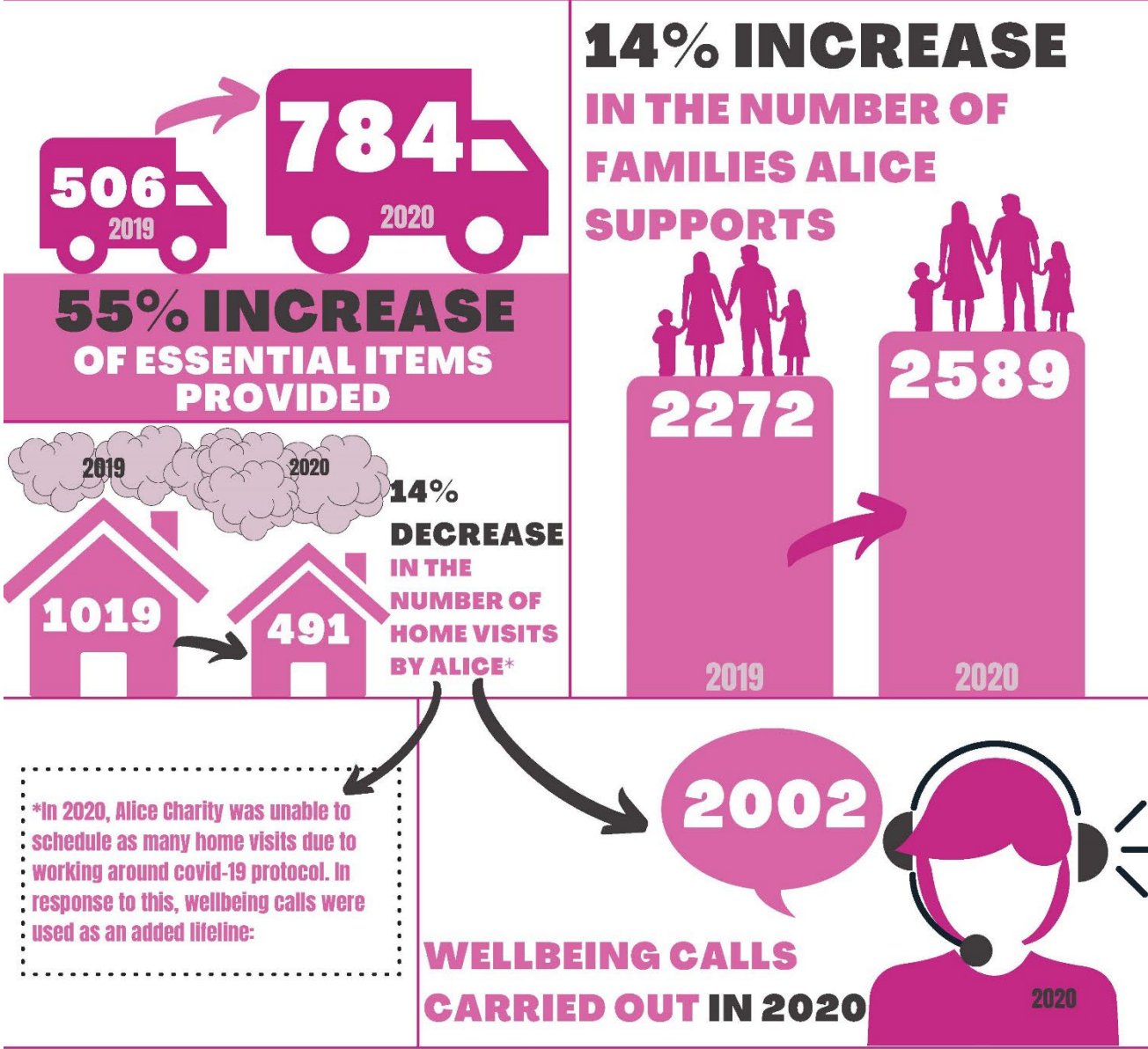
‘Time’ and ‘Isolated’ were the words most frequently used to describe people’s experiences of Covid-19. ‘Time’ was used to refer to the amount of time that people felt went by during the lockdowns throughout 2020 and early 2021, especially in the isolated conditions that they faced. Additionally, ‘Time’ was also used to talk about the extra time that was able to be spent as a family in a household.

Other words used by families show that although people found the situation scary and that it caused them to worry, there were elements of happiness that came from that period of isolation, happiness came from the increased time that some people had with their families. Therefore, a key positive response can be seen to revolve around time spent as a family at home, in a safe environment.



ALICE CHARITY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN 2020

Alice Charity saw an increase in demand for their services during the pandemic and had to increase and diversify their services to meet the community need. Here are some of the ways in which this was achieved



211% INCREASE OF PEOPLE FED BY THE PEOPLES PANTRY



Alice Charity's response to COVID

Alice Charity saw an increase in demand for their services during the pandemic and had to increase and diversify their services to meet the community need:

“[There has been a] huge increase all over. The magnitude of demand was shocking. I believe Pantry demand will be one of the longer impacts as families continue to struggle”

In the face of a global pandemic and growing demand for service, the response of the charity's staff has been one of strength, resilience, and selflessness, despite the risks involved:

Alice Charity's response has been one which has allowed service to continue effectively, whilst ensuring connection and wellbeing that transcends throughout families, staff, and volunteers. Whether this was through the implementation and enhancement of the government furlough scheme or wellbeing catch-ups and training sessions.

People's Pantry Response

The People's Pantry has seen a growth in demand for its services.

The People's Pantry, at Alice Charity, had always revolved around being free to run. It was at no cost to Alice, through food donations, volunteers, and free rent locations. However, when Covid hit, suddenly, Alice struggled to get donations. People couldn't get to the pantry, to donate, because they were in lockdown

“People couldn't go out and buy tinned food because the shelves had been wiped out. We couldn't get toilet paper, let alone tinned meat, veg, fruit. [...] we were experiencing higher demand than ever for food. But we weren't getting any food brought in”

Due to the impact of the pandemic and government restrictions, Alice Charity had to invest more resources into the Peoples Pantry to ensure that it could continue to provide for the people in the local community that needed support.

This meant putting in place paid staff to operate the day to day running of the pantry. Alice Charity had never paid staff to run the pantry before this. In addition to paying staff, Alice Charity began to buy food for the pantry too

“We’d never bought food before. And we couldn’t just go into ASDA, and buy food there were restrictions on. So, we had to go to lots of different supermarkets [...] we had to go to different wholesalers to get things which again, we’re selling out. At one time, we couldn’t get any Potatoes. Pasta, that’s a staple for a food bank”

The pantry became a lifeline for many members of the local community, and with the increased demand and difficulty in sourcing produce, the task for Alice Charity became much more difficult

“For every one family that we would have fed before, we now have to invest four times as much to feed that one”

As well as meeting the demand, the pantry has also provided more food options like halal and vegetarian and diversified to add delivery service, allowing people to receive food and supplies, even when it might not have been possible for them to physically access the Pantry. Overall, the pantry fed **6074** people during 2020.



Word Cloud made from the COVID words collected at Big Cup

Wellbeing Calls

To counteract a lack of face-to-face contact, family support workers made **2002** wellbeing phone calls throughout 2020 to stay in contact with families, something they had not done before.

These calls helped family support workers to continue to check in on families, building and maintaining relationships through a non-judgmental space that allowed honest and truthful conversations to take place. Additionally, where it was safe to do so, some home visits continued during the pandemic. A total of **491** home visits were made during 2020.

“We've had a lot of feedback from the families saying that wellbeing calls have not only been really helpful, but they found it useful for just keeping in touch with us [...] [It's worked for] staff too so it's just become a regular way of working for us, because it's so beneficial”

Furlough

The furlough scheme has had a positive impact on those at the charity that accessed the scheme, as it acted as a safety net. Alice Charity went one step further and added 20% to the government 80% of pay, ensuring that all furloughed staff would receive 100% pay whilst furloughed.

“Without the furlough scheme, there would have been redundancies, without a doubt [...] we actually grew as an organisation throughout COVID. And we wouldn't have been able to do that without furlough”

Wellbeing and Training Sessions

To help combat the negative impacts of working from home on their staff, Alice Charity arranged weekly wellbeing ‘connecting sessions’. Using Torus Wellbeing CIC to provide 8 wellbeing sessions- focusing on anxiety, mindfulness, sleep, healthy eating, and exercise.

Staff at the charity completed **47** training courses during lockdown,

providing a way for staff members to continue to add to their skillset whilst away from the office.

Additionally, Alice Charity facilitated their sessions with staff wellbeing. This was in the form of virtual quiz nights, as well as staff nights in where the charity paid for all staff to have a takeaway that was eaten together by everyone virtually.

Response for Volunteers

Away from operations conducted from home, Alice continued to provide opportunities for people to carry on volunteering with the charity and providing much-needed services to the community. Volunteering opportunities also allowed more connections to be formed, and lessen the negative impacts of isolation:

[I] felt really pleased that the charity put measures in place, [they] gave out masks, had a place to talk to others, [where we] chatted about worries.”

Making the right decision

“Our values are all about kindness, compassion, unconditional love, and courage. And everything that Alice did just aligned naturally with the response we needed to give, there wasn't an active thought of ‘we need to be brave and make this brave decision’, [...] it's so naturally embedded into Alice that we always do, the harder decision, it would have been easier, it probably would have been more financially beneficial for us to shut shop. But it's never been about making the easy decision. It's always been about making the right decision”

THE DAD COMMUNITY

The Dad community supports single dads in the Stoke on Trent and Newcastle Under Lyme area, by providing weekly support phone calls every Wednesday. Here, dads talk about their accomplishments and achievements and struggles that they're going through, but the most important aspect is providing somewhere for single fathers to be heard by a fellow single father.

“They've got mums, dads, or brothers, or whatever, but they haven't got people that understand their position [...] they couldn't understand the journey and that's why [The Dad Community] was needed really”

The Dad Community was launched right in the middle of the pandemic in 2020. It was during this time that some of the dads had nobody to talk to about being a father, some of those dads didn't see anybody, some due to their fear around the pandemic.

COVID-19 negatively impacted the mental health of the dads supported. The fear and anxiety of not knowing what's coming, or what is happening, mixed with isolation, loneliness and being stuck at home with children, impacted massively on the dads that Alice Charity supports.

Having the Dad Community support calls allowed Alice Charity to speak to people over the phone, breaking the isolation that they were facing, at a time when a lot of places had to close. Alice Charity carried on all the way through the pandemic, dads that needed support received a call, no matter what. It was a massive lifeline.

“Even if it's been a tough week, come Wednesday, they've got somebody to talk to you. They've got somebody to vent off to, they've got somebody that can listen”

THE IMPACT OF ALICE CHARITY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

This research identified the impacts of Alice Charity's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Community researchers spoke to staff, volunteers, and Alice Charity leadership to understand how the changes Alice charity made in response to Covid-19 affected the staff teams and the services provided.

Furlough

Implementing the furlough scheme, and providing the additional 20% of pay for staff was identified as one of the key positive impacts for staff

Our research found that Alice Charity's rapid response to furloughing staff and paying the additional 20% ensured financial security for staff at a time of huge uncertainty and anxiety.

“It was such an uncertain time, and nobody knew where they were from one day to the next. So, to be able to have one thing, one massive thing that we could be certain of that, we were going to get the full wage, and we were going to be able to afford to pay bills when everybody around us left, right, and centre is losing jobs or whatever. I think that helped massively in terms of mental health and just feeling supported”

Keeping Staff Safe

Although it was a difficult decision, the Alice team recognised that the shift to working from home was a tough but necessary step to take to ensure that staff members could be kept safe, especially in the early uncertain times of the pandemic:

“[We knew] that closing the Alice Office was hard, but it was the right thing to do to keep people safe. I don’t think in a different workplace I would cope. The supportive and networking environment provided a support system”

The “supportive and networking environment” created by Alice Charity was established by adapting services quickly to meet the needs of staff:

“We did right by the team, rather than the organisation”

Ensuring a staff first focus allowed the wellbeing to be prioritised, instigating the continuation and diversification of services offered by Alice Charity.

Working From Home

Although some Alice Charity staff members found working from home difficult, the ability to carry on working from home for some allowed them to feel that they could continue to make a difference through a new flexible approach to working.

Working from home also helped to provide focus and routine. This helped to combat isolation.

As well as flexibility, being able to spend more time with their families was an impact that proved beneficial for some staff members:

“[It was] good to be at home, connecting with family which is something I don’t usually have time to focus on”

Volunteering

The protocols created by the Alice Charity aided in creating a safe and open environment, which encouraged volunteers to engage with the charity:

“[Alice Charity’s] clear protocol, made me feel safe. I always wanted to volunteer but didn’t have the nerve”

Being able to extend volunteering opportunities during the pandemic, aided in the continued delivery of the services that the charity offered, further supporting the local community at a time when it had been hit hardest.

Additionally, volunteering also allowed an opportunity for people to gain a sense of ‘community’ during the pandemic, which was valued during a time when people have felt isolated:

“Knowing I can support with volunteering and donations gave me a sense of community, it was lovely to be able to help. I saw people going above and

beyond. It made me realise how lucky I am. [I realised it is] good to give.”

Staff Wellbeing

Alice Charity’s diverse response to the pandemic has contributed to an overall staff wellbeing focus.

This focus has been identified as one of the main positive impacts that occurred during the pandemic:

“Without Alice [my] mental health would have been more negatively impacted”

Alice Charity arranged quiz nights, online training, and evening wellbeing sessions to help staff keep in touch whilst they were working from home, isolating, or shielding. These sessions and get-togethers helped to keep staff in touch with each other

“[We were] seeing each other, sharing, human normal interaction, we cried and laughed together, [it was] very healing”

Additionally, the online training opportunities were considered to inadvertently help boost the skills possessed by the team, because staff members were logging into things from home, independently.

Although times throughout the pandemic have proven difficult and made some people 'break', the response to staff wellbeing, throughout the pandemic, has been one which has enabled services and human connection to continue in the face of uncertainty, and ultimately:

“Alice went above and beyond to support as many people as possible”



Big Cup tree consultation tool

Produced by

Alice Charity

and

Staffordshire University

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