



HOLLOWAY NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUP'S COVID-19 RESPONSE



Supporting Islington residents during the first six months of COVID

Holloway Neighbourhood Group has a long track record of providing services to support mental wellbeing and social connectedness. From the very beginning of the pandemic, knowing we had to close our Community Centre and Therapy Centre, we decided we should deliver new services which played to our strengths and expertise around mental health and social isolation. In such a fast-changing environment, it was important that we developed robust partnerships with other agencies offering practical help around issues such as food poverty and welfare benefits advice.

Most of our service users are older people and people experiencing mental health issues. We knew that most of our older services users were self-isolating, becoming more physically inactive and demotivated, and relying on the telephone to maintain contact with people. People's mental health deteriorated rapidly. We spoke to many people who were experiencing anxiety, loneliness and depression. Some had also experienced bereavement and many were finding it difficult to access their usual support services.

To meet the changing needs we collaborated with colleagues across the borough and with partner organisations such as Octopus Community Network, Talk for Health, the Recovery College, Islington Council, and Age UK Islington to ensure that people could get the support they needed.

In-Touch, a friendly telephone chat service 244 people supported on 888 calls

In-Touch is a friendly telephone chat service for local people, helping them to feel less isolated, maintain their interests and to help solve issues such as food and medication delivery and access to free food. We established this new service in response to the lockdown with a grant from the London Community Foundation.

We provided the service to people who used to attend our centre-based activities as well as working closely with referrers such as GPs, Mutual Aid groups, food delivery services and Islington Council to ensure other isolated people could access the service.

In-Touch case study

We called this friendly lady for the first time on 12th May. She had broken her ankle and was in a cast. She had been getting help with food and medication from her son, but he was due to return to work and this help would stop. She was lonely and struggling to get around. She needed help with shopping, cleaning and someone to talk to. For a week after this we could not get hold of her but left information about services that could help. On the 19th we spoke to her again. She was in a lot of pain with no medication to help, her cooker had broken down and she was unable to cook anything to eat. She was teary from the effects of isolation and lack of sleep due to pain. We contacted her GP and local Mutual Aid group on her behalf and telephoned the next day to find out she now had medication and a Mutual Aid volunteer to do her shopping. She was very grateful for our help and the speed with which it had happened. By the 27th she had daily carer support with bathing and cleaning her house.

She said she wanted to thank us for all our help, she said we "saved her life" as she didn't know who to ask for help. She said the calls are good company for her, but the practical help is "amazing".

"The Zoom creative writing sessions have been great for me in lockdown, especially as I am shielding. Oriana sends us very comprehensive and interesting worksheets so we can prepare beforehand and then read out to each other during the session. It's so good to connect in this way with fellow writers and get the amazing encouragement from Oriana and members of the group. It has been so good to be challenged creatively during this very difficult time and then share our work with familiar faces. Thank you so much Oriana for being so inspirational and considerate."

Counselling 819 sessions for 91 people

We supported our volunteer counsellors to develop their skills so that they were able to transition from offering counselling in its traditional setting at our Therapy Centre to delivering sessions remotely via Zoom or the telephone. We expanded and adapted our counselling services to provide a fast response, knowing that early interventions can prevent complex mental health problems in the future - helping to reduce the strain on NHS services in both the short and long term.

A grant from the London Community Foundation enabled us to fast-track more people into counselling, helping people to put tools in place to cope better and rebuild their confidence to re-engage in normal activities. We supported people at risk of suicide and experiencing bereavement due to COVID-19.

As lockdown eased in August, we were able to re-introduce some in-person counselling from the Stress Project Therapy Centre.

Counselling case study

"E" is in her mid-60s and called the Stress Project during lockdown. She was experiencing a high anxiety disorder, saying that she had never felt this way before the COVID-19 outbreak.

She had been living independently on her own and would go to her daughter's house to look after her 3 grandchildren who she adored. She was supportive to her daughter who is a frontline worker and a single parent.

She described her anxiety as "climbing the walls". She was convinced that she would get the Virus and would die. Her belief was so strong that she would stay in her pyjamas so that when the ambulance would come for her she would be ready for them. She spent most of the time worrying and had actually called the emergency service once. She would excessively clean the house and would manage breakfast but nothing more than that.

She had 12 sessions of telephone counselling, during which her anxiety levels reduced. She managed to see her grandchildren as a family bubble. She has now come to the Old Fire Station community centre and engaged in our weekly women's discussion group.

"Thank you to the Stress Project for the support over this really distressing time. I thought I was losing my mind and had no one to turn to. The counsellor helped me to work through my anxieties and I can now enjoy life better."

Mindfulness 9 sessions for 23 people

By focusing the attention on being in the present, Mindfulness is clinically proven to reduce anxiety, improve sleep and help with stress. With many people experiencing deteriorating mental health, we were pleased to offer socially distanced Mindfulness classes at the Stress Project Therapy Centre from late July.

Our highly skilled facilitator, Ulanah, helped attendees to learn techniques to build their resilience and better cope with the challenges they are likely to face during the pandemic.

Because of rising rates of COVID-19 in the local area, we moved the classes to Zoom and begun offering one-to-one in-person Mindfulness sessions to help continue to support people's wellbeing and mental health.



**Online Classes – Yoga, Tai Chi & Egyptian Dance and Art
143 sessions & 84 people supported**

From April, we delivered online our Yoga, Tai Chi, Egyptian Dance, Creative Writing and Art classes, which we had previously offered from our centres.

These online classes gave people the opportunity to maintain regular exercise and pursue creative outlets with a facilitator they were already comfortable with - especially important during this time of great change and uncertainty. We worked closely with partner organisations, such as Octopus Community Network and Islington Council, so that people who accessed similar services elsewhere which had been cancelled – could attend our classes; bringing new people to our services.

To complement these classes we also provided telephone support, produced videos, posted out activity packs, and we provided technical support to help people get onto Zoom.

From mid-July, following government guidelines, we were able to safely host a socially distanced bi-weekly Art class at the Old Fire Station Community Centre – giving those that felt able a chance get out of the house and access a much needed in-person activity, helping to further reduce isolation.



**Complementary Therapy Clinic
25 sessions for 14 people**

Demand for complementary therapies remained high during the pandemic, especially as many people were struggling to access services that they had previously relied on to support their wellbeing.

Following strict guidelines from the government and governing bodies for complementary therapies, the Stress Project opened in late August, providing clothed massage, shiatsu and reiki.

**Discussion Groups, Film Club & Bingo
37 sessions for 35 people**

With the easing of restrictions in July we began to host some small, COVID secure, activities at the Old Fire Station Community Centre, providing opportunities for people to meet together safely. With so few in-person activities on offer during this time, we were pleased to receive referrals from many organisations looking to support their clients to build their confidence in re-engaging with public space.

We began by restarting the Film club and Bingo group – it was lovely to welcome familiar and new faces back to the Centre. Unsurprisingly, Film club members requested happy and uplifting movies as a response to the stressful period. 'It was just so nice to have something open to go and do – and see some familiar faces.'

Next, we restarted our MenTalk discussion group and also begun a new WomenTalk discussion group. These groups were expertly facilitated and topics focused on recent news and events – giving people the chance to express their feelings in a safe and welcoming environment.

Providing COVID secure spaces at both our centres also allowed our renters to return, many of whom work with the most marginalised members of our local communities.

“It was much more fun doing Tai Chi with other people instead of practising alone and picking up all sorts of bad habits. I find I’m more motivated to get it right if I have Neil saying do this and do that all the time and also I can ask questions. As always with Zoom it was lovely to be able to see everyone.”

WHAT'S NEXT

Holloway Neighbourhood Group’s response to the coronavirus pandemic involved quickly transforming our services to make our support accessible to the most vulnerable and isolated in our community.

As rates of COVID-19 increased in mid-September we once again had to close some of our in-person activities at our centres, with further closures in response to the England-wide lockdown a few weeks later. Funding from the Coronavirus Community Support Fund, distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund, has helped us to expand our In Touch telephone support, to provide even more counselling, and offer more tech support to help people to access online activities.

As everyone is bracing themselves for a challenging winter, we continue to work fast and flexibly to respond to changing needs within our local communities. We look forward to better times when we can welcome more people to participate in activities at the Old Fire Station community centre and Stress Project therapy centre, but meanwhile will continue to support people to stay connected by offering wide ranging services by telephone and online.

Thank you, funders



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