

Supporting children with disabilities during COVID-19

Together Trust, UK

Background

The Together Trust has been championing and caring for people with complex needs for over 150 years. It is a leading disability charity in England, and helps children, young people, parents and carers by delivering individualised care, support and education. The communities it works with may be experiencing emotional, behavioural and social difficulties; physical disabilities; learning difficulties; and autism spectrum conditions.

The charity offers over 40 different services and reaches thousands of people each year across its programmes. This includes a range of children's services at home and in the community that aim to offer flexible support for families, helping them to maintain relationships and keep their children at home where possible. Other key areas of support include special education, therapy programmes in schools, short breaks for families, and community services. It also advocates for positive change in local and national communities.

Introduction: COVID-19 context

In March 2020, the UK Government announced a three-month period of nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While schools closed for all face-to-face teaching during this time, and again between January and March 2021, the schools for children with complex needs where Together Trust delivers its services remained open, with an average of 60 per cent pupil attendance. Virtual learning was introduced in accordance with the government guidelines at the time enabling all students, wherever possible, to continue their learning programmes.

Together Trust quickly adapted to continue supporting children with disabilities and their families safely during this difficult time. This practitioner guidance paper highlights the adaptations that the organisation made and identifies their impact, as well as the challenges faced, with the aim of providing a learning resource for other practitioners. Together Trust also shares tips for responding and adapting to unexpected situations.

Programme adaptations

Given the range of different settings in which Together Trust delivers its services, there was a variety of different government regulations to understand and apply in each of the different settings. Staff were no longer able to provide home support to children with disabilities so instead they adapted this service to provide virtual contact, engaging children remotely in activities such as cooking and arts and crafts.

Together Trust provides day care and residential centres for children with disabilities, for short-term stays, as respite for families, or full-time care for children with more complex needs. There is a strong focus on maintaining family contact and all children spend regular time at home with their families, or their families can also come to stay at the centre to visit for the weekend. During the lockdown period this became difficult, as parents of a number of children in the residential services were key workers, so it was too risky for the children to have breaks at home with their families. Local authorities also restricted access to children's overnight services as they were concerned about the risk, so family members were only able to see their children through the window while visiting, although staff made sure that lots of virtual contact with families was maintained.

Together Trust's community youth groups provide a vital space for children with disabilities, aged 8–12 and 13–18, to connect and develop new skills. While the groups ceased during the first lockdown, they were able to reopen from July 2020 as they were defined as support groups that promoted well-being. However, Together Trust had to implement a range of rigorous logistical adaptations to ensure the safety of both children and staff. This was particularly important as children at the youth groups attend different schools so have a large number of different contacts. A risk assessment was undertaken using a task-based analysis approach and several measures put in place in accordance with government guidance. This involved measuring the space to assess which groups could be accommodated and to establish an adapted layout that included a one-way system to ensure changeovers between groups were as safe as possible. As a result, the number of children who could use the space at any one time was reduced to a



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maximum of 15. Intent on limiting as much risk as possible to children and their families, Together Trust established strict cleaning procedures throughout the whole space in between all activity rotation, and of the toilet facilities after every use, engaging additional members of staff to support this increase in workload.

Together Trust also staggered the numbers that children returned in, slowly building up to the maximum of 15. Some parents were nervous about their children returning even with increased safety measures, so not all children returned straight away and initially the number of youth groups reduced from four to two per week. Staff made contact with children and parents in advance to check that they had no symptoms of COVID-19. On arrival temperature checks were carried out and hand gel provided for staff and children to use frequently, especially given the tactile nature of the work.

Another important aspect of reopening these services was preparing the children for the changes they could expect on returning to their youth group. Many children that Together Trust works with have significant communication needs, including some who are non-verbal and therefore rely on visual cues. To support these children Together Trust used [social stories](#)¹, sharing photos virtually and in letters sent home of what staff would look like wearing masks, gloves and aprons, and the different procedures in place at different points in the building to prepare children for what they would find upon returning.

While children were not expected to wear masks, staff went to great lengths to share social distancing practices and procedures with them, using [makaton](#)² – a visual language – for non-verbal children or those with communication challenges. At Together Trust youth groups, children learn how to run tuck shops to develop practical skills in working with money. This element of the sessions also had to be redesigned in order to limit physical interactions between children: currently only one person at a time can access the tuck shop and is served by one other person; hand gel is used after all money handling; and the money and change boxes are kept separate to avoid contamination.

There is a real mix of household income levels among the families that Together Trust supports across North West England. In addition, Together Trust finds that parents who are carers often have underlying health conditions as a result of the impact of their child's disability; the ongoing pressure of the situation and constant concern for their child alongside the demands of modern life can often lead to anxiety or depression, which make it challenging to hold down a job, or, in many cases, parents do not take on full-time work at all.

As a result, some families have been particularly impacted financially by the pandemic. Together Trust began delivering food parcels and distributing supermarket vouchers to families who needed extra help. Despite lockdown restrictions starting to ease in the UK, Together Trust anticipates that it will continue to provide this support for the foreseeable future.

Another way that Together Trust had to adapt during this time was in the way it protected and supported its workforce. The trust already had a well-established mental health first aid system in place across all of its services, which proved to be very useful during this challenging time. The organisation also made several staffing adjustments which required a flexible approach. Due to the closures of some services during lockdown, staff were redeployed across different settings that remained open, receiving training where necessary and integrating into a choice of different teams including night/day care or residential services providing 24-hour support to children or adults with disabilities. Staff were provided with all necessary personal protective equipment and were never expected to do anything they felt uncomfortable with; however, Together Trust found that most staff were very motivated to continue working with children they had long-term relationships with. Three members of staff even moved into a children's residential home to reduce the risk, leaving their own families behind for two weeks at a time. Together Trust was also aware of the increased risk to particular members of its staff, so some were placed on the UK Government's furlough scheme (a financially supported temporary leave of absence from work) due to their own clinical vulnerabilities. In practical terms the organisation made use of all the mechanisms available to it in order to help alleviate pressure on staff.

¹ Carol Gray Social Stories: <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>

² Makaton: <https://www.makaton.org/>

Challenges

- There have been frequent changes in messaging and guidance from the government. Together Trust has needed to repeatedly respond to different regulations, make numerous changes in its services and keep families updated.
- Changes in regulations were particularly challenging for children with disabilities who were about to start secondary school, as there were no education and care plans provided for them.
- There was a high number of staff absences. With just short of 900 employees, Together Trust had around 450 periods of absence, often due to staff periods of self-isolation after coming into contact with someone who had tested positive for COVID-19.
- There were delays in grant funding as a number of potential funders changed their criteria to focus on smaller charities, which led to a reduction in fundraised income for the trust.
- Some families do not have access to their own device and in many cases one device is shared between siblings.
- The use of phones and tablet devices also raised safeguarding issues.
- This has been a really difficult time for carers and families and Together Trust predicts that there are likely to be long-lasting effects, both economically and emotionally.

Impact

- Together Trust's rigorous approach to safety and risk assessments has ensured that it has been able to minimise the risk of positive cases and cross infection of COVID-19 to the 2,000 people supported over the last 12 months.
- Children have responded positively and adapted well to the changes in their services.
- A more agile workforce has been able to deliver new virtual support services to families and young people to maintain the charity's reach to the most critically affected, including the introduction of virtual support and learning for pupils (via digital platforms).
- The Trust's learning and development programmes and induction for new staff changed from face-to-face to online delivery. 6,564 e-learning courses were completed by 808 individual learners between 23 March and early December 2020, which is equivalent to an average of eight courses per learner. In total 90 per cent of the workforce engaged with e-learning during this time period.
- The Trust developed a volunteer-led shop and drop for families and services bringing essential goods to their homes if needed during lockdown restrictions.

Next steps

Together Trust is currently looking at how it can expand its virtual offer in order to extend its reach and support for children and vulnerable adults with disabilities. A positive outcome of the move to more virtual connections brought about by COVID-19 is that children and adults with disabilities who are usually very isolated have increased contact with people outside of their close support networks. Together Trust now sees this as a great opportunity for networks to grow further, helping to improve the mental health and well-being of the children and adults it works with. It is exploring the potential of online music and singing projects, interactive games and virtual reality as new ways of bringing children with disabilities together to take part in creative activities online and connect with other children wherever they are in the world. While more virtual initiatives won't remove the need for face-to-face services, Together Trust sees the development of this area as a way to bring added value to its work. The possibilities are endless!

Together Trust has also recognised that working from home has enabled office-based staff to have greater control of their time management, enabling them to connect with staff and services more often – albeit mostly virtually given the pandemic restrictions. The organisation's plan going forward is to keep a mix of home and office working to achieve the best possible balance for all staff.

Top tips

- 1** Be resourceful and take a pragmatic approach.
- 2** Find out what is right for the individuals you support, check in with them to see if you've got it right and implement programmes based on that feedback.
- 3** Be optimistic, positive and action-focused.
- 4** Collaborate with other providers in your networks; find strength in your allies and connections.
- 5** Be proactive in communicating with your funders and support them to adapt to your needs.



CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about Together Trust at www.familyforeverychild.org/together-trust or contact Amanda Hampson, Head of Personalisation and Community Services Amanda.Hampson@togethertrust.org.uk



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