

How a Community Organisation Adapted During the COVID-19 Crisis

September 2020

By working with our colleagues in the Voluntary and Community sector, we have a series of reports on our website that capture the experiences and issues from the point of view of services and groups that support local people in the community.

This is an independent case study showing an example of one community organisation's story of adapting and what the future holds.

About the organisation



Pregnancy Options Centre provides free, non-directive counselling and support to women and men, facing unplanned pregnancy or struggling following a pregnancy loss, including a miscarriage, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancy, therapeutic termination or after an abortion. They support both recent and historic experiences.



Pregnancy Options Centre, established in 1997, offers a free counselling service for anyone facing an unplanned pregnancy, giving them time and space to explore their thoughts and feelings in a safe non-judgemental environment.

Anna Madge CEO Pregnancy Options Centre



What were the immediate challenges?

Pregnancy Options Centre continued to be operational during COVID-19, providing support by telephone and video, something new for the organisation. Unplanned pregnancy clients were offered an hour session to talk through their thoughts and feelings about their pregnancy, giving space to explore all options available to them with a non-judgemental volunteer counsellor.

Pregnancy loss and post abortion clients were offered an initial assessment to talk through their experience as well as regular check-in until face-to-face support can resume. Since May, Pregnancy Options has offered telephone and online support to all long-term clients, adapting their support programme to compliment this type of work. If the person is at risk to discuss their pregnancy or circumstances by telephone, they were offered text or email support as well as signposting to other agencies, as appropriate.



Counselling online and over Zoom has mostly been successful, particularly for our existing clients who had built up a relationship with the counsellor.



They have seen an increase in demand for unplanned pregnancy of around 60-70%. One reason for this is that the sexual health clinics have closed so there is a lack of contraceptives provision.

Pregnancy Options Centre also works in local schools and youth settings across the district, delivering educational sessions on healthy sex and relationships, sexual health, online safety, signs of Child Sexual Exploitation, consent and the consequences of risky sexual behaviour. Their education team work closely with the Community Safety Teams to develop sessions as part of an early intervention and are supported by the District Council, working with vulnerable students across County Lines.

Young people are given tools to resist peer pressure, value their self-respect and gain confidence, helping them to build a firm foundation for adult life. They develop values that will impact positively on their health, wellbeing and safety, enabling them to make considered, responsible and well-timed decisions for themselves.

Pregnancy Options Centre's schools work is postponed until further notice but will certainly return to support local young people when safe to do so.

What was the impact on staff, volunteers and clients?

The impact on volunteers was huge; the delivery of the counselling service had to change and their schools work completely postponed. Numbers of volunteers decreased as many work within the NHS and were needed elsewhere. Some volunteers are carers, some needed to shield or had children at home so found it difficult to support the service. With the counselling service moving online or via telephone, it could be hard for volunteers to create a safe, confidential space at home to talk with clients, due to home schooling and household distractions.



This reduced availability meant that a waiting list has formed and one staff member is providing a ‘check-in’ service by phone to those on the list. The Centre also supported the ‘check-in’ role for Winchester, and Horsham Centres.

Pregnancy Options were running a volunteer training course which had to be stopped halfway through. As training takes a long time, these new volunteers are vital to being able to support more clients and reduce waiting times.

How has COVID affected their finances?

They are funded by grants, donation, and fundraising. The impact of COVID-19 is the loss of grants and fundraising. The furlough scheme was helpful and has protected monies. Despite this, finances are looking good for the rest for the year as they were successful in a few COVID-19 crisis funds, including Charities Aid Foundation’s Coronavirus Emergency Fund. The nature of their work can sometimes make it harder to fund. They do not have any contracts from the NHS although pregnancy loss tends to go through general A&E. They have good relationships with midwives and bereavement counselling at St Richards Hospital.



We did have a planned fundraising event for the end of March, and this has been provisionally moved to November. This is for our unrestricted funding.



The Charity Aid ‘IT Grant’ paid for the technology transition to be able to work remotely from home. Everything is now online and password protective to comply with GDPR.

They are a small organisation and are supported by knowledgeable Trustees.

How have they begun to Forward Plan?

We are planning for the easing of the Lockdown but are monitoring Government guidance as to the timeframe. We are hoping to begin seeing people again by August but in reality, we will have to see how things go. Social distancing will impact on our counselling space, and appropriate policies and procedures will be needed.

Pregnancy Options Centre is connected to the [Pregnancy Centre Network](#), an organisation who builds best practice and connects local centres together across the UK. This will help with understanding ‘*what works well and is safe for our volunteers and clients*’.



They have applied to the Sussex Community Foundation for monies to purchase a new telephone technology for their helpline, enabling volunteers to use the main helpline number to contact clients from their homes. This is important as some clients like additional support and have ‘checked-in’ over a number of years, especially anniversaries.



People will have support for as long as they need a space and a safe environment to discuss decisions on pregnancy, abortion, loss and adoption. Pregnancy loss is complicated and individual, so we provide a client led service.



Pregnancy Options Centre is currently in the process of planning to re-open the centre for client support soon, whilst following Government guidelines to protect staff, volunteers, and clients. Please see their [website](#) and social media pages for up to date information.

What are the concerns for the future, post COVID?

Pregnancy Options real concerns for the immediate future are funding and how to begin fundraising in order to access core funding for the service. Another area is guidance planning for ensuring compliance with Government guidance and duty of care.



We need help in getting back to normal in stages, and safely in general.



Partnership working has been tried on a small scale and found to be successful and they are always keen to be part of wider opportunities and networks.

Contact details

To learn more about call **01243 784177**

Email office@optionschichester.org.uk

Or visit their webpage <https://optionschichester.org.uk/>



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We are here to listen, take action and influence positive change for local people
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