



**Reaching
Families**

Impact Report 2020



Empowering families of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in West Sussex

“You guys work tirelessly to help and support us all and it doesn’t go unnoticed. You are worth your weight in gold.”

Executive Summary

At the beginning of 2020 Reaching Families was on the eve of launching an exciting new programme of services for parent-carers that included a foundation course for parents of newly diagnosed children with SEND, a new group counselling project, achieving county wide coverage of our Face-2-Face befriending service and further development of our three parent support groups.

With three year funding secured from the National Lottery Community Fund and West Sussex County Council we were deep in planning for the year ahead. Little did we know that a new virus spreading in Asia and moving its way up the daily headlines was about to turn our world upside down and with it our ambitious new plans to develop peer support for parent-carers in West Sussex.

On the 12th March 2020 we closed our office and as we waited for the government to announce the inevitable first lockdown turned our attention to how we could adapt our services to meet the new circumstances.

On the 25th March (two days after the lockdown started) we published our “Stay Connected” strategy for delivering services during the pandemic. Six days later we held our first online event. The new programme included the following elements:

- Providing information on Covid via regular FAQs published on our website and via a new series of fact sheets and animations on Covid & SEND
- Delivering live chats, training workshops and training videos via Facebook and Zoom
- Providing emergency telephone counselling for parents struggling with their emotional wellbeing as a result of the pandemic
- Continuing to deliver our befriending service using telephone and Zoom
- Delivery of a weekly Umbrellas support group via Zoom
- Using Facebook to share information and resources and enable parents to stay connected

“I hate to think how this last year would have been without Reaching Families”

With no prior experience of virtual or remote delivery we could not predict how parents would receive our programme of services, particularly in such extraordinary circumstances. However, within weeks we were experiencing record attendance and participation and by the Autumn there were waiting lists on all workshops. As the table below shows the level of engagement across all services was historically high:

	2019/20	2020/21	Growth (+/- %)
Unique Web Visitors	13,044	27,015	107%
Making Sense Guides	2,602	2,666	2%
Fact sheets	6,945	10,672	54%
Covid Animations	-	55,000	-
Training	405	479	18%
Mindfulness & Counselling	-	97	-
Face-2-Face Befriending	22	41	86%
Umbrellas Support Group	117	129	10%
Facebook Group	638	949	49%

Outcomes

Despite the potential barriers regarding participation and engagement, our programme of services during the pandemic, were incredibly successful and achieved what we had intended:

- Helping parent-carers stay connected.
- Keeping them informed on Covid and SEND issues
- Maintaining user-friendly access to our services, and most importantly
- Supporting their resilience and emotional wellbeing

The data captured below, demonstrates the degree to which these outcomes have been achieved:

- I have improved knowledge of how to access support for my child – (83%)
- Our children have accessed new services as a result of our using Reaching Families services (38%)
- I have improved skills and self-confidence in supporting my child as a result of attending training (88%)
- I have improved support from other parent-carers (60%)

“I think Reaching Families has done as much as could be asked of it during the pandemic. A really amazing effort from such a small organisation.”

- I feel less isolated as a result of the support I get from other parent-carers (63%)
- I feel more confident and resilient in overcoming difficulties as a result of the peer support I have received (64%)
- I feel have improved emotional well-being as a result of peer support I have received (61%)
- The early support I receive from befriending has helped me in my role as a carer (95%)
- I value that Reaching Families is led by parent-carers (87%)
- Reaching Families has helped me become less reliant on local public services (for example, social services) (17%)

Right from the start of the pandemic we did all we could to learn about the challenges families were experiencing. It was hugely important in helping us tailor our delivery to meet their needs. At the end of April 2020 we conducted a survey of 415 parents that revealed the rapid and devastating impact of the lockdown on their lives:

- 47% of children were experiencing a significant increase in anxiety and/or depression
- 42% of children had a significant increase in behavioural problems

- 65% of parent-carers described themselves as suffering from significant mental exhaustion
- 51% of parents described themselves as suffering from physical exhaustion
- 51% of parents said they had a significant increase in anxiety and/or depression

In March 2021 we carried out our annual online survey with 195 parents and asked them again about the impact of covid. Even though the same sample rate in the second survey was smaller responses continued to show a comparable upward trend that demonstrated a consistent adverse impact on the physical and mental health of both young people and parents:

- 57% of children had a significant increase in anxiety and/or depression (+10%)
- 54% of children had a significant increase in behavioural problems (+12%)
- 69% of parents described themselves as suffering from significant mental exhaustion (+4%)
- 61% of parents described themselves as suffering from significant physical exhaustion (+10%)
- 56% of parents described themselves as suffering from a significant increase in anxiety and/or depression (+5%)

“Thank you for helping me stay sane”

The families we work with were already vulnerable before Covid and our findings suggests their recovery could take many years. The road back to a more normal way of life will not happen once the remaining social restrictions are lifted in June 2021.

For our families support and investment will be required to help children and young people catch up with their education, rebuild their confidence, social skills and wellbeing. For parents too, some of whom may be struggling with exhaustion, and challenges to their mental health and wellbeing; continued access to practical and emotional support from peers and professionals will be vital to their recovery.

As we enter a new phase of the pandemic, buoyed by the vaccine programme but conscious of new variants and talk of a third wave, we are cautiously planning to resume live activities and events over the course of 2021/22. This will inevitably be a slow process potentially interrupted

by social restrictions but even if all goes according to plan. What is clear however, is that Covid will have a lasting impact on our service delivery and how we reach out, engage with and support families.

About our Surveys

Reaching Families values the importance of evaluation in ensuring we are delivering services that meet the needs of families.

Data cited in this report is based on two online surveys we conducted with parent-carers, one specifically on covid carried out in April 2020 (415 respondents) and another, our annual survey, carried out in March 2021 (195 respondents). Data from these surveys have been collated with routine monitoring collected from our individual projects and services to provide a richer evaluation of the impact of our work. The surveys also capture information on how the Covid pandemic has affected children, parents and families.

“It’s increased my mental load tenfold, and I’m stressed about all the constant changes to our life that we cannot control”

Impact of Covid

Covid had a swift and immediate impact on parent-carers and families of children with SEND. Within weeks of the pandemic we learned of parents being at breaking point. When surveying more than 400 parent-carers at the end of April 2020, 65% described experiencing significant mental exhaustion. By March 2021 that had increased to 69%. Meanwhile, more than half (52% and 54% respectively) of parents reported that their children had experienced an increase in mental health and behavioural problems.

Our surveys present a snapshot view of the pressures families have been under in a rapidly changing environment. Nonetheless the consistency of responses parents gave across both surveys also suggests enduring challenges, particularly with the mental and physical health of both children and parents. This is reinforced by what we have learned from parents through befriending, counselling, training and support groups.

At the beginning of the pandemic there was a small but not insignificant number of families who enjoyed the relative tranquillity and lessening of pressure that came with lockdown. For some children, not being in school was source of relief and their wellbeing improved as a result. A number of parents also reported feeling less pressure and being more relaxed. An emerging concern are the number of parents (49%) who are now worried about their children adapting to a more normal way of life.

Writing in April 2021, slowly emerging out of lockdown but uncertain about future waves, new variants, etc. it is still difficult to gauge the long term effects the pandemic will have on our community. We are clear however that the emotional wellbeing and resilience of our families will continue to be key issues in supporting and sustaining a full recovery.

“Without this group I would be very lost. My emotional wellbeing has definitely got stronger.”

Impact of Covid on Children	Apr 2020	Mar 2021	+/-
Significantly struggling with not seeing friends or family	58%	59%	1%
Significantly struggling with change in routine	57%	65%	8%
Significant increase in anxiety or depression	47%	57%	10%
Significant problems with mental health	43%	52%	9%
Significant increase in behavioural problems	42%	54%	12%
Significant problems with sleep	39%	46%	7%
Sleeping significantly better	15%	7%	-8%
Significantly enjoying being at home with the family	36%	29%	-7%
Feeling significantly less pressure	28%	23%	-5%
Feeling significantly more relaxed	21%	15%	-6%
Significant trouble with eating	18%	27%	9%
Significant problems with physical disabilities	16%	17%	1%

Impact of Covid on Parent Carers	Apr 2020	Mar 2021	+/-
Experiencing significant mental exhaustion	65%	69%	4%
Significantly struggling not seeing friends or family	55%	63%	8%
Experiencing significant physical exhaustion	51%	61%	10%
Significant increase in anxiety or depression	51%	56%	5%
Significant trouble sleeping	47%	46%	-1%
Sleeping significantly better	10%	8%	-2%
Significantly enjoying being at home with the family	36%	31%	-5%
Significantly struggling managing on their own	27%	33%	6%
Significant trouble with eating	16%	18%	2%
Significant problems working from home	27%	22%	-5%
Feeling significantly less pressure	21%	16%	-5%
Feeling significantly more relaxed	15%	10%	-5%

“The Making Sense of Wellbeing course was excellent. I particularly liked the mindfulness sessions as they provided me a time a time to de-stress, reset and refocus.”

Coming out of lockdown

Our online annual survey asked parents about the impact of the pandemic on their social skills and self-confidence. Almost half of respondents (46%) said these had been affected whilst a further 1/3 said it had occasionally been affected.

We also asked parents about their concerns regarding coming out of lockdown and received a varied response. Whilst 1/3 of respondents said they are excited about returning to normal life, the same number are anxious about doing so. One parent described losing the art of small talk whilst another said they have panic attacks when leaving home. Tellingly, nearly half of parents (49%) say they are worried about how their children will adapt to returning to normal life.

Community Engagement

The anxieties parents have about exiting lockdown are reflected in the type of engagement they prefer when accessing our services. Our annual survey asked parents what kinds of events they would be happy to attend after lockdown. There appeared to be some ambivalence in returning to in person events. 58% of

parents said they would prefer to attend online workshops whilst 41% opted for in person workshops. This is not solely due to anxiety; many parents report that juggling family life makes online activities more accessible. For us as an organisation however, the desired outcome remains the same - to ensure we deliver services in a variety of accessible ways.

Operational Delivery

Making Sense Guides



The huge surge in visitors to our website during 2020 had a significant impact on the use of our information resources, particularly our fact sheets and Making Sense parent guides. We chose to pause on publishing a new edition of Making Sense of Adult Life in 2020 due to the inevitable upheaval to health, education, social care and the voluntary sector caused by the pandemic. This did not diminish access to our guides which were downloaded in vast numbers in e-book format. Given our limited capacity to distribute hard copies of the book, this format proved a fortunate alternative.

“I accessed the 1-2-1 counselling after a mental health crisis. It was quick and easy which was the key thing. It really cannot be understated just how much it helped me and therefore, my children.”

Covid FAQs & Fact sheets



Our Covid FAQs, which we launched on The 20th March 2020 and shared with other partners, ensured we could immediately help parents navigate the deluge of information on covid. We also published a series of fact sheets on Covid and SEND covering subjects like anxiety, behaviour, benefit changes, changes in education, home learning, survival strategies and returning to school. By the end of the year 2,166 copies of our Covid fact sheets had been downloaded from our website whilst overall 10,672 copies of our wider library of fact sheets were downloaded, 54% higher than in the previous year.

Animations & Training Videos



Thanks to part funding from WSCC we published a short series of animations designed for parents when talking to their children about Covid. They covered issues like understanding Covid and the “new normal”, returning to school, supporting siblings and practising mindfulness. They proved an extraordinarily popular resource with

parents, children and schools and have been viewed over 55,000 times on our website, on Facebook and on YouTube.

In addition to our animations we recorded several training videos to accompany live sessions delivered on Facebook. These provided both a reference for parents who attended these sessions and a resource for those unable to attend. Over the course of the year they were viewed 3,600 times.

Both animations and videos have proved educational in terms of visual learning and/or presenting information in a more accessible format. We will therefore be exploring other ways we can use visual and digital media to help inform children, parents and families on SEND issues.

Counselling, Mindfulness & Wellbeing



In April 2020 we had planned to launch a new group counselling project based in Bognor Regis and Crawley. Social distancing made this untenable. Instead we approached the issue of mental health & wellbeing through a combination of 1-2-1 counselling, mindfulness and training. Given the emotional and psychological impact of the pandemic it was vital we offered various

“I love that the training is now online. I couldn’t access before when it was in person due to my own disabilities but the move online has made it more inclusive.”

types of support in order to build and maintain parent’s emotional wellbeing as much as possible.

Thanks to a grant of £5,000 from the Sussex Community Foundation Covid Crisis Fund we were able to provide emergency 1-2-1 telephone counselling to parents who were struggling with lockdown. The project was delivered on a subsidised basis in partnership with a local counselling practice, Lanes Counselling.

We also began running mindfulness sessions on zoom. They proved so popular we incorporated mindfulness as a regular feature of a new course called Making Sense of Wellbeing, which addressed the issues we intended on covering in group counselling, albeit with a different approach. Such was the popularity of the course we intend continuing it in place of group counselling even after social distancing measures have been lifted. We will also continue to offer 1-2-1 telephone counselling to parents struggling with the effects of the pandemic.

Training



Of all our projects and services none is more suited to online delivery than training. Not only did parents quickly adapt to this method of delivery, it also widened

access to training for parents who have issues with childcare, free time or transport. Over the course of the year we delivered 24 one-off workshops and six Making Sense courses (36 sessions) to 479 parents, an increase of almost 20% on 2019. By the second half of the year all our workshops had waiting lists.

Our training programme was enhanced this year by the introduction of two new courses – Making Sense of It All, a foundation course on all things SEND for new parent-carers and Making Sense of Wellbeing, which we introduced in lieu of our proposed group counselling project. As previously stated, the training based approach to mental health & wellbeing has proved so popular our intention is to maintain this format and forgo establishing a group-counselling project.

We adapted our training during the pandemic to reflect the challenges of the times and delivered a number of workshops and live Facebook chats focussed on challenges resulting from the pandemic, for example, food issues, home learning, returning to school, survival strategies and supporting siblings. Other training content was also adapted to include the impact of Covid.

“The Umbrellas group has been a real lifeline for me. It is amazing to have met other parents during lockdown virtually and be able to talk about things I couldn’t with close friends as I was scared they wouldn’t ‘get it’.”

Umbrellas



The onset of the first lockdown meant immediate suspension of our three support groups in Billingshurst, Littlehampton and Worthing. In their place we set up a weekly support group that has met via zoom since April 2020. It has proved one of the most popular local services for parents during the pandemic.

Whilst there is no like for like replacement for the live engagement of a support group our online Umbrellas has helped parents stay connected, and despite obvious drawbacks, grew in membership from 2019. We are particularly pleased at the number of new parents who joined the group and the increased accessibility online delivery has given them. Many parents who could not make one of our live groups are now regular attendees of the online sessions. With that accessibility in mind we intend maintaining an online version of Umbrellas long after social restrictions have been lifted.

Face-2-Face



At the beginning of the pandemic we feared our youngest service, Face-2-Face, might become victim to social distancing and the increased pressure the lockdown was placing on our team of volunteer befrienders, all of whom are themselves parent-carers. Their dedication to the project has been one of the most humbling features of the past year.

One benefit of the change to telephone befriending was our capacity to match befrienders with parents regardless of geography, which in turn made it quicker to provide support. This helped increase the number of parents we could support by over 80%. Although we are keen to return to face to face delivery we will maintain a telephone befriending offer in the longer term to ensure parents can still access the service. In the following year we aim to train a new team of befrienders which will increase the capacity of the project and its geographical reach for those befrienders and parents who can and want to meet locally.

“The befriending service has really helped me keep on track, as you feel you have found your tribe who understand and get it.”

“The Facebook group allows me to read other situations and learn from their stories. A feeling of being supported and not being alone.”

Facebook



The value of Facebook to our work over the course of the pandemic cannot be overstated. It has been a vital means of sharing information, news and resources and more vital still in helping parents reach out, share stories, seek peer advice and support. Not surprisingly membership of the group rocketed during the year (49% higher than 2019) reaching over 4,000, making it the largest online support group in Sussex.

In 2020 we also launched a separate news page designed to share updates on our projects and services. By the end of the year the page had over 1,250 followers. Analysis of likes as well as membership of the two respective pages show we are now reaching an online audience of almost 5,000 parent-carers.

Campaigning

Such was the impact of the pandemic on the SEND community Reaching Families engaged for the first time in campaigning and raising awareness of the challenges experienced by our families.

In early April 2020 our Director wrote an [article for the Guardian](#) on the impact of covid on families, pressing the case for meaningful government investment and support. In April we also ran a community survey on the effects of Covid on our families and shared the subsequent report with West Sussex County Council, West Sussex MPs, the Department of Education and national campaigning charities.

We were later asked to write an article on the impact of the Covid pandemic with the Disabled Children’s Partnership for the respected [Tizard Learning Disability Review](#). We also worked with Amaze in promoting local campaigns on issues like exercise passes for children with SEND and priority access to supermarkets for parent-carers.

“No one does more for parent-carers in West Sussex.”

“This group has made me see we are not the only family to deal with difficulties, such a great source of support and encouragement.”

Reconnecting

We have delivered services during the pandemic around the theme of staying connected – ensuring parents can access our services as quickly and as easily as possible, helping them stay in contact with or build new connections with other parent-carers and, doing what we can to support their emotional wellbeing and resilience. As we enter a new phase of the pandemic these priorities remain the same.

Covid may have a lasting effect on how organisations like ours operate. Software like Zoom has been vital in helping us deliver support groups and training whilst in person activities have not been possible. It has also widened accessibility. Some parents tell us they prefer online sessions as it makes their lives simpler, they don't have to get a carer or babysitter, travel to a workshop or attend outside of working hours.

Whilst uncertainty over the course of the pandemic remains we will continue to deliver online services but also expect to maintain a virtual presence long after social restrictions are no longer necessary. In effect we are moving towards a blended model of delivery that includes both virtual and in person engagement.

Over the course of 2021/22 we will be focussing on the development and delivery of the following projects and services:

- Merging Making Sense of It All and Making Sense of Adult Life and publishing a new edition that covers the needs of families of children and young people aged 0-25
- Continue to provide an online Umbrellas group whilst we reconvene and rebuild our groups in Billingshurst, Littlehampton and Worthing with the view to maintaining an online group in the longer term
- Providing blended training delivery that will include both live and online workshops and courses (and which are adaptable to sudden changes in social restrictions)
- Resuming in person delivery of our Face-2-Face project whilst continuing to offer telephone befriending to parents who prefer this or whom we cannot match with a volunteer befriender local to them
- Continuing to offer 1-2-1 telephone counselling to parents struggling with the effects of the pandemic
- Seeking further investment from funders to increase the capacity of our current services and ensure we can meet increasing demand from parents.



Reaching Families

Partners & Funders

With many thanks to the following funders and partners who helped in the delivery of our services during 2020/21:

Amaze

Aspens

Autism & Social Communication Team (WSSC)

Co-operative Community Fund

Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust

Garfield Weston Foundation

Henry Smith Charity

Lanes Counselling

National Lottery Community Fund

ShareGift

Sussex Community Foundation

West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group

West Sussex County Council

West Sussex Parent Carer Forum

West Sussex SEND IAS



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