

Beyond the pandemic – emerging stronger

The pandemic has changed the way many organisations work. Share Community responded to COVID-19 with flexibility and resilience, adapting our services to support students and their families during a difficult time. We worked tirelessly to make sure that people had their basic needs met, the right mental health support, and continued to learn and move towards their goals.

As we move forward, we're not just going back to business as usual. Although the past 18 months have been challenging, they've also provided opportunities. We've evolved to maintain our high standards of specialist support. It's clear that some of the changes we made during the pandemic have lasting benefits and we've sought to build these into our longer term strategy.

Sadly, COVID-19 has highlighted the health and social inequalities that many disabled people face. Studies have shown that 93% of people with learning disabilities or autism feel more isolated from society due to the pandemic (source: Dimensions). This has strengthened our resolve to work even harder to help people integrate more into their communities, and to help them maintain good mental health.

We've improved our services, changed existing programmes and developed new and exciting initiatives, all with the core aim of helping our students grow their confidence, social skills, and independence to enjoy the best possible quality of life.

Report aim

This report provides a summary of the changes to Share's service provision as we emerge from the pandemic; how we provide improved individualised care and support.

- It outlines the positive changes we've made to our working environment
- It highlights our increased focus on student and family wellbeing, and providing a holistic service to make sure people keep learning outside of Share
- It shows how our social and community-based projects have developed to combat isolation and increase independence

Digital inclusion and virtual learning

During lockdown, the majority of our students accessed learning sessions remotely using Zoom. We helped many students and their families become equipped at home with online technology for the first time, enabling them to communicate with others, and access services and entertainment. This helped them to keep in touch with their peers and familiar Share staff, giving much-needed social contact, structure, and a chance to develop and practise their digital skills.

We also developed relationships with external organisations, working to deliver virtual workshops and create collaborative learning spaces. And although it was a welcome relief to meet up in person again, we've realised we can enhance the learning experience by integrating online learning, and bringing people together when they can't physically be there. So we've invested in technology and all our teaching spaces are now equipped with large screens and other enhanced audio-visual equipment to support blended learning.

CASE STUDY - accessible online learning with *The National Archives*

Before the pandemic Share collaborated with the outreach team at *The National Archives* and *Wandsworth Heritage Service* on a community wellbeing project. Although COVID-19 put a stop to meeting up in person, we were keen to continue the relationship and make history and heritage more accessible for everyone.

We worked closely with both organisations to design a learning programme that would work online. The result was engaging virtual learning that made history come alive. Our students explored identity with the history of Royal Seals, and looked at drawings and photos of homes throughout history to consider what makes a house a home.

The sessions allowed our students to express themselves as they created their own interpretations of historical themes and documents. This shows how, with expert facilitation, online workshops can make material accessible and relevant, helping stimulate our students' imagination and creativity.



Main building overhaul – enhanced teaching environment

We redesigned the spaces at our Clapham Junction headquarters in response to COVID-19. The aim was to make sure all teaching spaces had lots of fresh air with plenty of windows. After a big declutter and extensive redecoration, we merged our smaller staff areas into one large open-plan space in the centre of the building. This created more teaching spaces around the outside of the building all with improved natural light. The classrooms are colour-coded to help students easily find where they need to be and a new ventilation system and increased cleaning regime provide a fresher environment.

The new layout gave us space to create a staff hub – a welcoming, open-plan space for staff to work in and share ideas. It has the added benefit of modelling a working environment to students, helping them understand what an effective office workspace looks and feels like.

We've also fully refurbished our catering facilities thanks to funding from *The Wolfson Foundation* and *The Clothworkers' Foundation*. This provides a more efficient teaching kitchen with first-rate facilities, helping our students to perform at their best.

Wellbeing support

The welfare of our students is paramount. Our dedicated wellbeing team provide ongoing pastoral support to all our students, helping them learn how to manage difficult feelings and make their own choices. Wellbeing support has been crucial during lockdown and we continue to work closely with students and their families, providing the very best care and support to help them move towards their goals.

We monitor and measure individual progress using the student outcome star. Staff work one-to-one with students to assess and plot their understanding and skills across nine different areas. These include communication and social skills, practical skills, and friends and relationships. People then set realistic goals based on their individual needs and wants, helping them feel more motivated.

CASE STUDY – John

Despite the huge challenges of the past year and a half, John's student star score went up in communication and social skills, living skills and friends and relationships. He said, *'Talking to people makes me happy'*.

John preferred not to use Zoom from his home during the pandemic, but enjoyed connecting with others over Zoom when visiting the Share garden. He said, *'I liked seeing people from Share [HQ] without having to go there.'*

John has formed some great friendships over the past year with fellow students with whom he has things in common. Recently he's started to think about moving out of the family home, *'I could live on my own but I would need help'*.

These friendships have helped give John the confidence to consider taking this exciting, yet nerve-racking step.



New health and wellbeing course

During the pandemic, we developed a new course to help people understand and cope with the impact of change and uncertainty, which can have a dramatic effect on wellbeing. This proved incredibly valuable during a difficult time, helping people build resilience and look after their mental health.

Students learn how to identify stressful feelings, how to use breathing techniques, and what to do if you feel anxious and need to calm yourself. People develop individual wellbeing plans with useful tools and tips on staying well and looking after all aspects of physical and mental health. Moving forward, we're developing the course to make sure people adapt and grow their resilience in the wake of the pandemic.

New community-based course

We're committed to finding new ways that allow people to learn in practical real-life settings, helping them become more independent and integrate more in their communities. We recently launched *Get Out and About*, a new course helping independent travellers go out and explore their local areas. The programme helps people learn how to stay safe in public, develop long-term independence and the know-how to access local facilities on their own.

Like much of Share's work, *Get Out and About* is user-led, so our students are directly involved in shaping the programme's direction. Students on the course so far have told us what they'd most like to work on is how to confidently talk to people and stay safe when out in public. Connecting with other organisations and meeting new people helps our students build confidence and self-esteem and we've already signed up to some community volunteering at a local café.

Supporting our Lambeth-based students

In 2020, we opened a site in Brixton to provide services for our Lambeth-based students in their local area. *We Are 336* is fully accessible and home to a dynamic community of organisations providing vital services for disabled people.

Digital skills, Steps into Employment, Art, and our new community-based course *Get Out and About* run from the site over three days a week. We're developing more services at the site, including plans to launch a home-cooking skills course, supporting people to develop everyday life-skills.

Supporting families

Many parents and carers faced extra pressures with little respite from caring responsibilities during lockdown. We invested in family support, raising money to recruit dedicated staff to connect more with students at home.

Now fully up and running, our Family Liaison team works closely with families and carers to help them support those they care for. We signpost and refer people to other agencies like social services, advice and advocacy services, provide health and vaccination information, and offer a supportive ear when needed.

Regular parent and carer forums give an open platform for people to talk to us about our work, both in terms of what's working well and what we can improve on. We also invite expert speakers from a range of agencies to talk directly about key developments and issues in social care, allowing people to raise any concerns, ask questions and generally support one another.

Befriending

Over lockdown, loneliness rose dramatically for disabled people, who were already disproportionately affected pre-pandemic. A recent survey by disability charity, Sense, found that almost two-thirds (61%) of disabled people report feeling chronically lonely, rising to 70% of young disabled people.

We witnessed many of our students struggling with isolation, which affected their mental and physical health. Being stuck at home for long periods meant people weren't getting much exercise or social contact. Determined to tackle the issue, we launched an outreach and befriending service. We reached out to those in most need, going for a walk in the park or just having a chat.

The benefits were clear to see, connecting with someone for companionship and getting a bit of exercise in the process really lifts the spirits. The service is now established and thriving. We've recruited and trained nearly 30 volunteer befrienders who are then matched with student members according to their interests and personalities. They usually meet weekly to get out and do whatever it is they enjoy, playing football, going shopping, cycling, or grabbing a coffee.

CASE STUDY – Michael and Rory

Michael meets up with volunteer befriender Rory to chat and cycle around Michael's local park. Connecting over a shared love of cycling, together they've been getting on their bikes once a week, come rain or shine.



This helps Michael's mental health and encourages him to communicate in a relaxed, safe space. Both Michael and his befriender gain from the experience, getting some exercise too!

Michael said, *'I like cycling around Battersea Park, it's nice. I like looking at the swans and cygnets. I would like to start a Share football team!'*

Volunteer Rory said, *'My favourite thing about being a befriender is being able to positively impact on someone's life. It only takes me a couple of hours a week and is completely worth it as I'm able to spend time with Michael doing something he might not normally do, last week we rode our bikes around the park, which was a treat for both of us - certainly a welcome break from work for me!'*

Social inclusion

Go Anywhere, Do Anything is our established project to help people enjoy social and leisure experiences. When physical trips out weren't allowed during lockdown, Share staff worked hard to deliver high-quality experiences virtually. The team also reached out to similar organisations like *Heart 'n Soul*, *Gig buddies*, *Club Soda* and *Croydon Mencap*, who all support people with learning disabilities, collaborating with them to provide fun inclusive experiences.

Virtual trips included discos, fancy dress parties, museum and stadium tours, club nights, DIY comedy and more. Zoom actually made the project accessible for our harder to reach members, people who even before COVID-19 found it difficult to get out socially.

Now that real-world trips are happening again, those connections made during lockdown are growing, and the project continues to thrive. And we've welcomed new members to the project, all keen to get out and have fun.

CASE STUDY - Bubble club

Bubble Club run an arts programme specifically for neuro-diverse people, pioneering what the possibilities of high quality, inclusive and accessible nightlife can be. We met them virtually during lockdown and members of *Go Anywhere, Do Anything* had a great time joining their parties online.

So it was particularly special, when after months of being confined to Zoom-only socialising, we met them in person for a club night in Brick Lane to dance the night away. Our group had a fantastic time chatting and dancing, making new friends, eating pizza, and staying out late. Social buddies supported everyone to get home after a fun-filled exhilarating evening.



Alex proudly said, *'I used my communication skills [to talk to others]'*

Shawn said, *'My favourite bit was dancing and singing'*.

Job coaching and employability

The pandemic temporarily paused our employability programme. But, we've resumed our work helping to get disabled people ready for work, whether paid or voluntary. Our *Steps into Employment* course runs at both Brixton and Clapham Junction, helping people identify the skills needed for different jobs, and learn how to search and apply for work. Our job coach also provides one-to-one coaching to help students find work experience and volunteer opportunities in the community.

We were delighted to partner recently with *Choice Support* and Wandsworth's *WorkRight* scheme to deliver GROW – an employability course focussing on soft skills, exploring behaviours and communication in the workplace.

Some of our students have also been involved in community volunteering, helping at charity shops and working to improve local green spaces like the Rookery gardens in Streatham.

CASE STUDY – Harold

Harold studies digital skills at Share and was previously employed by a retail company. Unfortunately, like many others, Harold was made redundant from his job due to the pandemic. He became understandably bored at home and was keen to get back into employment. He began sessions with Share's job coach to update his CV and polish up his interview skills.

Harold also attended the job club run collaboratively by Share, *WorkRight* and *Choice Support*. Whilst there he impressed members of staff with his excellent communication and employability skills. As a result, he now receives one-to-one employment support from *Choice Support* and hopes to secure a new role soon.



CASE STUDY – Peter

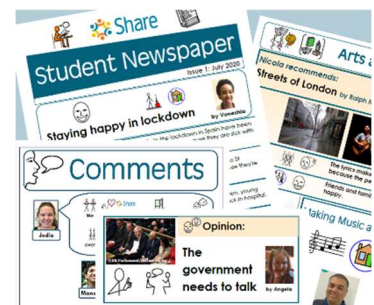
Peter studies horticulture at Share. Despite his accomplished gardening skills, he lacked the confidence to take the leap and look for employment. Peter recently took part in supported volunteering with a group of Share students at the Rookery gardens in Streatham. He really enjoyed it and made great progress, putting his excellent gardening knowledge to great use.

With the support of Share's job coach, he started volunteering independently at the Rookery. After doing that for a month or so, Peter grew in confidence. Independently, he found a paid job that interested him on a nationwide job board and applied for it. He met with our job coach for a few interview pointers and attended his first ever interview for a paid role. Although Peter didn't get the job this time, he's confidently continuing his search looking for the right role.



The student newspaper

We're always seeking new and creative ways to help people communicate. Created during lockdown, the Share newspaper is written by students, for students. Now on its fourth issue, it's a great way for students to develop their reading and writing skills whilst taking ownership of a project, giving a sense of pride and achievement. It's published with support in an accessible, easy-read format with opinions, recipes, lifestyle tips, comments, and more. The newspaper gives our students an outlet to express themselves and show what they can achieve, allowing their voices to be heard, and it's extremely popular!



The Share garden, a multi-functional space

Our two and a half acre site in Tooting is a much-loved open space where people can enjoy the therapeutic benefits of nature. This has been especially beneficial in recent times when many people felt anxious and uncertain. We now have a dedicated wellbeing officer at the site. As well as running our usual horticultural training programmes, we've used the garden for other initiatives, including a community art exhibition, an employability training scheme, and to run art and wellbeing sessions.

We have exciting plans for growth and we're busy planning for a complete redevelopment of the site at Springfield University Hospital, looking to drive our social enterprise *Share Nurseries* forward and develop our training programmes further.

CASE STUDY – Cally

Cally is a talented artist. She's created an array of striking graphic artwork in the past. We ran art sessions at the Share garden after the first lockdown and Cally enjoyed creating colourful images of objects around the garden.

But when we resumed sessions back at Share HQ, the change meant Cally struggled to focus and stopped producing art. Our art tutor worked closely with Cally, turning mark making into a game, which gradually encouraged Cally to begin creating her signature art again.

We took part in the 2021 Wandsworth Arts Fringe, an eclectic local festival celebrating art across the borough. Cally's work, along with a range of powerful pieces from other Share students, featured in our art exhibition, *No Limitations*.



Artwork was displayed in a in a marquee at the Share garden. The director of the Wandsworth Arts Fringe personally visited the show and was hugely impressed with the creativity on display. We're looking forward to getting involved with more community events in the future.

Staying safe and healthy

Throughout the pandemic, we adopted the safest practices possible to minimise COVID-risk. We continue to use face masks when walking around our sites or when in close contact with people, and our staff test regularly for coronavirus.

People with learning disabilities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Data suggests that they are up to six times more likely to die from the virus (source: Public Health England). This

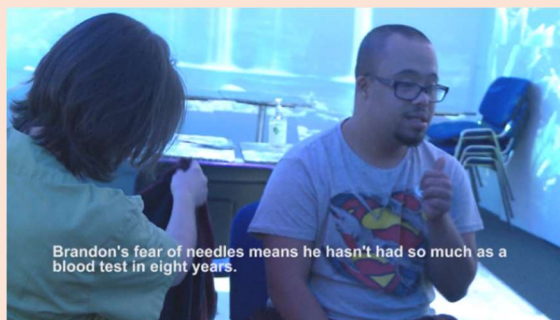
makes vaccination especially important, however busy vaccination centres can be stressful for people with learning disabilities and autism. We collaborated with Wandsworth NHS and a local GP practice to run two separate accessible vaccination clinics for students and their parents and carers. Using our immersive learning space we created a tranquil atmosphere with projected images and calm music. We ran interactive Zoom sessions beforehand to prepare people and encourage them to ask questions and talk about the vaccination process.

This meant that many people who were anxious about attending a traditional clinic environment were able to get their vaccination in a stress-free space.

CASE STUDY – Brandon

Brandon's fear of needles made getting the coronavirus vaccine difficult.

To minimise the stress, Brandon attended our sensory vaccination clinic. There was a calm and soothing atmosphere and a local GP and friendly nurses chatted to Brandon and his mum Sandra to put them at ease. Brandon had his jab, followed by the second one weeks later.



Sandra described the clinic as 'amazing'. She said, 'After all these years of Brandon being terrified of needles and tests, this has worked. I am so thankful to Share and the NHS...Due to this wonderful clinic set up in soothing surroundings, he had his jab with no problems. I am so happy knowing he has protection. I am going to have [the jab] now too.'

Report summary

We're using the knowledge we've gained and the partnerships we've forged over the past 18 months to focus our strategy as we move beyond the pandemic.

We'll keep evolving, building on existing programmes and identifying new opportunities to support people to integrate more into society and become more confident. To tackle isolation, we'll continue developing new ways to encourage friendships and help people connect. And we'll keep providing support to help people be more independent, not just when they're at Share, but when they go about their daily lives.

We're emerging stronger from the pandemic. We remain committed to our performance goals, working smarter and harder to provide high-quality services and make sure our students continue to grow and learn in the post pandemic world.

www.sharecommunity.org.uk

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