



Share's journey through the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on society, especially for people providing and receiving social care. Lockdown restrictions have meant adults with learning disabilities and their families have faced increased isolation and anxiety. The disruption to support services, loss of routine, difficulties staying in touch with people and keeping active meant many have struggled to cope.

As an organisation providing training and support for disabled adults, Share Community has made major changes to the way we operate and deliver our services. Throughout the pandemic we've continually adapted to provide meaningful, high-quality training and support. We've worked tirelessly to make sure that people get not only their basic needs met, but the right mental health support, and that they continue to develop, learn, socialise, and move towards their goals.

Report aim

This report provides a summary of how COVID-19 has impacted Share's service provision, how we've reacted and how we continue to provide individualised care and support to our service users.

- It outlines the importance and value of accessing online services and how effective blended learning can be.
- It shows how one-to-one outreach and keyworking services have helped relieve isolation and provide better outcomes for disabled people who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- It demonstrates the extent of the investment by Share to deliver these services.

Keyworking team

Right from the very start of the pandemic, we set up a keyworking team that has continued ever since. Student wellbeing was assessed and risk levels rated as high, medium or low. Since then, keyworkers have kept in touch via phone with the frequency of calls adjusted according to risk level. They identify issues that arise and react accordingly, alerting social services to any safeguarding or wellbeing concerns. The team also signpost and link people to other support services. The service is ongoing, we're still in contact with some of our students multiple times a day by phone to provide support and reassurance in what continues to be an unsettling time.

Zoom sessions

As soon as the first lockdown was announced, we immediately organised our team to provide online learning sessions over Zoom. Nearly two thirds of our students access Zoom sessions, as of February 2021 that's 700 virtual 'spaces' per month. These sessions have been beneficial for many, connecting with peers and Share staff gives social contact, structure, and a chance to practise digital skills. Most popular is 'cooking with Kenny', a weekly interactive session where catering students shop and prepare before the class and then work step-by-step online with our chef tutor to create nutritious meals to eat at home.

Students in our home skills group have been learning about different appliances around the house so they've been able to demonstrate and practise in real life, on-screen in their own homes.

During lockdown we provided a full daily Zoom programme starting at 10am with pastoral and meditation, with further sessions running until 4pm including digital skills, art, creative writing, music, health and wellbeing, home skills, steps into employment, fun games, quizzes, guest speakers and daily exercise sessions with Disability Sports Coach and Movement works.

'I like doing workouts on Zoom it keeps me busy'.

'Nicola's IT skills have also massively improved, thanks to the Zoom sessions, and she can now log herself in to all sessions. She's even memorised the Zoom codes'.

'These sessions were invaluable to our daughter. They gave her some structure to her day. They helped her reconnect with familiar adults at Share and her friends. They supported her communication skills, giving her opportunities to practise her conversation skills'.

'This meeting was amazing'.

'I enjoyed seeing lots of different people'.

Blended learning

As the threat of further lockdowns loomed, we developed more complex learning sessions, integrating digital and classroom based learning. Tutors run online sessions in conjunction with staff at Share, so that students attending our sites in person can take part alongside those isolating at home. We've invested in technology and upgraded all our teaching spaces with large screens and other enhanced audio-visual equipment. We regularly invite guests from a variety of organisations to join our sessions virtually to enhance the learning experience.

Digital inclusion

Although digital technology cannot replace face-to-face interaction, it has proved critical to helping our students maintain social connection over the past year, and supporting their health, learning, and wellbeing.

In fact, digital inclusion has been high on our agenda for a long time. We've raised money to help get people connected, identifying who needs help, getting people internet access providing dongles, tablets, and laptops, and then teaching students how to use them. Digital skills are critical for everyone, the trend was there before the pandemic with access to services, support and information all going online. And it's vital that people with learning disabilities are supported to enhance their digital skills to be more included in society.

CASE STUDY – Edmond and Eileen

With no laptop or tablet, and no internet connection at home, brother and sister Edmond and Eileen were unable to take part in online activities and connect with friends at Share. This left them isolated and unable to continue developing the skills they'd been learning. Before lockdown Edmond used an iPad at Share mainly to plan travel routes for trips out on our community learning scheme, but long periods at home with no technology meant he couldn't practise his skills.

We provided them with an iPad and router. Their outreach worker delivered the equipment together with a detailed easy-read guide we prepared to get them set up. Edmond in particular was delighted to receive the equipment, *'I feel like Christmas has come early!'*

Now he enjoys the routine of regular learning sessions via Zoom. He said of the iPad, *'It's good, it helps me see my friends'*.

Edmond and Eileen both love their walks around Putney Heath with their outreach worker, always ready with their coats on whatever the weather, giving them a chance to exercise and have a good chat.



Learning resources

Early on we created a variety of learning resources; worksheets, art challenges, videos, games, fun tasks, and more. As well as sending them out we hosted them digitally in a newly designed COVID-resources section on our website which also signposts people to reliable health information, government guidelines, and local COVID support services. We supplied a host of easy-read information sources from key learning disability organisations. We created wellbeing resources and tips on dealing with staying at home for prolonged periods of time.

Staff explored creative ways of using technology to inspire and engage people when learning remotely. Tutors learnt new technologies quickly, creating accessible videos to suit a range of learning styles including clips with practical demonstrations of particular tasks, 'how to' picture guides with simple subtitles, and videos explaining concepts using basic animation and voiceover.

Providing and delivering home packs

We created home kits for horticulture and delivered them to people's homes so they could carry on gardening. We also put together and delivered art packs that we sent out to students' homes. They included art supplies and instruction sheets that were also available in video form to inspire people to get creative. We delivered sports packs supplied by Disability Sports Coach which included table tennis bats and balls, tennis balls, bean bags, skipping ropes and foam balls, and also sensory kits with massage balls and bean bags all to help people stay active at home.

Mental health support

Looking after our students' mental health has been a major focus. We've seen a deterioration in social skills and behaviour over the course of the pandemic, highlighting the importance of supporting mental wellbeing. All our initiatives and interactions with our students are carefully designed with this in mind. Staff have been running sessions to help people identify and understand their emotions and work through different ways to deal with them.

We've collaborated with groups like Talk Wandsworth to set up virtual sessions for students we identified would benefit most. This gives people a chance to talk through sometimes difficult topics and struggles they experience and receive professional support and advice. Crucially, time is spent working on developing skills that they can employ independently. The importance of this type of support can't be underestimated; students' understanding of their emotions and ability to recognise coping mechanisms was notable, as was their comfort around expressing their thoughts and feelings and confidence in themselves.

Outreach and befriending service

At the end of July 2020 we launched our outreach and befriending service. This was in response to the mental health struggles we witnessed our students and their families going through. We identified those in particular need of respite and our outreach volunteers/befrienders met up to go for walks, bike rides or simply a sit down and a chat in the park.

The service is ongoing, we've invested further, recruiting and training volunteers to keep growing and supporting more people in their local environments. All visits follow appropriate social distancing guidelines and students undergo a thorough risk assessment before taking part. Connecting socially with someone and getting a bit of exercise in the process has been crucial to alleviate some of the stress that people have experienced during the crisis.

CASE STUDY – Gifty

Like many students, Gifty felt the negative effects of suddenly losing social contact due to lockdown, she was unable to take part in any of her usual daily activities. Our keyworking team noticed from their regular phonecalls that Gifty was often sleepy and not getting out of the house much. To help motivate her, they offered her a range of sports equipment to choose from. The team then delivered a skipping rope (Gifty loves boxing and boxers skip to stay fit!) and a large foam football.

Gifty was anxious about going out and nervous about catching the virus. Her outreach worker, Hannah, explained how they would stay outside in the fresh air and practise social distancing, she also gave Gifty a direct number to contact her on if she feels worried. Since then, Gifty has been out for regular walks in the park, bringing along her foam football for a kickaround.

Hannah also supports Gifty to go to the shop so she practises her independent living skills too, using the self-checkout. Gifty said, *'It's important to go out skipping, kick a football and go for a walk in fresh air, it's really good for you, it's good'*.



Student voice

Our self-advocacy group has been running virtually for a while now, adapting exceptionally well to an online format. The approach has been reimagined and a group of 10 students attend regularly. They recently developed ideas around student rep roles. They've been exploring how these roles would function and what responsibilities they would have. They'll soon run elections for who should fill the roles and then continue to support the reps to take more control and have a louder voice in all matters at Share Community. Guests sometimes attend and students take it in turn to chair the meeting. Everyone decides what to add on Share's social media channels afterwards, truly allowing their voices to be heard. This has given much needed meaning and purpose during a time when many have felt forgotten.

The Share garden

We've used our 2.5 acre outdoor space, the Share garden in Tooting, to great effect during the pandemic. We maintained a staff presence at the garden right from the start to maintain the site and when we emerged from the first lockdown we made sure we took advantage of the open space by running wellbeing and creative classes on site as well as our regular horticulture training. It continues to be a calm space where people can socially distance and enjoy the therapeutic benefits of nature at a time when many feel anxious and uncertain. With Spring on the horizon, we're planning more outdoor learning sessions over the next few months to take advantage of this wonderful site.

Community meals project

We partnered with another local service provider, Generate, and worked with the council to provide healthy cooked meals to those in need. We worked hard to raise funds to support the project. We used our professional kitchens to prepare and cook the food and involved some of our students which helped them stay active and develop their catering skills. We prepared and cooked over 5000 meals in total, offering shielding and vulnerable members of the community regular hot meals to help them stay healthy through the first lockdown.

CASE STUDY – Shanice

When the first lockdown happened, Shanice and her family faced a tough time. Some family members have health issues and needed to be extra careful about going out. Shanice has lots of energy and is very active so she found staying at home difficult. Then a family member lost their job due to lockdown so finances were tight. On top of this the family's oven broke down so they were unable to cook proper meals.

Our keyworking team identified that Shanice doesn't like attending Zoom classes or talking to people on the phone. Instead, we supported her with weekly socially distanced outreach sessions so that she could get some exercise outside and her family could get some respite.

The family also benefitted from Share's community meals scheme, receiving pre-cooked meals to heat up in the microwave, saving money and helping them to shield. Shanice's favourite class at Share is catering and so she was delighted to return to the Share kitchen in the summer of 2020 and be part of the catering team who cooked and packaged the meals.

After the meal delivery programme ended, Share supported the family to buy an oven so that they could cook their meals again. Shanice has accessed in-person services at Share whenever possible and has continued to benefit from outreach services and the donation of a sports kit to help her stay active.

'2020 was a very hard year for us all, some more than others but nevertheless a struggle. We just wanted to say thank you for looking after Shanice through this pandemic and also me and our mum on top of that'.



Family liaison support

Many parents and carers have faced extra pressures with little respite from caring responsibilities during lockdown. We've continued to run parent and carer support forums and we've signposted local services, disseminated health and vaccination information and offered a supportive ear when needed. We've invested further in family support, raising money to deploy dedicated staff to connect more with students at home. Our family liaison officers have been working hard to build

stronger relationships with students' immediate support circles, helping them manage and cope with the stress of the pandemic and support the people they care for.

CASE STUDY - Sabina

Sabina usually attends Share three days a week. She particularly enjoys expressing herself through music and art. At the start of the first lockdown Sabina was digitally excluded. With low levels of IT literacy and only a small smart phone at home, she was unable to get onto our Zoom sessions and connect with other friends and services online.

Our Family Liaison Officers were able to visit Sabina at home as soon as restrictions allowed, provide an iPad and support Sabina's family carers to access Zoom classes. Since receiving the iPad, Sabina attends at least two Zoom sessions per day engaging with the various classes she attends.

Sabina's dad said, *'It's really, really good she is on Zoom now. It gives her a routine; she knows she has to be in the office, ready for 11am. She is busy 5 days per week. It has helped a million times'*.

Sabina's art tutor commented, *'Sabina's creative energy is great! She likes to hold up her work to show, and she is always fully involved in the session'*.



Making our sites COVID-safe

From the start of the pandemic, we've adopted the safest practices possible. And due to our commitment, we were able to stay open throughout the second and third lockdowns for those students that really needed to access our services in person to safeguard mental health. We've carried out extensive work to keep everyone who visits Share safe. We've installed a new ventilation system at our main site in Clapham Junction to ensure clean air flow through the building. We've redesigned all our teaching spaces to ensure social distancing can be adhered to. We've employed cleaners to continuously maintain a high level of hygiene throughout the day, included floor markers and easy-read signage to help people stick to the rules, and we've installed hand sanitising stations throughout. We educate everyone about the importance of hand washing regimes and sticking to the rules. We've also created personal packs for students to reduce sharing of stationery and communication tools and other resources.

We also rent space at We Are 336, a disability hub in Brixton, to better support our Lambeth based students meaning they don't have to travel far to access in-person services.

Teaching good hygiene and social distancing

We run a comprehensive programme of initiatives to encourage and teach people how to maintain good hygiene and we provide guidance about using masks. We teach people why we need to change a few things about the way we're currently living, what social distancing means and what it looks and feels like. This is embedded through all our classes, online and in person. Our students have even made their own video showing this: <https://youtu.be/2AH66Hrclio>

Social inclusion

Go Anywhere, Do Anything is our project allowing people to access social and leisure experiences. It's been needed more than ever as COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of social connections in tackling loneliness. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, staff have worked hard to continue to deliver high-quality experiences, even though physical trips out haven't been allowed for most of the past year. We've run nearly 60 social activities since March 2020, mostly online. Our team has 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 people with the best social experiences possible throughout the pandemic.

Virtual trips have included discos, fancy dress parties, museum and stadium tours, club nights, watch parties, Taekwondo, DIY comedy and more. Zoom actually made the project accessible for our harder to reach members, people who even before COVID-19 faced barriers to leaving the house for various reasons.

CASE STUDY – Fatima

Fatima has attended nearly every Zoom trip over lockdown but for logistical reasons hasn't always been able to attend our pre-pandemic trips in person. Having enjoyed a range of positive virtual experiences she's now planning on attending more *Go Anywhere, Do Anything* physical trips in future with the support of social buddies.

Accessing the programme virtually has opened up new experiences for her, in particular museum tours. Fatima and her sister told us that before lockdown she didn't much like museums, but now she really enjoys them. As her sister loves history this allows them to develop a shared interest and they're looking forward to visiting more museums in person once restrictions allow.

Fatima's sister says about our sessions, *'She [Fatima] experiences very positive things, she learns new things, it's something different for her...something she can enjoy and participate with other members...it's very good for her'*.

Fatima's family have noticed that joining virtual trips has helped her build independence and communication skills. Her research skills have improved and she's learnt more about exploring emotion; after each session she describes the experience in detail to her family, opening up and being more expressive. It gives her space to have some time for herself and to have fun, *'I really enjoy it, every trip was brilliant'*.



COVID-19 vaccination campaign

We're running a COVID-19 vaccination awareness campaign providing clear, reliable facts from the NHS and Public Health England, including easy-read information tailored for those with learning disabilities, and promoting resources in different languages to make sure everyone has access.

This allows people to make informed choices, helps to dispel myths and anti-vax messages, and demystifies the process for those that otherwise may not have considered having the jab. We use social media and our other digital channels and we also work with local health groups to provide webinars where people can ask questions and get the facts from health professionals. Working with local health services we're running a vaccination clinic at our main site in Clapham Junction to offer vaccinations to students and their parents and carers.

Staff adaptability

Staff at Share have adapted to ever changing scenarios, constantly striving to support our students and maintain their wellbeing. We've upskilled in new technologies and developed innovative teaching methods. We've redeployed and shared skills across the organisation, often working well outside our comfort zones. We've worked in bubbles and nominated COVID champions to help keep us all safe. We've worked hard to keep a check on our own wellbeing; attending mental health support sessions, utilising digital communications to stay in touch with each other, attending virtual tea-time chats, and generally supporting each other to keep working to the best of our abilities to deliver a high-quality service during a very difficult time.

Report summary

At Share we've worked hard through the pandemic to ensure a full, holistic service. We've demonstrated commitment, a can-do attitude, and huge resilience to react to numerous changes, all with a common vision - to value and support people with learning disabilities and mitigate the devastating effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

Lockdown has changed the landscape of digital inclusion, it's spurred many of us to get online and use the internet in new ways. We recognise that there are barriers for some people and we're working hard to overcome these. We're ensuring people have the technical infrastructure to get online, and the skills to use it.

We've endeavoured to provide the best services we can for those who prefer not to be online, through our outreach and other offline activities.

Services developed in response to lockdown may look different from those pre-COVID, but we don't view virtual services as being any less valuable than in-person support. They've played a crucial role in helping people with learning disabilities deal with the effects of the pandemic, as well as continuing their learning and development longer term.

Studies have shown that 93% of people with learning disabilities or autism feel more isolated from society due to the pandemic (source: Dimensions) and the death rate from COVID-19 has been up to six times higher. Sadly, the pandemic has highlighted the health and social inequalities that already existed for disabled people. This emphasises the importance of supporting people through this challenging time.

As we look to the future, with the prospect of lockdown easing, we need all of our resources so that we can continue to support our students' mental health; to rebuild their confidence and social skills; to aid their learning and development, and to help them have the best possible quality of life.