

Age Connects Morgannwg: Adapting to Life's Challenges – Covid-19, Floods and Nail Cutting

2020 will forever be etched in our minds as a challenging year. Whole communities in the south Wales valleys had not yet recovered from Storm Dennis and Storm Jorge, when families were forced into lockdown in their flood-hit homes.

This was also the case for charities like Age Connects Morgannwg (ACM), which works across Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT), Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil, to help create a society where older people can meet their aspirations and feel respected, through welfare services and poverty relief.

When the storms came in February 2020, ACM's office in Pontypridd was completely flooded they lost all their

desks, chairs, IT and phone systems, but within a week, they were up and running again, working out of a nearby housing association. Having already been uprooted once, it may explain why ACM was able to 'roll with the punches' and respond quickly to what was soon to follow: the Covid-19 pandemic.

Though they were forced to close their public-facing offices in mid-March 2020, ACM successfully maintained the bulk of its integrated, community-based health and social care services, including information and advice, advocacy support, hospital discharge support services, home-based dementia care and befriending services.

Yvette Davies, ACM's Advice Services Manager, who has worked for the charity for 19 years explains: 'We'd



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'All face-to-face appointments were replaced with phone-calls, and we recruited more volunteers to cope with demand, particularly in terms of hospital discharges etc. We also provided over the phone support to people who needed help paying utility bills, accessing medical appointments or guidance on social distancing and shielding.'


ACM has always been there for local families – during some of the most difficult periods of their lives. The charity is determined to be there for them during the pandemic, particularly as its communities have been hit hard by Covid-19 (in April 2020, RCT recorded 176.2 deaths per 100,000 people¹).

In addition to shifting to phone-based support services, they also redeployed eight staff to directly support RCT's Community Resilience Hubs, which include tasks like shopping for those shielding, collecting prescriptions and delivering equipment from acute hospital settings.

Other teams were relocated to two

brand-new 'Step-down' facilities (set up to support elderly patients discharged from general hospitals), in Abergarw Manor in Bridgend and Marsh House in Merthyr Tydfi, to help staff prepare both private and communal safe spaces for patients transferring from hospitals.

Much of this also involves direct interventions to combat loneliness and isolation by helping patients to keep in touch with families via technology donated by Digital Communities Wales, including Android Tablets, Amazon Echo Dots, Amazon Shows and Oculus virtual reality headsets. Virtual meet ups on Skype, Whatsapp or Messenger video make all the difference between a good and bad day.



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Clearly, a dual challenge has emerged for the charity: in continuing to support service users who are already vulnerable to life's everyday challenges, while also responding appropriately to the fact that a great

¹ BBC Wales, 12 June 2020: <https://bbc.in/3eepaGa>


number will be in the high-risk group for Covid-19 complications.

There is a real need to maintain everyday services not because they're needed, but also because it will help reduce anxiety levels, limit reasons to venture outdoors unnecessarily, and reduce the risk of infection from Covid-19. This is why ACM is in the process of finding ways to bring back its suspended services, currently unavailable because of social distancing rules.

Yvette, who also oversees the charity's nail-cutting service, says its return is crucial: 'It's of little surprise to me that, twelve weeks into lockdown, we have a waiting list that fills two sheets of A4. Severely neglected feet can lead to very real health and social care problems, like isolation, depression, more falls and the need for orthopaedic interventions, like hip replacements. Our three nail technicians – Helen, Ann and Linda – do a fantastic job in not only providing basic foot care, but tackling a range of other health and social care issues before they take hold.



After the first visit, his nail technician was able to cut his nails, relieve his pain, and signpost him to an NHS Podiatry Department. Now that he has regular nail cutting appointments, he's regained his independence, is back driving and attends his local Quiz night, with his partner.



'Take for example Jack,* a former miner, who had worn steel capped boots most of his working life, which had led to his toenails thickening and becoming deformed. When it was impossible for him to cut them himself, he was too embarrassed to tell his GP, which eventually meant it became too painful for him to walk, wear shoes or leave the house.

'This naturally led to isolation and depression, until he agreed to visit our clinic. After the first visit, his nail technician was able to cut his nails, relieve his pain, and signpost him to an NHS Podiatry Department. Now that he has regular nail cutting appointments, he's regained his independence, is back driving and attends his local quiz night, with his partner.'

ACM is in the process of developing a method statement that will help overcome barriers to getting this service back in operation – under new social distancing guidelines. The charity is hoping that restrictions will soon be lifted on social purpose nail-cutting services and will be calling on the Minister for Health, Vaughan Gething, to prioritise the re-opening of such services as soon as possible in recognition of its value as a health and social care service, rather than a luxury beauty treatment, such as hairdressing.

The method statement seeks to protect both staff and service users, including provisions such as:

- initially offering the nail cutting service within a clinic setting only (avoiding home visits altogether because of shielding issues)
- extending appointments from 30 to 45 minutes, to allow a deep clean of the room between each patient
- sourcing proper PPE, including full face visors.

We all know that, as we get older, ordinary life can become a little more challenging, particularly if we live on

our own, have lost a partner, or our family live elsewhere. It can be overwhelming to stay on top of it all: getting in the food shopping, paying bills, picking up prescriptions, visiting the GP, attending outpatient appointments, and cutting nails.

ACM is a lifeline that cannot be underestimated.

**Jack – name changed for confidentiality reasons*

To learn more about WCVA's Health and Social Care work, email Sally Rees, National third Sector Health & Social Care Coordinator, on: srees@wcva.cymru

For more information about Age Connects Morgannwg and its services go to: www.ageconnectsmorgannwg.org.uk



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