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A special feature from Connected Voice  
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## Voices of the pandemic



Case studies of support provided by VCSE organisations  
in Newcastle and Gateshead



Cover photos

From top left to bottom right: Images courtesy of Disability North, Tyneside Women’s Health, The Comfrey Project, West End Refugee Service

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# Introduction

## By Lisa Goodwin, Chief Executive

As we begin to emerge from a global pandemic, we felt it was the right time to highlight the role that local voluntary and community organisations have played in getting people through it, and – more than that – to give a voice to some of those people who suffered its worst effects.

At this point in time, we all understand that the pandemic has caused inequalities to widen, and that it was those already in poverty, people from ethnic minority communities or those facing problems such as poor health, who suffered most.

We have gained a renewed understanding of the role and reach of the voluntary sector, and seen a greater value placed on the sector's role in tackling local issues and understanding local need. We can offer countless examples of how organisations have worked together to support people and to creatively approach how they delivered that support, and throughout the past year have highlighted these examples in our regular publications.

For this publication, our aim was simply to amplify the voices of the people hardest hit by the pandemic; to put ourselves in their shoes for a moment and hear what life has really been like over the past year, via the organisations who supported them.

The voluntary and community sector plays a crucial role in supporting communities that are marginalised, excluded, or who face additional challenges or barriers compared to the rest of society. The way in which we do that is naturally person-centred, so lockdown represented a fundamental challenge to the sector's core way of working.

Organisations had to find new ways to support beneficiaries – and fast. They also had to overcome new challenges which were presenting themselves on a daily basis – as their beneficiaries started to share issues of digital exclusion, isolation, and mental health deterioration alongside the challenges many of them already faced. In the case studies that follow, we look back at what people were facing as we went into lockdown, and how the organisations and their beneficiaries feel now, as we start to look to the future.

As with any publication of this kind, we can only feature a small number of organisations. We focused on organisations supporting groups of people who were more likely to be affected by the pandemic: for example older people, asylum seekers, carers, and people with disabilities. There are many essential support services that were active during the past year, such as local foodbanks, who are not included. We made the decision to look at specific communities of interest rather than charities providing more general services – but the importance of the support that such

organisations across Newcastle and Gateshead have provided is, of course, without question.

Each of the independent organisations featured has its own experience of the pandemic, and has taken its own approach over the last year; nonetheless, some clear common themes emerge.

The first theme is that **organisations who were not digital experts found themselves promoting digital inclusion**. From seeking donations of IT equipment and smart phones, to supporting people to be able to use them, a new generation of digital champions emerged within local charities. Throughout the case studies, beneficiaries reference access to online / digital support as a lifeline, and much of it would not have happened without that additional effort by charities at the beginning of lockdown – and the generous support of funders.

During the first lockdown, **organisations switched to advocacy mode – helping to raise issues where people were being forgotten about in the rush to close or adapt services**. We see this again and again – whether it is Gateshead Carers raising awareness of particular carers' issues with local GPs, Disability North flagging up issues around access to PPE for people with personal assistants, or Search supporting someone to seek help for their health issue at a time when they felt reluctant to bother the NHS.

Many organisations **rallied to set up physical meeting spaces and support groups over the summer of 2020, only to find that people did not return to them**. By the summer, the news spoke of little else than Covid, and fear had become much more tangible, keeping people at home even when government guidance allowed them to go out.

It is abundantly clear from these case studies is that there is a high level of **creativity and responsiveness within VCSE organisations**. Physical support groups were changed to online overnight. New volunteers were welcomed and tasked with roles that hadn't existed a week earlier. Shop and drop services were set up. Meaningful ways to keep people occupied and provide a sense of connection were developed at pace.

Finally, the **responsiveness and flexibility of local funders** must be acknowledged as a key enabling factor in the local Covid response. Many of the additional activities outlined within the case studies were only possible because of emergency funding which was made available via local trusts, Community Foundations, and local authorities.

Wholehearted thanks go to all eleven organisations who gave generously of their time to speak to us, to Martin Gollan who led on the research, and to our Marketing and Communications Officer Amy McKie for her design skills.



Image credit: The Comfrey Project



Image credit: Search Newcastle



Image credit: West End Refugee Service



Image credit: Age UK Gateshead



# Search Newcastle

## Introduction

Search Newcastle was set up in the 1970's to provide advice and visits to housebound pensioners in the West End of Newcastle. It is one of the longest established voluntary sector organisations in the West End, and while Search has greatly expanded the support and activities it offers the pandemic has in some ways seen it return to that original purpose; meeting the needs of older people who are unable to leave their homes.

## Response to pandemic

When the first lockdown was announced:

**“ Pretty much everything changed overnight. In normal times the general ‘prevention’ mantra was to ask people to come along to activities, events and venues where they could join in and meet other people in person. This message was effectively reversed**

Older people were from the beginning of the pandemic identified as extremely vulnerable to effects of the virus, with much higher chance of dying from it. The challenges for older people, especially at the beginning of lockdown ranged from how to shop for groceries to how to maintain mental and physical health.

Stockpiling and panic buying meant supermarket home delivery slots became almost impossible to find. At the same time, it became very difficult for older people who were using a Post Office Card Account, a basic account for collecting pension, benefits or tax credit payments from the local post office.

Unable to travel to the Post Office and without recourse to online banking, many older people told Search that they were unable to buy food and other items. One response was to provide a food parcel - but in wanting to maintain their independence, many refused parcels.

Search took the decision to set up shopping service and after some initial struggles found a supermarket willing to give them an early morning priority slot every Thursday. Calling on individuals once a week to collect a shopping list Search used money from its reserves to cover costs until it could be repaid by cash or cheque.

To begin with the shopping service was delivering shopping to 30 households. The service continues to run and now delivers a weekly shop for 17 people who continue to shield and remain highly vulnerable.

Managing physical and mental health during the previous twelve months has also proved challenging for older people, who in many cases have been isolated from family and friends, even during the summer months when lockdown eased.

Threats to health took a number of different forms. Cancellation of routine health checks, appointments for surgery and access to health professionals saw a deterioration in individuals health. One man, who was receiving regular help with his shopping asked for help after noticing a lump on the top of his head, which had begun to itch. He asked the Search staff member to take a photo of the lump so that it could be emailed to the man's GP. No action was taken on this occasion but six months later the skin tag was again bothering the man, who this time was reluctant to bother his GP. The member of staff insisted and this time



the man was referred immediately to the RVI where it was removed as a malignant cancer. A reluctance to 'bother the doctor' has been observed by other Search staff and volunteers and appears to be an unintended consequence of the 'protect the NHS' message.

## User experience

For other older people it was the loss of daily routine, for example a walk to the shops to buy a loaf of bread or a newspaper. These daily rituals provided the opportunity for social contact and exercise. Now, after so long spent isolating, older people report feeling anxious about how they will manage when finally, they can go outside again. Some, like one older woman, previously an active walker, now fears that she has spent so much time essentially immobile at home that she will be physically unable to do much walking again.

This nervousness about the individual's physical capability is matched by a psychological fear of the continuing risk the virus presents in crowded areas, a fear stoked by media portrayal of the risk the virus holds as soon as one walks outside their door.

Search worked hard, especially during the early stages of the pandemic to counter false or misleading stories and messages about coronavirus but like other voluntary organisations that have participated in this report found it hard at times to counter the



misreporting, negativity and misinformation within mainstream news outlets and online.

As vaccinations became available for people older people, a further challenge presented itself as some refused to take buses or taxis to vaccination centres in places such as Gosforth Racecourse or the Centre for Life venues distant from the neighbourhoods where Search Newcastle is mainly active. As a result, some older people are choosing to wait for the vaccine to become available at their local GP practice. However, what remains clear to staff and volunteers is that even after receiving their first vaccination, some older people continue to be fearful of exposure to COVID-19.

## Looking to the future

For older people whose lives before the first lockdown were already limited by poor health or poverty, the experience of the past 12 months may have felt little different. However, wider reporting of social isolation and its harmful effects by the media means that older people are perhaps less self-conscious about declaring their situation.

The support provided by Search during lockdown, by phone, online and on the doorstep has strengthened existing links and forged new ones with older people Newcastle's west end. As COVID-19 restrictions begin to ease Search will begin again bringing older people together in lunch clubs, exercise classes, craft sessions and more, while continuing to offer for the most vulnerable people the phone and online contacts that have proved so crucial during the pandemic.

**“ The support that I've received from my church, from the people in Search like Adam here, has been nothing but wonderful. They have been able to keep an eye on me over this past many months, and as a result.... I am still here.**



# Age UK Gateshead

## Introduction

Age UK Gateshead is an established charity that has been providing services and activities for older people in Gateshead since 1972. The charity has 32 staff and 147 volunteers, which during the pandemic increased to over 2400 volunteers.

Age UK Gateshead offers information and advice services, exercise and wellbeing sessions, social groups and specialist services dealing with issues such as mental health, bereavement, dementia, stroke rehab and palliative care. It has six day care centres, one dedicated dementia centre and 38 social groups. There is also a befriending scheme that includes a group for LGBTQ+ older people, gardening groups, men's groups, bowling clubs and friendship groups, Hospital to Home services and a community Dementia support service.

Before the pandemic, services provided by Age UK Gateshead were regularly used by around 3,800 people living in both Gateshead and Newcastle, where it began to offer services and activities following the closure of Age UK Newcastle. During the pandemic, the needs of older people saw the number of active users increase by approximately 10,100 individuals to 14,000 people.

## Response to pandemic

Age UK Gateshead anticipated a lockdown announcement being made and during the weeks leading up to 23 March 2020 had already begun planning for the sort of services that would be needed for older people suddenly unable to leave their homes. These included services such as shopping, prescriptions, food parcels, hot meals, pensions, welfare calls, dog walking and friendship groups. The service development was based on known need - thanks to the charity being part of it community and designed around the individual.

When lockdown was announced, Age UK Gateshead was able to close all its existing services, some 70 individual projects, and immediately replace them with a service model designed for the new restrictions. Gateshead Council soon integrated with Age UK

Gateshead's customer relationship management (CRM) system in order to make things happen and be delivered. Other local voluntary organisations were given training on how to use the CRM for older people they knew would need additional support. This enabled the charity to act as a hub for both the statutory sector and the voluntary sector in coordinating support and services across the borough.

During the early weeks of lockdown, the number of Age UK Gateshead's volunteers dropped as many were required to shield. However, working age people who were furloughed soon looked for opportunities to help, and volunteer numbers rocketed. With more volunteers becoming active in their own neighbourhoods and with Age UK Gateshead providing a central coordination role, enquiries to statutory services began to be referred onto Age UK Gateshead and onto local volunteers.

**“ We all live and work in Gateshead, we're investing in ourselves and my colleagues and volunteers needed that feeling of belonging and of making a difference**

Volunteers have formed the backbone of Age UK Gateshead's response to the pandemic, and there is hope that new connections created within neighbourhoods will continue, making communities more resilient to future knocks.

## User experience

In 2017 at least 20,000 older people in Northumberland and Tyne and Wear were classified as lonely, a figure which the lockdown and Covid restrictions will have hugely increased.

One man, in his eighties and living on his own, was referred to Age UK Gateshead last summer. He was physically well but had a history of long-term depression and anxiety. His daughter now lived in the South East and he had no contact with his son. Spending so much of his time alone was worsening his fragile mental health. After an assessment, Age UK Gateshead organised respite care and encouraged him to join the Men's Group, which had moved online.

**“ I have had a brilliant day today. It's great to meet other people like me and hear about their lives and families even if it is on a screen. It does me a lot of good to talk to other people**

On some occasions staff or volunteers would need to get past initial resistance to 'accepting charity' or causing a fuss, before help would be accepted. A widower living in a high-rise in Newcastle accepted a food delivery and then spent almost an hour talking to the volunteer about his wife who had recently died. Later he phoned to say that a mistake had been made with the shopping. When the volunteer returned, there was no mistake. The widower had simply been looking for an excuse to have someone visit again and to have another conversation.

As the year progressed, volunteers delivered over 1800 'treat parcels' to older people, and would spend time chatting and find out about their circumstances, what services or help they might need and make a referral if required.

For many of the older people living in urban areas of Gateshead food insecurity and social isolation were the significant issues during the lockdown. By contrast for older people in Gateshead's more rural areas, such as Chopwell and Ryton in the west of the borough, access to services was the main barrier.

Unexpectedly, Age UK Gateshead found that restrictions on travel during lockdown meant its twitter account became a way for families now living in other parts of the UK or even abroad, to request a visit to older relatives living in Gateshead and make sure that they are still healthy and well.

## Looking to the future

The pandemic confirmed what the charity already knew and that is the communities of Gateshead and Newcastle are resilient and like a family in crisis pull together to support each other. Age UK Gateshead will be retaining and building upon up its increased volunteer capacity, and the partnerships it has formed during the previous twelve months. As a charity, Age UK Gateshead has always believed we are stronger together and stands firmly within its communities alongside its partners.

As lockdown begins to ease, Age UK Gateshead will again look to retaining its flexible structures in order to provide services to meet new needs. However, the charity is aware of the continuing vulnerability of older people even with a successful vaccine programme in place. It is unlikely therefore that all provision set up to manage the challenges of lockdown will be fully withdrawn. Instead a mixed approach is more likely. Age UK Gateshead would rather hear 'well done' than 'well said', and they plan to continue to introduce positive change at a person by person level.





# The Comfrey Project

## Introduction

The Comfrey Project has allotment sites in Gateshead and Newcastle, using them to create a safe and welcoming environment for refugees and asylum seekers. Combining gardening with crafts, cooking and shared meals, the Comfrey Project promotes personal wellbeing by creating a sense of place and belonging.

The Comfrey Project began in 2001, offering one session a week at a plot in Newcastle's west end. The project became a registered charity one year later and now manages three allotment sites, works closely in partnership with other charities including British Red Cross and Freedom from Torture, along with other local voluntary sector organisations.

In 2009 Comfrey Project was named The Guardian's Charity of the Year.

## Response to pandemic

At the start of lockdown, the Comfrey Project did not consider furloughing staff - and quickly decided that it was essential for the people who the project supports that it remained open and available. The immediate focus was on providing emergency support along with making sure that people understood lockdown guidelines and that they had what they needed to keep safe.

Although the Project remained active, lockdown meant they could not keep open the allotments. Therefore, staff began making regular calls to check in and find out how people were. it

became apparent quite quickly that social isolation and boredom was having an effect, especially on mental wellbeing. The Project set up a befriending service, which, as the pandemic continued, became a lifeline for some:

“When I speak with [the befriender] it makes me feel less stress or worry... he helped me when I had a problem with my housemate. It is a good feeling that you have someone there to help you if you need help or if you need to speak with someone

Comfrey Project began distributing monthly wellbeing parcels. These included gardening and creative activities along with some essential support, so that people could be occupied while stuck at home. Other projects that could be done remotely, including gardening and a creative story telling projects also began. After a few months however, it became apparent by simply giving people something to do at home, rather than inviting them to come together to jointly create something, a key element of the Comfrey Project's ethos was being lost.

The Comfrey Project decided to offer volunteering opportunities and invited people to come up with their own projects. One Syrian group chose to share, with a group of older and disabled people, recipes and ingredients along with creative activities. Another group

of volunteers provided meals for vulnerable people living in the community. Volunteers and local people were invited to help make up food parcels.

Volunteering projects helped to improve the wellbeing of those who took part, and gave them a sense of purpose and connection.

“Last week me and my friend distributed packs. We helped the Comfrey Project. During these hard days you need to do something for people in need

“Thanks to the Comfrey Project for giving us the chance to take part in this volunteer activity. The happiness people had when we delivered the parcels also made us happy

## User experience

Before the pandemic, daily life for refugees and asylum seekers was already far from easy. However, the sudden closure of places to go, such as the Comfrey Project's allotments, other voluntary organisations or local religious groups was keenly felt. All of these places offered opportunities to meet and eat, to take part in activities, find information, exercise or to simply establish a routine.

“The past 12 months been like hell to me. When pandemic started everything went down, [I became] seriously ill with [my] mental health, the start of pandemic took me back to where I came out of

“[its] very difficult at times, we are thinking about coronavirus, life in the flats [is] very difficult, can't go outside [can't] go for exercise, just a very difficult time

Many of the refugees and asylum seekers found it difficult to access health services and their physical and mental health began to deteriorate.

“For three months I was down and depressed

Confusing messages from the Home Office created further anxiety for people whose status in the UK was already precarious. Many did not realise that the Home Office had paused processing asylum cases until they were informed by the Comfrey Project. Along with increasing isolation and worsening mental and physical health, refugees and asylum seekers experienced widening inequalities when ESOL and other learning opportunities ceased. Parents meanwhile were faced with home schooling their children but with a number of additional challenges such as language barriers, lack of IT equipment or a reliable broadband connection.

By distributing smart phones and computers along with targeted support to increase digital literacy, the Comfrey Project enabled some to bridge the digital divide.

## Looking to the future

As the vaccine programme progresses, people who have struggled with being stuck indoors are beginning to look forward to getting back to the Comfrey Project. However similar sentiments were expressed last summer and when the project began to open up people, perhaps out of habit established during lockdown of not going out, didn't arrive back in the numbers expected.

This time around Comfrey Project will look to have a more gradual re-opening, to give their community more time to adjust and prepare for a new set of conditions.





# West End Refugee Service

## Introduction

West End Refugee Service (WERS) was set up initially in 1999 to provide clothing, blankets and food parcels for refugees arriving in the West End of Newcastle. The charity is now based in Arthur's Hill where it continues to provide clothing, but also a range of advice, opportunities and support services, working with other agencies and local groups as part of a network of organisations and services dedicated to supporting some of the most vulnerable individuals and families in the city.

During 2019 to 2020 WERS supported clients from 57 different countries, the largest percentage coming from Iran and Iraq. Along with its advice services it offers the only designated befriending scheme in the city for refugees and asylum seekers and Skillsmatch, which matches volunteers' skills and interests with volunteering opportunities.

WERS also runs an education and training programme designed to counter negative stories and misinformation about refugees and asylum seekers.

## Response to pandemic

Like many other charities, WERS took the decision not to close but to adapt core services so that they would continue to be available throughout lockdown.

Advice and information about housing, health and welfare services began to be given by phone, and WERS made available credit for phones, (giving out over 1000 top up payments since April last year). All destitute asylum seekers supported by WERS received a £10 phone top up along with a pre-payment card with £60 per month credit, to replace the £10 weekly cash payment they had received pre-pandemic.

“**This card means a lot to me, it makes me feel proud, I do not stand out, I have a bank card like everyone else, it has made me feel human... part of society again**

WERS were also able to offer computers for some families and individuals and they installed WiFi in their offices to give internet access to refugees and asylum seekers.

In addition to giving advice by phone, volunteer support workers began to make regular calls to vulnerable clients and families, to check in on how they were and also provide information about new support services, updates on covid guidance and health information.

During the pandemic and in particular the lockdowns, social isolation and worsening mental health were significant hazards that faced refugees and asylum seekers. WERS was able to scale up its befriending service. Over 60 befrienders made more than 2,500 contacts by phone, texts, WhatsApp and visits.

“**I decided to stay in Newcastle when I got my status, the main reason was my befriender**

“**If you have someone you can turn to you don't feel alone [and] you feel more confident to navigate problems with settling into the community**



## User experience

Loss of networks and regular contact with friends and services, increased social isolation and deterioration in mental health has been a common experience for WERS clients.

One woman who was housed during the pandemic under the government's section 4 legislation (under which accommodation was offered to homeless people during the lockdown) found herself isolated and although she has friends, she did not have contact with her family, like most people seeking asylum here. Naturally a very social person she was taking part in online classes but had to stop after she broke down crying during one class.

Another woman, who like other asylum seekers is awaiting a decision on her application to remain in the UK, has been affected by Home Office delays in processing claims within the original six months target for issuing a decision. This continuing uncertainty, coupled with receiving regular Home Office letters threatening deportation alongside being alone has seen her mental health worsen considerably.

The Home Office letters have led to an increase in people calling WERS desperate/anxious and stressed and seeking legal help with their case - something that WERS cannot currently offer. WERS but is now a part of a regional bid to provide more support to people during the asylum process.



WERS, alongside many other voluntary sector organisations, have found that during the pandemic they have been increasingly plugging gaps in statutory or contracted services - gaps that are often leaving highly vulnerable people without access to health care, clothing or mobile phones.

For some it is WERS befriending service that has proved crucial to their ability to keep going. One man, with a strong case to remain, nevertheless received a negative decision from the Home Office. The news was all the harder as he had seen friends receive positive decisions and had a brother, with leave to remain, now living in Yorkshire.

When asked what the biggest challenge is now, he said:

“**It is very hard to explain, it's like internal problems, my health and my head. At night I have this pressure and bad experiences from my past and I'm in my house, on my own, reliving them**

He credits the support from his befriender, who regularly stays in touch, sending messages and says:

“**I call him and he's there for me and I'm thankful for him**

## Looking to the future

The pandemic has given WERS the opportunity to review the services they offer. Historically, WERS has been a place for people to go with issues. While support workers will still be doing their job to address these issues, there is a different need now as well, about being able to connect again. A garden project with new gazebos will offer a social space giving people the opportunity to drop by and "muck in" when they want to, and the skillsmatch project will also begin to create new links between people WERS supports and volunteering opportunities out in the community.



# Disability North

## Introduction

Disability North is a user led charity promoting inclusion, independence and choice for disabled people. Based in the Dene Centre opposite the Freeman Hospital, Disability North was set up during the 1980's to become a centre for excellence for disability and to provide services across the region.

Disability North offers a comprehensive set of services to enable disabled people to live independent lives. These include advice on welfare benefits as well as managing direct payments, personal budgets and payroll for personal assistants. During 2019- 2020, Disability North supported around 4000 disabled people and their carers - helping them to claim approximately £4million in benefits.

The charity also provides advice on aids, adaptations and equipment and personalised support about community care. Disability North's approach is to make sure the right advice and support is given to the person who needs it, whatever that need is.

## Response to pandemic

When lockdown was announced, Disability North closed the Dene Centre to all apart from staff who managed payroll for disabled people employing Personal Assistants. All other staff began to work from home, quickly setting up the systems to continue to be able to offer advice and answer questions as everyone adjusted to lockdown.

Providing advice by phone, especially about welfare rights and benefits, brought particular challenges. One worried and confused mother wanted help to make a Disability Living Allowance claim for her child, recently diagnosed with autism and hyper mobility. This meant completing a 36-page application form asking 70 questions, on the phone and supported by a Disability North advisor.

The application was in this instance unsuccessful, which required a series of further phone calls with Disability North advisors who worked with the family, again on the phone, to write and submit an appeal, following which:

**“ DWP changed their decision and [our child] would now receive DLA. We're very happy**

Disabled people were simply overlooked however, when the government introduced the £20 uplift for Universal Credit claimants but chose not to include ESA claimants.

Disability North successfully secured grant funding to buy and distribute laptops to ensure people could continue to access information and keep in contact with friends, relatives and services.

During the early stage of the pandemic as the government introduced a range of measures and support to help people manage lockdown, it became apparent that disabled people were being left out. When disabled people were not able to access PPE in the way care home or NHS staff were, Disability North worked with Newcastle City Council to distribute PPE for use by personal assistants.

## User experience

During the early period of the pandemic disabled people were given a temporary reprieve from the uncertainty of benefit assessments as hearings were stopped and appeals were not being made. The sudden halt created concerns for some disabled people who contacted Disability North for reassurance. However, this period of relative calm was soon



disturbed as letters began to arrive informing people who had only recently been told they were not being assessed that a way had been found to carry them out and in fact they were going to be assessed.

As the year progressed through the various lockdowns, staff increasingly heard the frustration of disabled people. Phone calls lasted longer as people talked about their situation and difficulties they were experiencing. One grant funded project to provide one-to-one sessions with a personal trainer to aid rehabilitation ended up using a portion of its budget to cover the extra time the personal trainer was taking when contacting people to let them know about the project.

Many disabled people or their carers who contacted Disability North during the pandemic were seeking advice about welfare benefits.

One retired man contacted Disability North:

**“ I hadn't any dealings with any benefits other than my state pension and didn't know if I was entitled to any, to help with my current health problems. I suffer from chronic breathing problems**

Disability North assessed that he would be eligible for an award and worked with him by phone, to apply for Attendance Allowance and organise the necessary medical evidence. Six weeks later he called to say he had been awarded £89.15 a week extra benefit

**“ I'm very happy with this outcome and once the pandemic is over, I'll call in at the centre to thank everyone personally, possibly with biscuits**

Another issue for people was being unable to access respite during lockdown. A married couple, the husband disabled, and his wife his main carer, would use their direct payment for

short breaks and contacted Disability North advisor to find out if there were any alternatives they could consider. Both had become very isolated while shielding. At the advisor's suggestion and after some negotiation with their social worker, the couple bought a tablet, which had Alexa installed, to get onto the internet.

**“ It's amazing, he's now able to Google things and call the family on [the tablet] it's made a real difference**

## Looking to the future

As the pandemic progressed, disabled people often spoke to Disability North advisors about feeling overlooked, particularly last summer as businesses began to reopen and people mixed more freely. Some also spoke about resentments and antagonism over disabled people having blue badges, especially if they didn't conform somehow to a common assumption of who is disabled.

It appears as if a social divide has opened up, one that is familiar to many disabled people who experienced hostility as result of the 'strivers versus scroungers' rhetoric that accompanied the start of the coalition government's austerity and welfare reform policies. As part of their awareness raising and influence work, this is something which Disability North will continue to challenge.





# Gateshead Carers

## Introduction

Gateshead Carers Association has been providing advice and support for carers in the borough for twenty-five years. Their offices at John Haswell House have become a hub for carers and a place where they can meet, relax, join support groups and volunteer. Always campaigning on behalf of carers and their rights, Gateshead Carers most recent campaign was for unpaid carers to register for COVID-19 vaccinations.

## Response to pandemic

At the beginning of the first lockdown, Gateshead Carers had to stop all of the regular activities and face to face support that it offers carers. Lockdown also meant closing the carers' allotment and the holiday home in Cumbria that is used for carers' respite.

To mitigate the impact on carers of being unable to come to John Haswell House, staff began regularly telephoning carers in order to continue the one-to-one support that many carers rely on in difficult circumstances.

The small group sessions that run every week were quickly set up online using Zoom. These included wellbeing groups, creativity sessions, and groups for carers who share particular identities or interests. Gateshead Carers produced a 'how to' guide for using Zoom and offered one-to-one support for carers who had little or no experience of using the internet, to enable them to take part.

Many carers began to participate regularly in the online groups. However, some carers preferred the telephone to stay in touch, while others, such as the Arabic carers had their own WhatsApp group, which they used to practice English along with maintaining contact with each other and Gateshead Carers. WhatsApp was also popular with Chinese carers, while Roma carers preferred to use Facebook. Being able to offer different options for carers to connect was important.

## User experience

For some carers, the loss of being able to go to John Haswell House for in-person support had a devastating effect. Responding to Gateshead Carers Unpaid Carer survey (carried out during September and October 2020), one carer said:

**“I was severely depressed in the first three months of lockdown. I did not kill myself as I thought it would be even harder for my child to be rescued as no one would notice I was gone**

Gateshead Carers were acutely aware of the risk to the mental health of carers of so many support networks and services disappearing overnight. The loss of not being able to visit John Haswell House to ask for help or advice; or for a friend, neighbour or volunteer to pop in and help out meant carers began to feel alone and isolated.

In response, Wellbeing Facilitators began to offer different coping strategies and wellbeing techniques for carers to adopt on a weekly basis. These strategies could be as simple as carers allowing themselves ten minutes in the shower and not having to consider, for a short while, their caring responsibilities. Small changes such as these added up - and in the absence of being able to access a full day or week of respite - enabled carers to manage each day as it came.

**“That's actually my time, I don't have to rush [and] the world can wait**



Gateshead Carers befriending project also played an important part, helping carers to maintain their mental wellbeing and reducing loneliness and social isolation. The project was a feature of the support Gateshead Carers offered before the lockdown and matched befrienders with a carer or the cared for, as either way it provided a break for the carer.

After lockdown, the service adapted to the new circumstances with the befriender making phone calls. While some carers decided they would wait until the time came when they could meet their befriender in person, to enjoy a coffee and a chat, the majority really appreciated the regular calls they received and talked about the difference it made for them.

Although carers support networks began to adapt and change, shopping for food and household necessities was difficult during the early period of lockdown when carers were nervous about the risk of bringing the virus back to the home. Rather than trying itself to meet all the challenges that carers were beginning to face, Gateshead Carers drew upon its links, through the Best of Bensham Collaborative, to put forward carers names to local voluntary sector organisations that were running hot meal services, providing clothing, or later in the year, Christmas gifts.

Another major worry affecting carers was the cancellation of hospital and GP appointments as NHS resources became increasingly focused on tackling the increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases.

**“Carers put themselves last anyway, they are the ones most likely to suffer by not attending appointments and letting symptoms go under the radar and ignore it**

Carers found it more difficult to access other services and support. Respite became especially challenging during lockdown as all options initially vanished. For parents of children with special education needs, for example, the lack of respite, coming on top of closure of SEN

in schools and the pressures of home schooling, proved acutely taxing.

For working carers, balancing the need to work from home, while also home schooling their children and carrying out their caring responsibilities was an enormous task. Lack of adequate space at home for work and study, unreliable internet connections and lack of privacy were all factors that all added to carers stress during lockdown.

Many carers looked for advice about benefit entitlements. Working carers who are self-employed and have not been able to work found themselves ineligible for government support schemes and faced real hardship. Gateshead Carers have supported carers with the Carers Wellbeing Fund along with grants available from other funders. However, when a washing machine or vacuum cleaner breaks down, being unable to simply pop out to ask someone about repairs or replacement has caused frustration and anxiety.

Given all these challenges, maintaining visibility was important for Gateshead Carers. Those supported knew that although they couldn't go to John Haswell House to ask for support, the organisation was available at the end of the phone to answer questions and give advice.

## Looking to the future

There are some positives in that the role of carers has been highlighted during the pandemic. More referrals were made during lockdown by GP practices and Occupational Therapists. Gateshead Carers campaign to encourage unpaid carers to register with their GP has increased awareness and focused more attention on carers in general.

There is now cautious optimism among carers that life will begin to return to something like normal and as one carer said about the vaccination programme,

**“It is another step in the right direction, another step to freedom**



# Newcastle Carers

## Introduction

Newcastle Carers is based in Byker and works across the city, offering services and support to over 6,000 carers who are registered with the charity. Newcastle Carers aims are for carers in Newcastle to be identified, heard and recognised. Carers should be valued and have access to appropriate support, information and advice so that they are able to exercise choice and control.

Newcastle Carers provides service for adult carers, young adult carers (aged 18 to 25) and young carers. Along with advice, guidance and support for individuals, the charity runs support groups, training, a grants scheme, counselling services and complementary therapy sessions. The charity works in partnership with schools, colleges and universities, GP practices, social care and public and voluntary sector services.

## Response to pandemic

For some carers the move to lockdown did not make a great deal of difference to their daily experience and in fact for some their life as a carer improved as other family members were furloughed and able to contribute more support around the house. However, for many carers daily life became much more difficult and complex as the support that would normally be available, such as day care or respite care or from more informal sources within community centres, libraries or gyms, all closed their doors.

Under these circumstances' carers spoke about feeling more isolated and during the early stage of the first lockdown found it more difficult to shop for food and other household essentials. Caring for someone who had been told to shield, as many carers were, meant that although they could go shopping, they were reluctant to do so for fear of bringing coronavirus into the home.

While Newcastle Carers had to stop all face to face and group work at their centre in Byker and outreach sessions in community venues, their Carers Information Line remained open

and they continued to provide telephone and digital support, proactively providing welfare calls to vulnerable carers. They set up an urgent grant scheme and increased their online resources. Reasoning that others were better placed to do this, Newcastle Carers took the decision not to begin providing services such as food parcels that were not part of its regular offer to carers. Instead they signposted many carers to Citylife Line and to other voluntary sector organisations and produced regular bulletins and social media posts giving information about where to go for additional help and support.

Access to the internet was a major issue to emerge early on during the first lockdown. For many carers the cost of devices and broadband was a barrier to getting online. Newcastle Carers used its Carers Wellbeing Fund to buy laptops, and worked with schools, colleges and universities to make them aware of the challenge's young carers and young adult carers were experiencing as they tried to combine learning at home with their caring responsibilities.

These challenges were especially acute when young carers were having to care for a parent or grandparent and now took on responsibility for siblings who were also home schooling.

“Looking after grandparents was very emotionally challenging, a lot of their health problems were only ever going to deteriorate. I often felt trapped in the house because there were three people depending on me

## User experience

For young carers school affords a place where they can have a break from the stresses of their caring responsibilities. However, school also provides an opportunity for teachers and other staff to look for signs of a young carer who is beginning to struggle with the demands of providing care. The closure of schools for long periods has meant the loss of this important safeguarding opportunity.

“Schools need to understand that young people with a caring role might need extra support

The re-opening of schools after the summer was generally positive for young carers, though some had become comfortable being at home with the person they cared for becoming comfortable too with the situation. Newcastle Carers therefore had to encourage some young people to return to school but they also began delivering face-to-face support at school for young people. The closure again of schools has proved particularly disruptive for young carers.



Experiences among adult carers have mirrored some of those of young carers. The loss of opportunity to access services and to meet other people, either at the Carers Centre or in other venues has been difficult.

“There was [to begin with] this stoicism, we've got to get through this... now we're stressed and exhausted

Many carers have begun to say they have developed increased levels of anxiety. Like their younger counterparts, adult carers can have two, three or four family members to care for who have their own mental or physical health problems.

“life isn't fair it doesn't dole it out equally

## Looking to the future

Like many other voluntary sector organisations that stayed open and continued to provide services during the pandemic, Newcastle Carers moved some of its services online. The availability of support groups online has made it easier for some carers, who previously might have faced a bus journey to the Carers Centre or a community venue, to access these groups, and the service has noted an uptake of online support from young men.

“The pandemic has brought about an increased awareness of carers and the challenges they face. Newcastle Carers plan not only to return to delivering many of the face to face services carers are keen to access again, but to develop new initiatives and partnerships to build on what they've learnt and bring about positive change for carers in Newcastle



# Tyneside Women's Health

## Introduction

Tyneside Women's Health was set up in 1985 to provide mental health support within a women-only environment. It has centres in Newcastle and Gateshead, and aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of women and girls living in the North of England. The support services that Tyneside Women's Health offers include a diverse set of workshops and courses ranging from identifying foods that enhance mental wellbeing, to anxiety management and coping with depression, to increasing confidence and self-esteem, to undoing the damage of domestic abuse.

Longer term support is available through support groups, while open access and drop-in groups provide more informal opportunities for socialising, connecting and making new friendships. The majority of women who access Tyneside Women's Health have low incomes, live in areas of higher deprivation and therefore rely on local, low-cost services for pastimes and diversion.

## Response to pandemic

When lockdown was announced on 23 March all face-to-face services stopped, but, like many other charities, Tyneside Women's Health decided not to furlough staff, and kept going. Certain services, such as creative writing and drop-in sessions, were moved online while staff began to provide phone and email support for individual women, even though this approach doesn't fit naturally with the group peer support that Tyneside Women's Health usually offers.

In August face-to-face groups returned with numbers limited to five per group. These groups were available to women who were the most vulnerable, often:

### “Quite mentally unwell

And very isolated. Some women had a history of self-harming or taking overdoses. Face to face groups continued to meet, and while January's lockdown saw some women decide to stop coming, most groups have continued with five women regularly attending.

Tyneside Women's Health continued to take referrals, with many coming from Victims First and involving women who were experiencing domestic abuse. By March 2021 Tyneside Women's Health had carried out approximately 120 initial assessments by phone. Some women took up online courses immediately. For others, the online offer didn't suit them.

## User experience

A survey carried out by Tyneside Women's Health towards the end of 2020 found that for almost half of the women who responded, lockdown had reduced their quality of life. For three quarters, feelings of depression, anxiety and isolation had increased or significantly increased. But more positively, a third of respondents felt better able to manage their mental health. Others stated they had experienced an increase in suicidal thoughts and feelings, while just under half of women responding said they had developed physical health problems as a result of lockdown.

One woman, who had been shielding since



the beginning of the first lockdown and was in regular contact with Tyneside Women's Health staff, spoke about her boredom of being indoors, of being fed up watching Netflix. She usually would take short walks but because of her poor physical health is now unable to go far. She looks forward to getting back to the centre and meeting other women, but is anxious about going out before having her second vaccination.

This echoes a widely shared anxiety about going out as lockdown restrictions ease:

“Coming back to Tyneside Women's Health will depend on Covid and how safe I feel being on a bus [for a] journey that takes 30 minutes

Coupled with a desire to get back to some normality:

“As soon as restaurants re-open get a worker and a couple of service users to go for lunch or a cuppa together

As the vaccine programme continues its successful roll out, the feeling among women who are in contact with Tyneside Women's Health is of optimism about the immediate future. However, women do voice concerns about jobs, and in particular about the prospects of their children finding work in a regional economy that looks bleak post - COVID-19.



There has been concern too, particularly among women who are office workers about home working becoming permanent. Women fear the loss of contact with workmates and friends, of not getting out of the home and having no time or space to consider their own.

More immediately, women with children at home but who were also working from home spoke about the pressures of managing their own work while overseeing their children's home schooling.

“Unfortunately, I have had more downs than ups, being a mam is a tough job but with the added stress of being in lockdown, home schooling and a dip in my mental health it has seemed impossible some days, I have literally had to be “mam” 24/7 I know that's what being a parent is, but normally I'm able to concentrate on myself whilst my daughter is at school but now my home is her school and I'm her teacher

## Looking to the future

Looking ahead, Tyneside Women's Health face a number of challenges, managing the demands of women who want to get back together in the charity's centres in Newcastle and Gateshead but balancing that with the need to provide a safe space that reduces any risk of spreading COVID-19.

An approach that blends being physically with other women, with continued group work online is likely, not least to meet the needs of women whose work prevents them from taking part in daytime activities or support.

The charity is aware too that the full impact of the pandemic will not become apparent for some time. None of us have been through it before, so the long-term health effects are unknown. For now, women are looking ahead to summer and then to Christmas in each case, after the false starts during 2020, waiting to see what comes next.



# LGBT+ Northern Social Group

## Introduction

The LGBT+ Northern Social Group (NSG) began as a Facebook group in 2017. It was set up to provide a safe space for LGBT+ people to meet up and connect without experiencing the pressures, expectations or prejudices that they might encounter in other parts of the LGBT+ community.

It was not long before NSG began to organise coffee mornings, meals and evenings out, offering an alternative to the established bars and cafes of the city's LGBT+ scene. As the group developed it forged links with other support groups and was able to signpost to groups providing support for issues not covered by other LGBT+ support networks or mainstream services.

Recognising its work promoting inclusion, NSG has been nominated for several awards. Most recently it has been nominated for a 2021 National Diversity Award for community organising.

## Response to pandemic

Lockdown in March 2020 meant cancelling all of the NSG's regular social activities and its planned events such as the annual Trans Day of Visibility on 31 March. The immediate challenge for NSG was to put online all that had been planned and to continue make it available.

To make sure that online content was accessible for NSG members who are deaf or hard of hearing, volunteers quickly taught themselves how to subtitle all the videos they were now posting onto Facebook.

“I didn't sleep for week because I was subtitling videos

Following the cancellation of the annual Pride celebrations, NSG organised a successful 24-hour online Pride event. Working with local musicians and artists to make the performances and activities as accessible as possible. After the event, an NSG member who is partially sighted and also a wheelchair user said that it had been their first Pride and that they had never been able to attend Newcastle Pride because their disabilities meant they were not accessible.

“For me, one of the things I love about the NSG, which I will add is a real change from other groups I have been part of in the past, is how inclusive it is... the group is continually striving to find ways to be accessible to all - something I had found previously lacking in many LGBT+ social groups I had been part of in the past.

## User experience

For the LGBT+ community, as with other communities, lockdown meant disruption to life's familiar rhythms and patterns.

“At the start of 2020 I started living alone - without realising how 'alone' in the pandemic would cause me to feel. Just like a lot of people, I have clung onto the ability to communicate with others online and in the dark moments when there seemed to be no one to communicate with I turned to LGBT+ Northern Social Group

For LGBT+ people living on their own, NSG's online coffee mornings and evening events became an important defence against social isolation and the damaging mental and physical impacts it can have.

“Finding the NSG has been a lifesaver. I was welcomed with open arms by an incredibly diverse and friendly group of people, many of who I now call my friends. This has helped me mentally to get through these difficult times

“So much of LGBTQIA+ life happens in queer-made social spaces, and I think the pandemic has effected the mental health of our community a lot because of the loss of access to those spaces

The closure of LGBT+ pubs, clubs and cafés were a double blow to the community, removing an important space where people can meet and connect without the risk of hostility that LGBT+ people can sometimes experience if they don't conform to heterosexual social norms in the city's mainstream venues.

Newcastle's night-time economy is also a significant employer of young LGBT+ people who were now facing reduced earnings on furlough, or complete loss of job and income if they didn't qualify for government support. NSG became increasingly aware of those employed in the hospitality sector or gig economy who were beginning to use foodbanks to get by.

NSG's online presence provided an important outlet for members who found themselves in lockdown with family or flatmates who did not know they were gay.

“LGBTQIA+ people already have higher rates of anxiety, depression, addiction, and history of trauma. All of these can be harder to manage while in isolation... many people from our community are living with family or roommates who they are not out to, who are unsupportive, or just don't fully understand our lives experiences. Online social spaces like NSG can really help!

Finding appropriate support groups or services during the pandemic proved challenging for some NSG members.

“During the lockdown I also started to really question if the support group I'd been involved with was actually a healthy group to be part of, and ultimately decided to leave... NSG has been an absolute lifeline during a lonely, challenging time for me

## Looking to the future

As lockdown measures ease the NSG is looking to organising small group events in parks and venues where its members will feel safe, especially those who have been on their own for over a year. NSG is also looking forward to becoming a registered charity.

Becoming a charity will mean being able apply for funding and increasing the opportunities it can offer members. NSG will continue to promote inclusion and call for increased cultural competency and awareness within public, private and voluntary sector services of LGBT+ experience and issues.





# Road to Recovery Trust

## Introduction

The Road to Recovery Trust's mission is to transform the North East from a place with one of the highest rates for alcohol, drug and other addictions to one with the highest level of abstinence-based recovery.

In 2016 the Trust opened George Street Social in Newcastle – a hub where recovery fellowships, including Alcoholics Anon, Narcotics Anon and others, could hold their regular meetings. In 2019/20 George Street Social hosted 1,100 fellowship meetings. George St Social is also a place for socialising and events with a café and alcohol-free bar, available for people who are in recovery as well as the wider community.

## Response to pandemic

The morning after the government announced the first lockdown George St Social closed. The first of many urgent tasks trustees and volunteers faced was telling all the fellowship groups that they couldn't meet at George St. The next urgent task was how to replace the vital fellowship connections that all those people in recovery had just been lost as a result of lockdown.

The Trust opened a Zoom account and in what was fast but steep learning curve, began to organise online meetings for the fellowships, although it took time for some members to be reassured about the security of going and that their anonymity would be preserved. With only one Zoom account and, during these early days, no passwords, the security of these early meetings were easily breached by so-called 'zoom bombers'.

Gradually these initial problems were sorted out and each fellowship began to open up their own Zoom accounts.

**“ Soon fifty or sixty fellowship meetings were happening each week. However, digital exclusion was an issue - not all fellowship members could access the meetings because they lacked a smart phone or internet access.**

The Trust put out a call for old phones and received around thirty in response. These were reconditioned, with Zoom installed and data vouchers provided by Newcastle City Council, given out to members. Problems of access were not entirely solved however, as some service users had court orders preventing them from using the internet. Taking advantage of the recently introduced rule of six, the Trust organised socially distanced gatherings in open spaces such as parks, to enable these people to participate in meetings.

To get the word out that George St and the fellowships were now available online the Trust secured a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund to set up the George St 24/7 project.

**“ Staffed by volunteers around the clock the project offered a central helpline number so that people, many with multiple and complex needs, could be advised on which fellowship group or groups would be best placed to help them.**

The Trust also began to distribute meals every Friday prepared by George St Social's chef. The food scheme ran for about four months and by July was giving out between 500 to 600 meals a week. The meals were clearly meeting a need in the local community, but for the Trust the scheme was primarily about maintaining a connection with fellowship members to help them avoid relapsing. Every point of contact is important.

## User experience

The loss of connection and the peer support offered by the fellowship groups posed a significant risk of relapse for those in recovery. Rates of relapse are usually quite high, but despite media reports of increased drinking at home among the general population during lockdown, the Trust did not find a marked increase in the numbers of people relapsing and reverting to old habits.

**“ Keeping in touch was so important. Every morning, one volunteer sent thirty texts randomly to fellowship members, not expecting to receive replies from everyone but in order to maintain a connection.**

Similarly, recognising that for someone being unable to join an online fellowship meeting could mean the difference between maintaining abstinence and relapsing with serious consequences for the health or life of the member, the Trust created a private Facebook page with details of all fellowship meetings, links and passwords.



During the summer, as the city gradually came out of lockdown George St Social opened its doors to fellowship meetings. Volunteers spent time cleaning and preparing George St Social for reopening. However, few members turned up for the first of the fellowship meetings to return.

**“ Fear of the risk of going out appeared to outweigh the desire to meet with other people**

Following introduction of the tier system and the subsequent lockdowns that the fellowships have continued to meet at George St Social under COVID-19 rules, permitting support groups to meet, and attendance has steadily increased.

Meeting at George St Social has made it easier for newcomers to the fellowships to join, although the limit of 15 people in any support group created its own difficulty. Now if the arrival of a new member threatens to breach the 15-person rule, one of the longer serving members of the groups will leave to allow space for the new member.

## Looking to the future

Twenty-two fellowship meetings currently take place George St Social and as the latest lockdown begins to ease, the Trust is beginning to plan for the reopening of the café and bar along with more fellowship meetings.

There are some fellowships considering whether to continue to meet online, even after lockdown restrictions are completely lifted. Such a move could pose challenges for George St Social with a loss of room hire income. However, the Trust is committed to supporting the fellowships whatever their decision, and is keen to try out a hybrid approach to meetings that combines online participation with attendance at George St Social. The experience of the pandemic has presented challenges to the new trustee board, but it has also been a learning experience, creating ideas and revealing possibilities that might not have otherwise come about.



# Denton Youth and Community Project

## Introduction

Denton Youth and Community Project (DYCP) began life in 2000 following an extensive community consultation during which young people made clear their opinion that not only was there a lack of provision for them, but for people of all ages living in Denton.

Although open access youth work has always been central to the organisation, from the start it organised lunch clubs, parent and toddler groups and dance and fitness sessions. Changing its name in 2012, DYCP has continued to offer activities for the whole of the community, along with providing volunteer opportunities. Several volunteers have gone on to become members of staff.

## Response to pandemic

In the run up to 23 March 2020, DYCP saw what was almost certain to happen and took the decision, five days before lockdown was announced, to close its doors. However, the organisation also began organising ways to stay in touch with everyone, young and old, who regularly attended DYCP's clubs and activities.

For thirty older people who were told to shield due to age and health conditions DYCP kept in contact with regular 'how are you doing' phone calls. For young people, all of whom had phones or other devices giving them access to the internet, DYCP began to deliver a series of weekly online sessions using Zoom.

However, while all of the young people were perfectly at ease being online and using a variety of social media platforms, only a small core of regulars stuck with the online sessions. For many, the excitement of taking part in youth sessions at DYCP's venue on Hillhead Road and being with their friends, couldn't be replicated online.

Young people who did continue with the online sessions enjoyed a variety of games and activities such as dancing on their doorstep and hula-hooping, and feedback has been that they found these very positive experiences.

DYCP began to put together craft packs which every fortnight or so a parent or carer could come and collect. During this period DYCP "spent masses on art and craft materials, cooking ingredients, games and quizzes" for the craft packs and pictures of what young people and their families made soon began to appear on Facebook.

**"I never knew making a pizza was so easy!"**

When the first lockdown restrictions were eased during the summer, DYCP opened its doors again and invited young people back. This came with its own challenges, as government guidance placed a limit of fifteen for the youth sessions. Some young people complained about their circle of friends being broken up, and others decided they wouldn't attend if not all of their friends could be there.

## User experience

For many of the young people DYCP worked with and supported during the past fourteen months, lockdown has been a mixed experience. Almost all enjoyed the initial novelty of the situation. With schools closed it was an unexpected holiday.

For a few young people not being at school meant a relief from bullying and name calling. Others flourished, as online learning offered the opportunity of one-to-one teaching. For almost everyone however, young or old, lockdown eventually tested to the limits their mental health and wellbeing.

One woman, with no family living close by and who found herself largely alone in caring for her increasingly unwell husband, the regular visits and hot meals that DYCP provided had she said:

**"Saved my life"**

For young people, even those who had experienced bullying and name calling, the

chance to return to school, to see friends again and to establish some daily routine, was welcome.

**"Well, I'm looking forward to seeing friends and bit of normality - but school's school"**

During the lockdowns DYCP developed an arts project with New Writing North which enabled a group of young people to have regular one-hour online sessions with a local poet. The resulting poem gives an account of the young people's experience of the pandemic and the impact it had on their lives and what it meant to their families and friends.

The poem was revisited after Christmas and following some changes and additions was recorded with all the young people involved reading their own lines. The recording has now been edited and the next stage will be to work with an animator to create imagery for the poem.

## Looking to the future

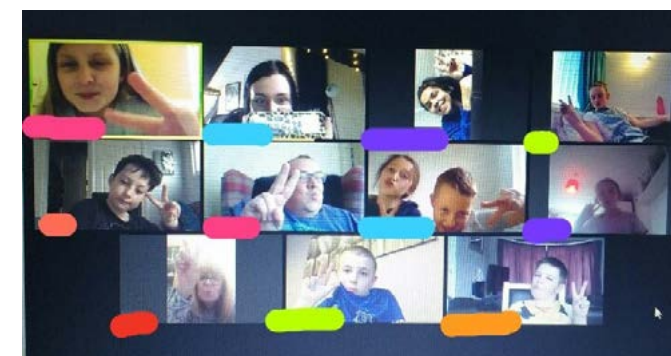
Thinking about the next six to twelve months, young people seem excited about the prospect

of getting back to normal; for instance, being able to take part in DYCP's annual skiing trip, which in 2020 had to be cancelled. However, they are also very conscious of the risk of COVID-19 to parents and especially grandparents, notwithstanding the success of the vaccination programme.

DYCP have seen signs in the community of anxiety and agoraphobia related to the imminent relaxing of all COVID-19 measures. In part this appears to be a result of the uncertainty people have experienced with the 'false starts' of opening up society only to quickly close everything down again.

**"We planned for the summer and were shut down; we planned for Christmas and were shut down; we planned for February half term and were shut down"**

Other concerns include the health of the economy after COVID-19, and the opportunities available for young people who are beginning to look for work or training. However, DYCP recognise that young people are resilient, and often surprise with their maturity and insight.





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### Connected Voice

Haref

Working with communities and organisations throughout Newcastle and Gateshead to reduce health inequalities linked to ethnicity and culture.

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