

## Role of our community services and link work during COVID-19

MHC and other third sector organisations have championed the role of non-clinical, person-centred community interventions for people struggling with health and social care issues for many years. This is often referred to as 'link work', as the emphasis is usually on supporting an individual to identify their needs and helping them to source and access the most appropriate support services from within their own communities.

At a time when the ability to 'link' people into, and support them to access, community resources is taken away, we have to re-think how this valuable human resource can continue to support people to remain as connected in their communities as possible, without feeling abandoned and resorting to unnecessarily accessing their GP, emergency services, A&E, or the mental health crisis team.

As a result, we have looked at what we can do to support people when the restrictions in place do not allow us to function in a way that we are used to. The relationships established between link worker and the individual using our services are based on building trust and establishing a mutual understanding of the person's needs and aspirations. This relationship allows our link workers to continue to communicate with individuals remotely, to reassure them that they have not been forgotten and, whilst the nature of the relationship has changed indefinitely, communication and a degree of continuity remains important.

Our link workers have now begun to develop regular contact with everyone using our services (see breakdown below), checking in with and providing a regular contact point for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They are checking and linking them to local authority and volunteer taskforces, who are ensuring supplies are available to the vulnerable to enable them to stay safe within their own homes during the COVID-19 restrictions.

This intervention is vital to support the wider health and social care sector. By supporting people to remain safe and connected in their own homes, we are able to play a vital role in the wider system response to COVID-19, ensuring the maximum frontline health resource is directed to treating people infected by COVID-19.

To deliver this, we are adapting our service delivery to undertake the following approaches:

- Staff in all MHC Community Services are now working from home with all phone calls into our office base being re-routed to a member of staff who ensures all messages are picked up and details forwarded to the appropriate keyworker
- Staff are keeping in contact with everyone via telephone, text or email depending on their preferred method of contact. The contact focuses on:
  - Making sure the person knows the service is still running and that they will be contacted regularly.
  - Ensures that people know how to get in touch if they are worried, feeling lonely or need practical help.
  - Ensures the person understands the current guidance and how it applies to them to maximise their chances of staying healthy.
  - Identifying people who are without immediate support from family, friends, or trusted neighbours, and as a result need assistance to get essential supplies (which we will help them to access either by internet or with direct help with deliveries).

Below are the specific arrangements deployed within each of our services.

### Together in a Crisis - Newcastle (mental health crisis response)

Currently supporting 100 service users (this figure is likely to increase as our usual 12-week delivery period will increase in accordance with need).

- The service continues to take referrals from the Crisis Team and Psychiatric Liaison Team, as agreed with our NHS commissioners and Trust provider partner.
- Support is offered to individuals via phone calls or any other contact preference.
- Cases are being kept open to try and prevent relapse, as we are not able to currently close cases in the usual way whilst support from other services and activities are limited or not available.

### Moving Forward - Newcastle and Gateshead (mental health specific)

Currently supporting 400 service users.

- New referrals still being taken, but all contact is via phone or the person's preferred contact route.
- Staff are keeping in touch with everyone using the service or on the waiting list, in line with the above, to ensure that communication lines are kept and that we are delivering the service as described above.
- Staff are identifying those who are at higher risk of not taking adequate steps to protect themselves from COVID-19 and are looking to provide support to reduce their risk of exposure.
- We are developing online group activities for people using the service, to provide an alternative route to support social inclusion.

### Chain Reaction - Newcastle (Preventative and Lunch Links services for Older people);

Currently supporting 600 service users.

- New referrals are still being taken. Staff are contacting everyone using the service as described above and identifying those who need help to get essential items.
- We are again exploring how we can develop online groups and activities for those who can access them from home, and identifying those who cannot access 'companionship' this way so that more frequent phone calls can be made.

### Chain Reaction – Newcastle (Higher and Lower level support);

Currently supporting 30 service users.

- Staff are still able to visit where individuals want this and the visits can be carried out safely, adhering to the Government guidelines regarding social distancing.
- For those who prefer not to have visits, time is being offered as phone calls, collecting shopping, or carrying out other practical tasks to support the people to remain safe in their own homes.

## Social prescribing link workers and other roles in primary care

We are liaising with GPs to explore ways to provide the most effective support, allowing them to maximise their efforts on the demand created by COVID-19. We are hoping to develop an alternative way to support the system, beyond that envisaged through the original focus of the role.

## Ways to Wellness

MHC is currently supporting over 1,000 service users.

- The Ways to Wellness service has agreed with its commissioners that it will respond flexibly to unmet need amongst vulnerable people in Newcastle, who do not meet Ways to Wellness referral criteria.
- The service is delivering a remote social prescribing service to current patients (>2,700 patients) and is accepting new referrals.
- Support is being offered to non-Ways to Wellness clients (over 18 years of age), where there is capacity in the teams, and current Ways to Wellness clients are being adequately supported, particularly vulnerable and/or at-risk clients.