

Appendix 2

Day Opportunities Challenges and Learning from COVID-19

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to the delivery of day opportunities services. It has led to many different approaches and ideas to tackling these issues, as services adapted to new and unpredictable circumstances. The loss of, or reduction in, day opportunities services during the pandemic has also been hugely challenging for people who use the services and their families and carers.

The ongoing pandemic has meant that many building based services operating in Cheshire East have been running at reduced capacity to facilitate social distancing and some services are still yet to re-open.

At the same time the current situation has provided an opportunity to rethink how we commission and deliver day opportunities provision in the future to best meet the needs of people in Cheshire East.

Closure of Day Opportunities Services – Challenges

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom and the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020 had a significant impact on day opportunities provision, and the people who use, and in many cases relied on these services. Day opportunities providers across Cheshire East (both in-house and commissioned services) made the decision to close all building-based provision.

As a result of the national lockdown a total of 8 commissioned external day opportunities services and 10 internal Care4CE day services closed the buildings from where they delivered day opportunities.

Table 1: Number of day opportunities services that closed in Cheshire East as a result of the national lockdown on 23 March 2020

	Number of Day Opportunities Services	Number of people supported by the services
Commissioned Services	8	285*
In-house Care4CE Services	10	377

*Some commissioned services supported individuals in neighboring local authorities and also self-funders and people on direct payments

Plans for alternative support were established for the most vulnerable and those that that could not manage at home without service provision. Providers, alongside social workers, worked closely to ensure that support was in place for those with the most complex needs and planned individually for each person, with the main aims to keep people safe, minimise distress and manage the fear and anxiety of all.

Alternative Support

The temporary closure of day opportunities facilities meant individuals with a learning disability and/or autism were at increased risk of social isolation and potential carer breakdown. To continue to ensure that support was provided to those who attended building based day opportunities, provider staff and social workers have been undertaking regular wellbeing calls.

Staff from some of the external day opportunities providers took the opportunity to deliver outreach sessions which involved managing staff teams around bubbles with groups of individuals. This involved people being taken out into the wider community, undertaking outdoor activities such as walking and sports. Other home-based outreach support was also delivered by some providers for those who normally attended a traditional building based offer.

Other day opportunities providers developed further innovative approaches including online digital support. This included group mental health and wellbeing sessions, exercise sessions and online exercise classes and games.

Some providers of supported living were also commissioned for additional hours where clients were in day services, to enable the continuation of activities supporting individuals' health and wellbeing and to remain positive. This worked well for both the individuals and their families and providers have not reported any concerns.

There was also the need to consider risks of any continuation of service for some people, particularly for older people with underlying health conditions, or those with family members shielding or extremely clinically vulnerable. Due to these exceptional circumstances, Direct Payments were paid to families who were residing in the same households as the individuals, enabling the continuation of support and care to meet the individuals' assessed needs.

Support for Carers

Carers reported the impact on the wellbeing of people they support through the loss of day opportunities and routine activities – both for carers and people using services. Parents and carers have highlighted that many individuals were feeling bored, with increased levels of anxiety linked to the cessation of services for both the cared for and carer.

As part of the People Helping People Service, the council launched the Hidden Carers Support Service for unpaid carers in partnership with the Cheshire East Carers Hub and Crossroads Together. This service was open to carers of all ages and included those who care for individuals with a learning disability and/or autism. The offer includes information, advice and signposting, shopping and medication calls, and provision of support in the carers own home to allow the carer to take a break and prevent carer breakdown.

Support from the social work teams has included practical help such as the delivery of toiletries and food, due to the difficulty of obtaining slots from online shopping. Families and carers were supported to obtain PPE which relieved stress and anxieties. Social work teams continued to maintain contact to support families and carers via telephone and video calls to provide emotional support and practical advice.

Re-Opening of Day Opportunities Services

Following a review of government guidelines, Cheshire East Council embarked on a phased re-opening of day services from 6 July 2020.

Many of the traditional building based services still needed to operate at a reduced capacity in order to maintain social distancing, which meant that many providers still looked at ways to be able to offer different services to ensure all clients received support (e.g. supporting them to access exercise or supporting them at home).

As part of the phased approach some services began to re-open using a blend of building based and outreach support to ensure more people could be supported. Some also operated a rota basis on alternate weeks where the buildings were not big enough to support those numbers who attended pre-COVID.

Cheshire East Council conducted an audit of commissioned and in-house services in September 2021 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the numbers of people that could be supported within building based day opportunities services (see Table 2).

We can see from the table below that capacity within building based day opportunities services was significantly reduced from that which was available pre-COVID. Capacity in commissioned services fell by 66.4%, while Care4CE saw an 80.3% drop in its capacity, which was a result of only 4 of its 10 buildings being able to safely open in line with national guidance and social distancing requirements at the time.

Table 2 – Day Opportunities Building Based Services Capacity and Services Operational (Pre-COVID and as at 1 September 2021)

	Pre-COVID Capacity (23 March 2020)	Pre-COVID Services Open (23 March 2020)	Capacity with Social Distancing (1 Sept 2021)	Services Open as at (1 Sept 2021)
Commissioned Services	423	8	142	7
In-house Care4CE Services	365	10	72	4

To assist providers in this process of re-opening day opportunities services, the council provided supporting documentation to providers to support to enable them to adhere to Public Health England advice and ensure the safety of both people using the services and staff.

The council also commissioned Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Trust to provide infection control audits to further support the safe re-opening of day opportunities services. These were delivered across in-house and commissioned services and focused on staff training, the environment and equipment.

Current Picture (March 2022)

As of 1 March 2022, one commissioned day opportunities service remains closed, with plans in place to re-open this service in April. There are also four in-house Care4CE day services which are currently closed, but they too are looking to re-open soon. Recruitment remains the biggest barrier at present to re-opening these services and proactive steps are being taken to address this in terms of promoting the vacancies on social media platforms and at recruitment fairs. This situation is being regularly reviewed by the service managers.

Customer Feedback

Feedback from Learning Disability Lockdown Survey (June-July 2020)

Cheshire East Council conducted a survey called the 'Impact of lockdown on those with Learning Disabilities.' The aim of the survey was to explore the COVID-19 lockdown period through the views of those with learning disabilities, how they had felt during lockdown, what activities they had done and what support they felt they needed in the future post-lockdown.

From 125 people who responded to the survey only 8% of people stated the thing they missed the most was going to day services, compared to 24% who said that they missed going out onto the community and 17% who missed being with friends.

Activities undertaken in lockdown that respondents would like to do more of in the future included enrichment activities such as cooking, arts and crafts, exercise, and gardening. These activities could be considered when developing future day opportunities services.

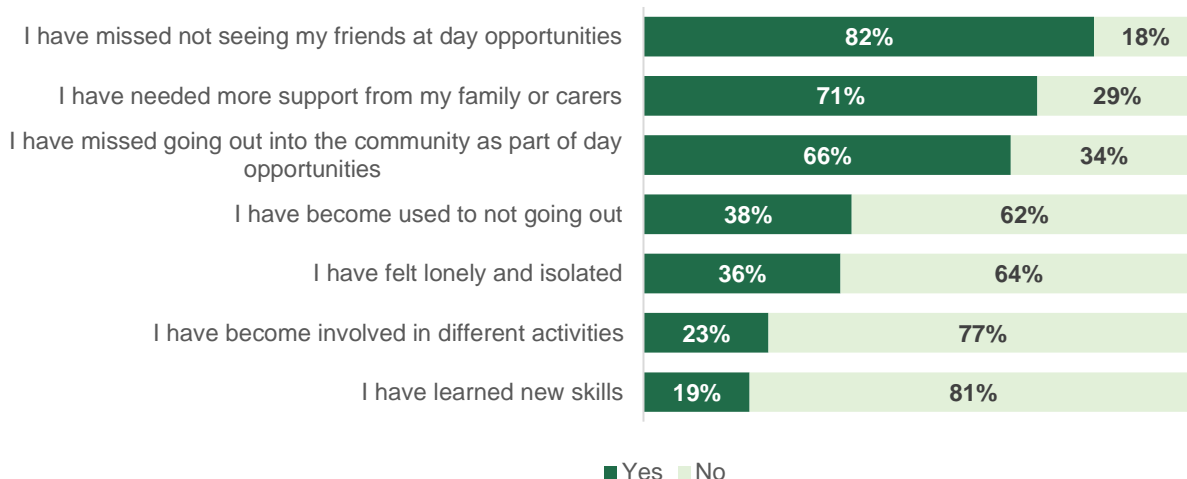
Feedback from the Day Opportunities Survey – May 2021

Throughout May 2021 Cheshire East Council conducted a survey with users of day opportunity services. The survey was conducted to help plan and develop services for the future, to understand how people feel about current day opportunities, if the service offered meets their current and future expectations, and what ideas they may have for new approaches.

The results of this survey along with other engagement activities were considered in the development of our Day Opportunities Strategy for Cheshire East. Respondents on the easy read survey were also asked what the impact COVID-19 restrictions had been on them attending day opportunities and how it had made them feel.

Figure 1 shows that the most frequent impact reported by respondents was missing seeing their friends (82% said yes), however a smaller percentage reported feeling lonely and isolated (36%) suggesting they had other help or support in place during this time to mitigate loneliness and isolation. A small percentage of respondents reported a positive impact such as learning new skills (19% yes) or being involved in different activities (23% yes).

Figure 1: How has the lockdown, during the covid-19 restrictions, and the impact this has had on day opportunities made you feel?



In terms of what an ideal day opportunity provision would look like, the following 5 factors were deemed the most important by respondents:

- Social interaction opportunities
- Safe space away from home (preferably within the local community)
- Tailored to individual needs
- Engaging and meaningful activities
- Well trained staff across several specialisms.

Future Provision of Day Opportunities

COVID-19 has thrown up new prospects for changing the way we provide day opportunities. During lockdown we had less clients to support which enabled some providers to provide more personalised services.

Feedback from stakeholders as part of the Day Opportunities Strategy has indicated that people would like to access a range of options compared to traditional building based services. People would like to choose from a more flexible range of options, with greater input into the wider community, including employment, training and opportunities in the evenings and weekends.

COVID-19 has reinforced the need for extensive co-production with people who use services, and their families and carers. This should be central to any future planning around the way day opportunities are delivered in Cheshire East.

Traditionally, the offer in Cheshire East has been predominantly building based, having not benefited from direct investment and development in recent years. This has limited the choice and control for those that attend day opportunities. The council recognises that people value day opportunities and through the development of the new Day Opportunities Strategy, we now have a clear set of design principles and actions to support further development of day opportunities in Cheshire East.

The vision for the new day opportunities offer will build on the learning from COVID-19. We will seek a shift away from one that was heavily reliant on building based services, only available Monday to Friday, with limited links to the community and

assets, to one which is outcome focused, person-centred and provides greater opportunities for community integration, employment and training.

To develop and stimulate the market which will enable us to deliver this new offer, Cheshire East Council are seeking to develop a flexible purchasing system. This will enable existing and new providers to develop an innovative flexible approach, working together in a way that makes best use of resources, whilst ensuring that individuals are supported in the most appropriate setting that meets their care and support needs.