



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How young people, supported by East Renfrewshire's Intensive Support Service, went beyond online participation to connect.

What was the challenge faced?

When lockdown was announced in March 2020, the Youth Intensive Support Service at East Renfrewshire Council and the Champions Board, which creates a platform for care experienced young people and key people within the council to become champions for change, mobilised quickly to offer support online for the young people aged 12 -26 using the Youth Intensive Support Service, a statutory Social Work Service for young people who are in the need of intensive support, as well as those receiving a Continuing Care and Aftercare Service. As the global health emergency continued, it became apparent that while online has a place, it could not fully replace face-to-face meetings and the young people began to share that they felt something was missing. The Intensive Support Team also knew that some young people living alone were feeling isolated, not leaving their home for weeks, and so they were concerned for their wellbeing, and they noticed that for some of the young people, they were tending to disengage and the usual connectedness was slipping away.

What change in practice took place?

Initially online group work began to take shape quickly in spring of 2020, and a separate mini CHAMPS group for the younger age group was established. This was to ensure immediate support and connection with workers and peers in a safe way, while the Government advice was to stay home. Articulate Cultural Trust, which creates projects, classes and courses for groups and individuals to explore and expand their horizons through the arts, worked alongside the young people using mind-mapping techniques to hear their ideas and develop programmes to suit their interests, such as an online sculpture group, and photography sessions.

However, once young people indicated that they were missing face-to-face contact with their support workers, and as initial restrictions began to ease, one- to-one meet ups were put in place for open spaces, following social distancing guidelines.

In East Renfrewshire, there is usually a summer programme of activity for care experienced young people however this year the programme was extended and there were activities running every day – all taking place safely outdoors in a local park. Young people could dip in and out of activities they had an interest in, such as yoga, graffiti art, fishing, football, and comedy workshops. The Mini Champs produced a film in the park which premiered online in December 2020. The staff offered group support during the summer programme, so that young people had a number of workers around them, and the connections enjoyed previously began to evolve and thrive again.

Who was involved in making the change?

The Intensive Support Service and Community Social Work Team at East Renfrewshire Council, the Champions Board, Mini Champs, participation groups, and Articulate, all came together to make sure that new ideas could be person- centred and involve young people decision-making about the types of activities they could take part in.

What difference did this change make?

Using a participation-based approach, a full and varied programme of support evolved. As the weather began to change and nights got colder in the autumn, outdoor walks with a coffee or hot chocolate, or doorstep conversations became more prominent. During Care Leavers' Week in October 2020, everyone had pizza delivered to their homes along with a cold weather goodie bag containing socks, a blanket, hot chocolate and other self-care items. Many of the supported young people spend Christmas together, so the local theatre was used to watch a Christmas film safely. Work is now underway to put together an Easter programme. Relationships have strengthened and connectedness has been maintained during the pandemic, and wellbeing and the mental health of the young people has been at the forefront of the activities and programmes offered.

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