

Telephone befriending: a valuable service during lockdown

April-August 2020

Contents

Executive Summary	page 3
Background	page 4
Calls made by Healthwatch Enfield	page 5
Getting started	page 7
Issues raised	page 8
Case studies	page 9
Signposting suggestions	page 16
Volunteers comments about the service	page 17
Conclusions	page 18

Executive Summary

This report gives a snapshot of issues raised by residents identified as being vulnerable or at risk within the London Borough of Enfield during the Coronavirus pandemic. Without doubt, the main issue was the impact of social isolation on health and well-being including mental health issues, with those residents with ongoing health needs being particularly concerned. Food parcels and medicines delivery were really appreciated. The support of family and neighbours was also valued by individuals. Practical issues were also raised and help to resolve these problems was offered wherever feasible.

Most of the recipients were pleased to receive the calls and a core continued to receive these throughout the period, not missing a call. There were some people we were unable to contact and others who didn't answer/want the calls.

'xx said today that she has felt looked after during this time and that all the phone calls and food parcels have been appreciated and made a positive difference to how she has coped during this time'

'Her throat was quite dry as she had not spoken to anyone for 4 days.'

'She said she had been feeling very low. On Sunday, she said she got up and prayed and then just cried all day'

'he told me shopping was delivered every Friday and medication delivered by the pharmacy when required'

'She really misses not been able to get out and about. She was waiting to get some mental health support when the virus happened.'

'She is getting help from neighbours, and appreciates the food parcels, as well as the other meals that are being delivered by the council'

The befriending service was valued and should be continued if people request it, with established organisations being asked to support the calls. If or when a second wave of the virus arises, or

Enfield goes into lockdown again, the London Borough of Enfield should make arrangements to re-establish this valuable service.

We are very grateful to Healthwatch Enfield volunteers and staff who undertook this work at short notice and kept a record of their work as part of the scheme. The rich data collected offers a deeper insight to the wide range of issues and challenges facing vulnerable and at-risk residents.

Background

Healthwatch Enfield staff and volunteers were pleased to be able to support the London Borough of Enfield befriending scheme, part of the activities of the Community Resilience Board and the 'Enfield Stands Together' partnership. There were many other organisations and individuals supporting this activity, including London Borough of Enfield staff, councillors, other volunteers and volunteering organisations.

Healthwatch Enfield were given contact numbers of local residents by the London Borough of Enfield. These contacts had been screened by the Local Authority for the first batch. Subsequent batches, mainly from NHS sources were not screened and this resulted in a high number of inappropriate calls for the team. A member of staff also made an initial check-in call to assess if people wanted regular calls. We also did this to ensure that any potential safeguarding issues could be addressed and to ensure consent for shared, anonymised data.

The individuals contacted were selected because they were identified as 'vulnerable' and/or 'shielding', who said that they wanted befriending calls by contacting Enfield Stands Together either through the helpline or completing the online form, and/or individuals who completed the gov.uk vulnerable persons form who were then referred to the council. We were allocated a random set of phone numbers.

The volunteers were not given a script but were given guidance which was a mixture of materials the London Borough of Enfield gave to Healthwatch Enfield, plus information we have used for past telephone work. They were also given online safeguarding training by the London Borough of Enfield. The calls were casual, informal

'chats' and the 'script' was just an initial guide to get the conversation going.

There were a number of people where the contact details appeared to be incorrect, e.g. not enough numbers for a phone number or that the phone was ringing out. These were not recorded for the first set of calls we made.

When there was no reply after multiple attempts, a message/text was left giving the contact details for Healthwatch Enfield and the London Borough of Enfield.

Calls made by Healthwatch Enfield

There were a total number of 413 calls recorded plus an initial call to each resident. There were additional calls by the volunteers, but these were not recorded due to IT issues. When there was no reply, the volunteers called 2 or 3 times to try to make contact.

This was to 71 residents, made by 14 volunteers plus staff. The staff calls were usually made to help resolve problems raised by residents. The calls commenced in April 2020 (24th) and continued through to 3rd August. Calls were usually weekly at the start but moved to fortnightly in July.

For 9 cases there was no contact made. This was because there was either not a valid number or the phone rang out. Where possible a message/ text was left giving Healthwatch Enfield and London Borough of Enfield contact details.

16 residents contacted wanted only one call or were already receiving calls from another volunteer. The majority, (12) of these contacts were given by the NHS to the Local Authority in early May as a second list of calls to be made.

For some of these numbers, the Local Authority asked us not to continue with these calls if others were calling the client, despite the fact that the volunteers were specifically asked to continue with the calls by the resident.



Figure 1: shortest and longest call times (minutes)

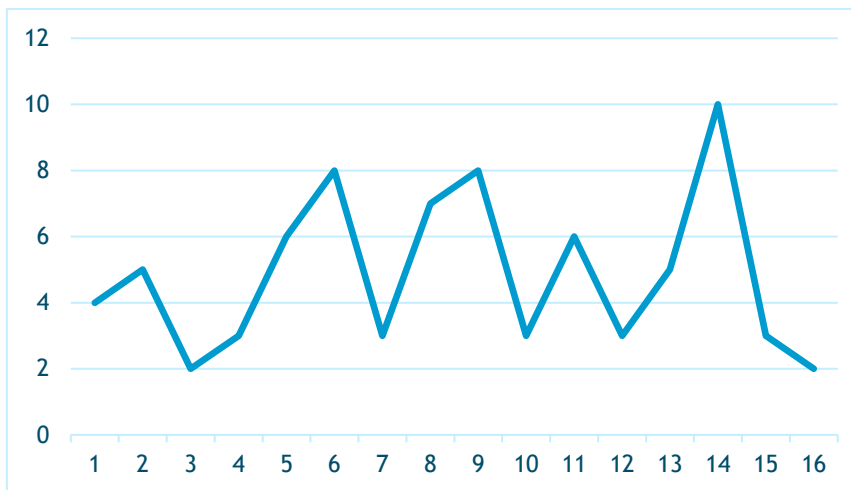


Figure 2: number of residents per volunteer

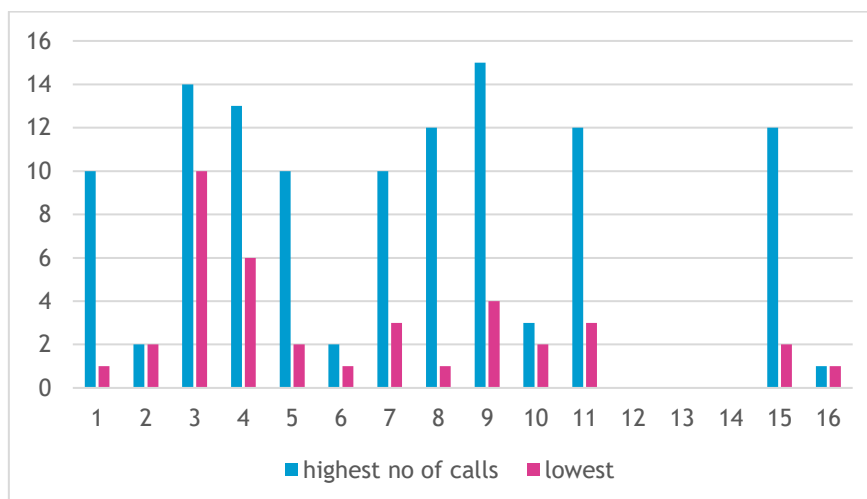


Figure 3: number of calls per volunteer

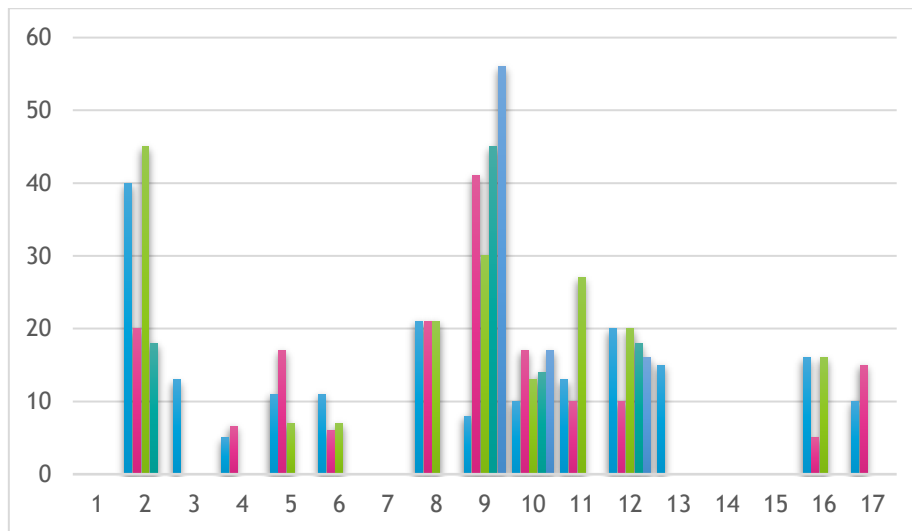


Figure 4: average length of call by volunteer (minutes)

Getting started

The quotes below are from the volunteers' record of the conversation with residents. They demonstrate some people indicating they did not require a call, some people not being able to hear/understand, and others being reluctant to talk (identified by the level of people not answering at all.).

It is also likely that some residents would not have answered a call from a number they do not recognise given the regular warnings about telephone scams.

The times of the calls were agreed with the residents, however on a small number of occasions this was no longer convenient, and the volunteers were asked to call back. In one instance, the person answered the phone, however they were waiting with their granddaughter in hospital - who was about to give birth! (The follow up calls included a lot of baby talk!).

The types of responses included:

I felt it was a positive call and exchange. I did wonder if she was someone who was persuaded to have a call in the first place rather than her choosing it. I felt she is a woman who is used to coping and getting on with life the 'stiff upper lip' approach and that to start to share maybe painful even if the topics discussed are everyday! She also seems to have a good link with her

family, visits, and phone calls. Maybe ensure that xx has a link to someone she could say thank you to for the parcels.'

'Had a job understanding me and vice versa. Was a bit puzzled at first as to why I was calling, think she understood in the end.'

'Insisted that I was busy enough and not to worry about calling her again. Amazing 99 year old lady. During the call she revealed: had a recent operation and slight problem she had afterwards. Still not able to walk as well as she wanted. Congratulated her on reaching 99 years old. Her sons don't live locally but are able to bring her shopping. Neighbours are good as well.'

'Call was very difficult as she couldn't really hear me. Mentioned her ears were clogging up.'

'Xxx is a nice lady to chat to BUT I do not know if she really needs a support call. She has her husband and from her conversations quite a few family and friends that she chats to on a regular basis. I just feel I am another person to have a chat with, which of course is not the purpose of these calls at all. I will still call on Tuesday as I said I would. I just feel there is a need for discernment so that the people who genuinely need help get it.'

Issues raised

As there were a number of calls to individual residents over the course of our support work, some topics were repeated, and new ones arose. The main themes raised in order of frequency were:

- Shielding /staying at home - all residents mentioned this at some stage
- Anxiety ranging from frustration to depression
- Missing going out/ seeing family and friends
- Medicines delivery, missing hospital appointments
- Food delivery slots
- Food parcels either not being delivered or the contents not what was wanted
- Keeping busy, creating a routine, knitting, jigsaw puzzles, cooking, cleaning, gardening
- Concerns about going out (after lockdown in particular)

People accepting repeat calls were happy to discuss a wide range of issues such as their work, family, the weather, books, films, TV, health, cooking, music and what they had been doing since the last call.

Case studies

The case studies below provide an insight into the individual experience of lockdown and offer an opportunity to build on this successful initiative.

Case study 1

This case study sets out a typical series of conversations and illustrates that the calls had been supportive.

This was a 68 year old lady, living alone, contact over 7 calls, from 21st April to 26th May - average call lasting 42 minutes

Call 1

xxxx has medical issues and a letter from the hospital asking her to stay at home during the virus period. She loves walking and misses going out, seeing friends on a Saturday for coffee and other friends once a month. She is an organised person and has a routine each day, exercises, word puzzles, sleep in the afternoon, and has three meals a day. She continues to cook - is grateful and pleased with the food parcel from the Council and says it is enough to survive on. If she runs short neighbours are keeping an eye on her and will do shopping. She has a son living in Hertfordshire and daughter in Lincolnshire. She didn't talk about her family. She enjoyed her work life. She loves travelling, usually with her cousin who lives fairly near, they have been to many different places and we spent awhile reminiscing about her travels through, Italy, Greece and Spain and trips to Xmas markets, she really came alive when talking about her trip to Cuba.

She restricts news watching to once a day otherwise it becomes depressing. She is taking care of herself and taking each day as it comes.

Call 4

xxxx was upbeat and busy and feeling much better health wise than last week. We discussed: household chores, cutting our own hair, puzzle books, TV programmes, gardening and what is flowering, our favourite flowers and the best place to buy them in Enfield.

A friend died this week - not being able to attend the funeral and the relationship she had with her - handling grief during this time.

What she is missing at the moment - restaurants/ favourite food and going to places with her cousin - day trips etc shared info about this.

VE Day celebrations - the expected fly past by the spitfires and everything about the old planes and the bravery of the RAF guys, Captain Tom included.

She speaks to her children every day and her son brings her food to top up her parcel.

Call 7

We chatted about the following: the weather and the impact of humidity on her health, feeling down and how to get motivation back, cooking - an exchange of recipes, farmers markets and ones she has been to, her family and the careers the grandchildren are pursuing, reading - what books she enjoys, outings to the sea and how people are behaving, crowding onto beaches during the unlocking, What unlocking means for her and when she will start to go out

Comments

xxxx said today that she has felt looked after during this time and that all the phone calls and food parcels have been appreciated and made a positive difference to how she has coped during this time. She still has daily contact with her son and daughter and speaks to friends and other family members each week. She has a weekly phone call from the Council to check whether her parcel has arrived and if she needs any help with getting medication or food.

Case Study 2

This case reflects the difficulties of living with mental health problems and teenage children.

This resident received 13 calls of which 11 were answered with an average time of 31 minutes – the longest being 55 minutes and the shortest 10 minutes, from 24th April to 16th July.

Call 1

In isolation due to having had a heart attack in 2018. Has quite a few health problems. Is isolating with teenage son. Trying to ensure he is doing study which is proving quite difficult and challenging for her. She does not have a garden, but she is grateful that she has a balcony. It had been a difficult day with her son, so she was feeling very stressed. We talked about general things and she did become chirpier. She really misses not been able to get out and about. She was waiting to get some mental health support when the virus happened.

Call 3

xxxx explained to me she was waiting for a call from the school with the possibility of her son attending 2 days a week. She had contacted them for help as her son is not studying. She feels this would really help get him focused and give them some time apart. She is very close to her oldest daughter. She was saying about missing her Dad and she told me he had died in February last year. She then shared a lot about her family, and I realised listening to her that she was still really grieving. I suggested to her to contact a bereavement group and she then remembered about a group called Cruise and is going to call them.

Call 12

xxxx was in the park with her children at a gathering for their dance teacher's birthday so we did not speak for long.

She said that she had not been out with the children since we last spoke but she was enjoying socialising and it was really good for the children to meet up with some of their friends.

She said that she has a friend who lives near their local park and she is planning to meet up with her, so she has some support around going out with the children as she does find it difficult. She and her friend can walk together as they both need to take more exercise and lose weight while the children play.

We also talked about doing online exercise videos.

Case Study 3

The gentleman was anxious, concerned over food and had lost his father during lockdown.

This 57 year old man received 9 calls, average call 11 minutes from 28th April to 20th July.

Call 1

I spoke to xxx about shopping and medication and he told me shopping was delivered every Friday and medication delivered by the pharmacy when required. He was concerned about food because he doesn't cook. I signposted him to Cypriot meals on wheels and the Cypriot Federation for a more information. He was pleased to receive those numbers. He told me he was depressed and lonely. He couldn't get out much because he was shielding and lived in sheltered accommodation, but he did manage to walk around the car park or be out for 10 minutes at a time. This made him feel a bit better. I explained about the Healthwatch Enfield website and things to do during lockdown, he wasn't very receptive. He also told me that his father had passed away in a care home two weeks ago and he hadn't been able to visit, as the Care Home was closed to visitors and that he was having to arrange the funeral. He was managing this and in contact with family, but it was adding to his stress. We talked about Mental Health help and I signposted him to the link on the Healthwatch website. He wasn't very receptive to this, so we discussed the Samaritans or Mind and someone to talk to. We talked about family and he said he was maintaining contact with family members and talking to them regularly. We then agreed that I would ring next Monday morning. He was keen to do that.

Call 3

He is in contact with friends and family by phone. Has shopping and medication delivered but says although he is grateful, it is basic, so he goes to get extra fruit and veg and gets Greek takeaway meals

He is shielding but gets some fresh air in his car park of the flats

He had to get a blood test today at North Middlesex hospital which he was concerned about, but he was seen very quickly. He is low and bored, concerned about his health. He is on medication and is being monitored by the GP and his consultant.

Call 7

Talked about his father's death due to Coronavirus but seems to be managing and has support. Getting to the funeral provided some closure

Not receiving food deliveries from the council anymore but goes to the supermarket and is ok to do that. Goes when it's quiet

Gets out to do a bit of walking and looking forward to football on TV

He is getting GP consults by phone when needed

Call 8

He is much happier, watching football and going to parks and outdoors.

He is going to small local Sainsburys branches to get food.

He is in contact with family by phone but not seeing anyone yet. He knows about the easing of lockdown, but he is remaining very careful and vigilant due to underlying medical conditions which are being managed by his GP. He has referrals pending for later this year.

Some comments from other people

'xxx has had to cope with a water leak over the last two days - stressful for him. The landlord dealt with the leak and sent an electrician round to make sure appliances were safe to use.'

'The other things discussed: food parcel from the council, general health physical and mental and support from his GP; relationships with family, TV and books enjoyed'

'Discussed how she was feeling. She lost the sight in one eye in December and was going to have some checks done but were cancelled due to virus. She is an avid reader and now finds it difficult to read. We spoke about audio books and I said I would enquire if mobile libraries were operating and let her know. Have found out they are not. We spoke about nature and different birds that are about now. We spoke about after the war and rationing for her. We spoke a lot about David Attenborough and his nature programmes. She has a garden but she has not been out in it for two weeks. She leaves the door open and looks out. She has someone doing her shopping. She feels quite lonely at times not being able to get out. I am phoning her again on Monday.'

'95 year old lady who lost her husband to liver cancer 3 months ago, after over 60 years of marriage. She told me about his illness, and chatted generally about the current circumstances, and how she's managing. She is getting help from neighbours, and appreciates the food parcels, as well as the other meals that are being delivered by the council. For 95 she sounded very much on the ball with a positive attitude and has agreed for me to ring her anytime next week.'

'Her throat was quite dry as she had not spoken to anyone for 4 days. We chatted about films we liked. Then she told me lots about her cousins after the war and how one had lost his arm but went on to live a very happy and successful life. She told me about how everyone had to learn to adjust to men coming back completely changed and how women had to be very strong. She shares a communal garden and on Friday they have organised a meal delivery and will celebrate VE Day together (at safe distance). She is really looking forward to that. We had a lot of laughs together.'

'xxx said she has been fine over the last week and continues to work from home. She then told me that she is getting a dog soon'

and we spent the phone call talking about this and how she thinks having the dog will help her with her anxiety and be an incentive to go out for walks.'

'There were 5 bouts of loud banging between 08:00 and 09:00 from upstairs kitchen this morning. He said it is not uncommon for him to be awoken at 03:00 in the morning by loud banging; he has no quality of life and says that the Government, Council and those nuisance neighbours make him feel like a second-class citizen as they don't care.'

'xx said that there are gangs that visit the flats wearing scarves and he is feeling very insecure.'

'We proceeded to have a chat about what he used to do; he worked for Post Office in Edmonton and Barnet; we spoke generally about the changes in the local areas over the years. Help was given to support him making a formal complaint'

'She said she had been feeling very low. On Sunday, she said she got up and prayed and then just cried all day. A friend dropped food off to her and she was unable to eat it. She just had 1/2 a banana and a glass of milk. She has not been feeling well and did not know if it was just that she felt depressed. She is going to take a walk tomorrow.'

'It was a quick call to say I would ring next week. It was her birthday on Tuesday and she was 89. Getting smartphone from her son so that she can do video calls with her son and grandchildren.'

'He had received his food parcel as requested but he said even with food in the cupboard, he was concerned about food running out by Wednesday. A man from Enfield Council I think had put him touch with universal credit and was sorting out his rent and council tax. He was happy this was happening because due to being self-employed, he had been without money for seven weeks which maybe him anxious. He had said that he was a painter and decorator and that was his normal profession and did not use online technology to get in touch with support easily.'

'She explained that she would call people more but it costs so much from house phone. It's a Post Office phone, so I am going to get information on offers they have. She has a friend who was going to help her get a contract phone and then lockdown came.'

Signposting suggestions

The most common organisations signposted to were:

Healthwatch Enfield website (Things to do & mental health support)	18
GP / NHS111 services/ Medical Information	13
Meal delivery including food parcels	13
Mental Health support	12
Age UK Enfield	11
Enfield Stands Together	8
Enfield Council	8
Bereavement support	6
Help with shopping	6
Medicine supply /delivery	5
Careers centre	4

Others include: mobile library, Enfield Police, Samaritans, Mind Enfield, Met Housing, Cypriot Meals on Wheels and Federation, Drop-In at Chase Farm, Solace Women's Aid, support for parents with children's learning etc, stop Smoking, Fortuna mobility, Clap for the NHS, Careers / work / training, information about masks and Enfield Women's Centre.

Some comments as recorded by the volunteers:

'I told her that I will talk to the team to see if she can get professional help like a counsellor'

'I also mentioned joining some clubs when all this is over, mentioned Ponders End library has a seniors' club. Said he was ok, preferred going with his pals to the pub'

'I gave him a link to 'MyLife Enfield' which gave advice to older people, he said he was looking at it including the NHS sitting exercises. But he said he would for now prefer information from

online resources in the post in relation to activities to do at home if possible.'

'Referred this lady to the Council as she is extremely forgetful and vulnerable. She keeps asking for a home visit yet cannot remember who she is speaking to.'

'The local food service for BAME and people with health issues as provided by HW staff, and a local fruit box delivery service. I also provided Enfield NHS advice on stretching she could do while immobile so as to feel less stiff.'

'She is really looking forward to going shopping but not confident enough to go on her own. She would love if someone could take her shopping just once a month to get out and do her own shopping. I said I would pass on the enquiry.'

'She explained about her food recycling bin is not been collected as it does not have a red sticker. Her neighbour had to empty it into black bag for her and it was full of flies. Passed message onto Office to see if they could help her get her stickers. She has rung many times requesting them but with no success. Also having a problem with repeat prescription. These were both successfully resolved'

Volunteers comments about the service

'I found it very interesting and rewarding to be able to give some support to the lady.'

'Once we got chatting it was quite easy and enjoyable.'

'She said she really enjoyed the chat and so did I.'

'Went over suggested time but I felt it was important. She was enjoying chatting and sharing her stories and I did not want to cut her short. I feel this lady benefits from the calls as she said she really enjoyed the chat'

'Considering the fact, she had not spoken to anyone in 4 days I felt privileged to be there for her in this small way.'

'We went above & beyond as this man has had no money for 7 weeks & literally run out of food & he has had a triple bypass'

I said that I would speak to the office to get advice or maybe they could refer her to someone. I told her that I was not qualified to give her advice and she was glad that I was going to ask for help for her.'

I explained that the calls will end in July. She asked if I would be allowed to keep contact with her after that as we are very relaxed together and she said it was a pleasure to talk to me as we always find so much to chat about. I would be very willing to carry on ringing xxx weekly when possible.'

Conclusion

The calls have now concluded officially, however at least 2 volunteers recorded they had been asked if they could continue the calls and had agreed.

In reviewing our work, we have identified a number of issues which need to be addressed to improve the impact of this service if there is a further lockdown.

- Some future planning such as drawing together an accurate list of residents and contact details and asking for volunteers to be on standby appears appropriate. For a second wave of the virus, there is the potential that the number of volunteers will be reduced as a total lockdown may not be in place and some volunteers will have returned to work.
- Whilst Healthwatch Enfield were able to address many of the practical issues raised, the contents of food parcels were frequently raised as an issue and consideration of tailoring the parcels to the persons needs also seem appropriate. Medicines delivery was really appreciated. Whilst many pharmacists appear to have set up delivery arrangements, these could incur a cost that vulnerable people may not be able to afford. It would be useful to have an agreed approach in place.
- A mechanism to support volunteers should be clarified so that volunteers are able to respond to a wider range of issues not only those relating to health and wellbeing.

- Where no contact can be made with residents, these details should be followed up by the London Borough of Enfield.
- This befriending service should be continued if people request it, with established organisations being asked to support the calls. If or when, a second wave of the virus arises or Enfield goes into lockdown again, the London Borough of Enfield should make arrangements to re-establish the service.



This report can be made available in alternative formats, such as easy read or large print, and may be available in alternative languages, upon request.

Healthwatch Enfield

Registered Office
Room 11, Community House
311 Fore Street
London N9 0PZ

Tel 020 8373 6283

Email: admin@healthwatchenfield.co.uk

www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk

Twitter: @HealthwatchEnf

www.facebook.com/healthwatchenfield

Instagram: @hwe_young_adults

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