

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Services Tackling Obesity & Loneliness in Rotherham



Background¹

Loneliness and **obesity** are two major public health issues influencing the residents in Rotherham. Both loneliness and obesity have an impact on the mental health of the affected individuals, which has been particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Rotherham in 2018:

- **13.4%** of patients above 18 years old were registered with their GP with depression.²
- **24%** of individuals above 16 had high self-reported anxiety scores.³
- **62.7%** of adults above 18 years old were either overweight or obese in 2018.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant social distancing measures have exacerbated these public health issues. In response to the pandemic, weight management & loneliness services in Rotherham had to alter their programmes. Due to obesity being a major risk factor for complications of COVID-19, some overweight and obese people may have become less comfortable outside their house. Loneliness became more prevalent and not only among older people, as all age groups have restricted access to social interactions.

To understand the impact of the pandemic on weight management and loneliness services in Rotherham, we spoke to: Rotherham United Community Sports Trust, Age UK Rotherham, Rother Valley South PCN, and Rotherfed. In order to acquire specific information about how the organizations support their members during the COVID-19 pandemic, we contacted the services via email and asked three specific questions:

- 1. How did the services change in terms of what programmes they offer?**
- 2. What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the services?**
- 3. How did people react, and did the number of referrals change?**

Over the next few pages, we outline the responses of each of the services and from this draw some conclusions and recommendations.

¹ This report was produced by Simon Kluska from the University of Sheffield Medical School as part of a Community Placement in Nov-Dec 2020.

² <http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/data/health-behaviours/mental-wellbeing-1/1>

³ <http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/data/health-behaviours/mental-wellbeing-1/1>

⁴ <http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/data/health-behaviours/healthy-weight-1/1>

Rotherham United Community Sports Trust (RUCST)

Fit Millers Weight Management Programme⁵

The continuity of the programme and the importance of physical activity and social interaction for mental and physical wellbeing were important factors in deciding on how to transfer to online courses. Children and adults in the weight management programme were offered the use of two online platforms:

- **Zoom calls**, consisting of physical activities that could be done at home without any equipment.
- **Whatsapp groups**, where the participants as well as the staff could send videos to keep everyone motivated and involved.

The number of applications for future weight management increased, with new applicants reporting increased alcohol and food intake alongside reduced physical activity. Around **60% of existing participants remained engaged**, and most of those saw better results than pre-COVID-19. This was attributed to them focusing on the programme as they were either working from home or being furloughed. Reasons for leaving the programme were various:

- Key workers (NHS staff) decided to put their work as a priority and due to their long shifts could not focus on the programme until the end of the pandemic.
- Some people left the programme due to the transfer to online classes and decided to postpone the programme until face-to-face interactions were resumed.

Tackling Loneliness programme⁶

Participants reported that they were feeling bored, low and scared while being alone during the lockdown and not feeling comfortable leaving their house. The organisation offered a variety of support following the social distancing guidelines:

- Those who previously had 1:1 home visits received **phone calls** once a week.
- Face-to-face coffee mornings were replaced with **online coffee mornings**. However, some participants were not interested as either they did not wish to learn how to use the internet or, for those who could use the internet, they felt it was not the same experience as face-to-face sessions and preferred to wait until these resumed

In July, RUCST entered the **EFL Trusts Tackling Loneliness Together programme** to support the elderly, with a focus on the over 70s. They supported people through:

- Monthly brochure and activity booklet
- Weekly phone calls
- Weekly garden gate visits
- Weekly online coffee afternoon

RUCST supported 45 people via face-to-face activities and 1,500 overall.

⁵ <https://www.rucst.co.uk/health-wellbeing/fit-millers/>

⁶ <https://www.rucst.co.uk/health-wellbeing/tackling-loneliness-together/>

Age UK Rotherham⁷

After the initial lockdown, during the summer months, **Age UK**, the national charity, carried out a **survey**⁸ asking older people how they were coping with the pandemic. 569 elderly people filled out this survey, either by themselves or with the assistance of someone else.

The results showed that:

- **1 in 3** have less energy.
- **1 in 4** have troubles walking as far as before.
- **1 in 5** feel less steady on their feet.
- **1 in 3** have difficulty preparing meals.
- **82%** of people with dementia have increased symptoms of the illness since the start of the lockdown.
- Within 7 days, 37% of people over 70 have not left their home, unless they went to work or to get basic needs, because they were feeling uncomfortable outside their house.
- **31% of the people over 70** feel unsafe outside of their house due to contracting COVID-19.
- Older people feel like they can no longer take pleasure in what they enjoy.
- **2 in 5** people anticipate their quality of life will be poor during the second wave.

Based on these findings and through listening to older people in Rotherham, **Age UK Rotherham** has designed a support system that can be accessed without using the internet.

The list of services includes:

- Extended hours advice line
- Support actions for vulnerable older people
- Deliveries of essential shopping and prepared meals
- Home visits

New services developed to support isolated and vulnerable older people through these times are:

- **Welfare and wellbeing calls** by experienced staff providing a point of regular connections and active solutions to the challenges being faced by isolated and vulnerable older people
- **Virtual Activity Groups** provided through a telephone to small groups of older people including lots of laughter, conversations and mutual support as well as activities, quizzes, bingo, singing etc

⁷ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/rotherham/>

⁸ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/health-wellbeing/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-older-people_age-uk.pdf

Initially during lockdown, the number of home visits reduced due to the restrictions introduced by government and as people did not feel comfortable with either letting someone into the house or going to visit someone in a different household due to the pandemic. Although **self-referrals have increased**, which is deemed as a positive because it reassures the organisation that people know about it, the **hospital and council referrals decreased considerably**, reflecting the effect of the pandemic on the standard referral process.

The shift in the normal referral process raises a possible issue, as there might be individuals who are in a need of support, but can not be reached. Furthermore, isolation, loneliness and other support needs in Rotherham among the elderly might be more severe than they currently appear to be and it is believed that the demand for **Age UK Rotherham** help will only be increased in the coming months.

Social Prescribing⁹

Rother Valley South PCN received an extensive list of shielding patients, prepared by the practises, which they were asked to target. These patients were offered:

- Help with **food**
- Help with finding **shelter**
- Support with **tackling loneliness**
- Help with **pet care**

The organisation has experienced an **increase in referrals since the beginning of lockdown**, mainly from the general practises. Due to the closure of many social groups and resulting limited contact affecting many people, the support provided by Rother Valley South PCN had to be adjusted by initiating:

- Several **virtual groups and socially distanced physical meetings**
- **Walking groups**
- **'Mindfulness sessions'**
- **Outdoor activities**

⁹ <http://www.rotherhamccg.nhs.uk/primary-care-networks-2.htm>

Rotherfed (Rotherham Federation)

Rotherfed is a local community charity supporting people of all ages and social backgrounds. On top of the services that Rotherfed has already offered, 2 new projects were implemented as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RotherSteps 2020 Project¹⁰

This project has been created in order to overcome boredom and keep Rotherham citizens active. The participants were provided with Fitbit watches to count their steps. The first round took place in Dinnington, Ferham, Masbrough, East Dene and East Herringthorpe. These areas were selected based on the level of deprivation. The second round, which includes all of the areas in Rotherham, began on the 23rd of November.

The first round of RotherSteps was regarded as successful as:

- **100 participants** joined.
- The project lasted 4 weeks.
- All the participants walked **6,426,767 steps** together.

Friendship Calls¹¹

This project has been introduced for people of all ages that feel lonely during the pandemic. Individuals can have a friendly phone call with one of the volunteers from the organisation, to lift up their mood and feel like someone cares about them.

- Since the fall the **referrals have roughly doubled every month**.
- The **demand greatly exceeded the expectations**, and as a result of this, the **number of volunteers was doubled**.

¹⁰ <https://www.rotherhamfederation.org/rothersteps-2020-project/>

¹¹ <https://www.rotherhamfederation.org/friendship-calls/>

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Offering support for the remainder of the pandemic & more:

- The general consensus is that obesity and loneliness have been highlighted during the pandemic, which has been reflected by the increased demands for the services, and it is vital to continue to offer support even after the pandemic ends as these issues need to be continuously tackled and will not resolve on their own.

2. Support for key workers:

- The need to prioritise the occupation during the lockdown was a prominent reason for leaving RUCST's weight management programme. Some key workers have thus postponed participation in weight management services, which may have a detrimental effect on their health in the future.

3. Tackling digital exclusion:

- Majority of the campaigns are based online, and therefore, a portion of the older population is unable to partake in these activities as well as reach out to the organisation due to digital exclusion. This also affects residents from areas of deprivation without access to the internet. Therefore it is vital to pursue different approaches on how to connect with such people.

4. Loneliness among younger generations:

- As all age groups are affected by the social distancing measures, it is important not to overlook young adults & middle-aged people with regards to loneliness. This can be indicated by the demand for Rotherfed's Friendship Calls.

5. Positive response to online services:

- Although it took some of the individuals a longer period of time to get used to receiving support online, they benefited from it, whether it was part of the weight management programme or tackling loneliness programme. Moreover, the overall approach of the individuals to returning to online services upon the second lockdown was more positive.

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