



HearMe Counselling Project

End of project report March 2023

The HearMe project started as an enquiry from a support worker, Edith Barrowcliffe, who had recently qualified as a counsellor and raised the question of access to counselling for the people who use our services. From this small seed of an idea, the project grew into a service that has impacted the lives of around 39 individual service users and carers from across The Action Group, many of whom would not or could not access mainstream counselling services previously.

Edith has done sterling work as the driving force and sole practitioner in delivering the service, for fluctuating hours between 7.5 and 15 per week over the course of the project. She is a highly experienced support worker, having worked in that role, across many teams, for over 12 years. She also is a fully qualified counsellor, professionally registered with BACP (The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy) and COSCA (the professional body for Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland.) Throughout the project she received external supervision from an appropriately qualified and experienced supervisor in line with these standards. She has also accessed a range of continuing professional development and training opportunities, in response to evolving service needs. including accredited courses in digital counselling skills and working with clients who have experienced trauma, and this has ensured her practice has remained of the highest standard across the lifespan of the project.

Outline of need for the project and how we responded

It is already well documented, and the lived experience of many of the people who use Action Group services, that there are a significant number of issues that affect emotional wellbeing and mental health for people who have learning disabilities and other support needs. These include isolation / loneliness, increased anxiety / depression, (often linked to additional stressors of living with a disability) a higher than average prevalence of historic trauma, and a number of issues connected with receiving services (stress of shared services,

recurring bereavement/loss of support staff, frustration with limitations of provision, and an inherent lack of power and voice). Mencap’s website provides the following statistical evidence:

Some studies suggest the rate of mental health problems in people with a learning disability is double that of the general population (Cooper, 2007; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; NICE, 2016). The estimated prevalence of mental health disorders range from 15-52%, depending on the diagnostic criteria used (Cooper et al., 2007; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Hatton et al. 2017; McCarron et al. 2017).

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/health/mental-health>

The special focus of this project was on overcoming the various barriers to mainstream counselling that people with learning disabilities, autism and other support needs face. In particular, mainstream services do not always have a good understanding of these kinds of support needs in general, meaning that they often don’t feel accessible to our client group (leaflets and information too complicated, language and concepts used in general difficult to understand). So, one of our key objectives was to create a counselling service that was sympathetic to the needs and issues of people with support needs. We did this by, for example, creating easy read information, building in prompts and reminders to attend appointments, allowing supporters to accompany people as necessary, sensitivity to sensory and other environmental considerations, and building in flexibility to the structure and duration of sessions to fit the clients’ needs.

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that the service had to shift rapidly to online and telephone provision and in this we found some additional access challenges for people who lack digital skills or equipment to participate. We overcame this by referring people for additional help / funding to purchase equipment, training in digital skills, working creatively with support staff (with the individual’s permission) to facilitate access, and carrying out phone-based sessions where necessary. One client requested an outdoor in-person option and with appropriate risk assessments in place and when government guidance allowed, we were able to offer this, weather permitting of course! On the whole, many people – though not all - managed to adapt to digital provision and in fact, some people said they preferred online / phone-based counselling as they feel freer and more able to open up about serious personal issues. In the final months of the service, we moved to a hybrid model, seeing some clients in person, and continuing with digital and telephone options for those this suited better. Edith’s flexibility and creativity in adapting to different ways of engaging with people has been key to enabling the unbroken provision of the service and deserves to be applauded.

The single biggest barrier we worked to remove was in the area of communication difficulties; considering how we could offer counselling to people with very limited verbal communication. This is where our work with Talking Mats came in. Talking Mats is a pictorial communication aid which uses a range of symbols to help people express choices and opinions. It was developed and pioneered in Scotland. The following is a summary from their website:

TalkingMats

Talking Mats Limited is a social enterprise whose vision is to improve the lives of people with communication difficulties, and those close to them, by increasing their capacity to communicate effectively about things that matter to them.

Our innovative, award-winning Talking Mats communication symbols tool is based on extensive research and designed by Speech and Language Therapists. It uses unique, specially designed picture communication symbols that are attractive to all ages and communication abilities and is used by clinical practitioners, carers and support workers in a wide range of health, social work, residential and education settings.

<https://www.talkingmats.com/>

Edith is fully trained in the use of Talking Mats and had used it successfully in her support work for some time (as have many other Action Group practitioners). She identified the potential for its use in a more therapeutic setting and this was incorporated into the HearMe counselling project. We maintained an informal alliance with the Talking Mats team who met with us and helped to develop symbols and respond to the needs of the project as we trialled this technique. Edith has worked hard to integrate Talking Mats into the processes of counselling and offered all clients the option to use it. Not every client has taken this up, especially since the service transferred to online and telephone delivery, but it was a useful tool to aid the process for many. (Further reflections on Talking Mats and other aspects of Edith's learning from this project can be found in her full report, available by request.)

Project funding

Since starting with a small amount of funding from the Hospital Saturday fund, in late January 2020, the HearMe Counselling service successfully established itself as a consistent source of quality therapeutic support for people who use Action Group services. The funding for the project has been a patchwork of grants and financial aid from a variety of sources. These have included larger grants (around (£10,000 for two consecutive years)

from The National Lottery Awards for All, and a series of small grants from the Hospital Saturday Fund (around £2,000 in January 2020 and 2021), Leith Benevolent Fund (£1,000 in 2020) Port O’Leith Housing Association (around £2,000 in 2020), Edinburgh Council PACT funding (£1,200 in 2020), Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund (a part of a larger grant in 2020) Throughout the life of the project, we have been grateful to receive funding from The Action Group Board, which has bridged the gaps where needed and provided about 50% of costs in the last two years.

Service delivery

The service was open to any current Action Group adult service user (and via one funding source also a couple of carers / family members) and was advertised across all teams, in staff and user bulletins and also on our social media channels. Within two weeks of launch, the service was at capacity and a waiting list opened. Since then, as places became available and /or funding increased we did a small amount of internal promotion and quickly and easily filled spaces, indicating that demand was consistently high and the need was very real.

The range of issues presented by individuals included those typically seen in the mainstream counselling room – anxiety, low self-esteem, mild to moderate depression, bereavement, past trauma, relationships, self-harm. Sadly, many of the people we have seen over the lifespan of the project have had some experience of trauma in their lives. We have also seen a number of people whose ability to manage their mental and emotional health has been adversely affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. In fact, almost every client seen since the outbreak of the pandemic raised the impact of Covid-19 as a significant issue within their lives, negatively affecting their resilience and wellbeing, a fact supported by national research:

‘Almost half (45%) of disabled adults said they are very worried about the effect that COVID-19 is having on their life compared with around a third (30%) of non-disabled adults, and nearly two-thirds (65%) reported that concerns around COVID-19 are affecting their well-being.’

(www.mencap.org.uk)

In 2020 we managed to access a number of funding sources which were focussed on ‘Covid response and recovery’ and this financial support aided our response to these needs.

The main support needs of those receiving counselling to date include learning disabilities, (formally diagnosed) mental health issues, autism, physical disability and personality disorder. **In total since the service began, we have delivered just over 600 hours of counselling to 37 individuals.**



Outcomes of the HearMe service

The service was really well received by service users and colleagues across the organisation, demonstrating the desire for such provision. This was borne out by the rapid influx of referrals each time we reached out. The individuals in receipt of counselling mostly engaged positively with the process and found ways to express themselves, both with Talking Mats and without.

Furthermore, the flexibility and freedom to adapt and tailor sessions and work to clients' needs was a real benefit.

Overall, the sense is that people did really feel heard and empowered in a way that they often don't get the chance to be. The service is entirely person-centred and each individual is encouraged to be in control of what happens 'in the room' in a very real sense. This has been felt to be a significant shift in the power balance for people and a theme for many people was 'finding their voice', both in the counselling context but also outwith it, in relation to self-advocacy with staff teams and other key people in their lives.

There are many individual stories of the people who accessed counselling through HearMe and how it helped them express and process their feelings and gain insight and control over aspects of their lives. However, given that a key theme was in people finding their voice, it feels fitting to let our clients have the last word as this valuable project comes to an end for now. Here are just some of the things people said about the impact of the service:

It really helps to be able to talk about all this stuff I've been keeping inside

That's the first time I've laughed! It's good to laugh ... it's good to smile

It is helpful. This feels like a very safe space.

I feel the session's gone really well. A lot of the stuff I've said, I wouldn't normally have opened up about

I want to talk about how I feel about myself, because I think – just a little bit – I love myself more.

I think the counselling's been good for me because I'm more relaxed.

I liked talking to you.

*Just to say that I found the Hear Me counselling service very good. My counsellor Edith made me feel at ease / relaxed. I was able to discuss throughout the sessions what I wanted to discuss. I feel that due to the counselling I can open up more.... (*to people in my life*). I would recommend this service to other people at The Action Group that may feel it would be beneficial. Thank you to Edith.*

I can only say thank you so much for allowing me to use this service. Words are not enough. Without my counsellor I do not think I would have coped with the last few months. She has literally saved my life and lifted my self-confidence.

We work hard together, as a team.

Speaking to you is helping me think about things.

You listened to me. No one else did

I do feel a wee bit better now, because I've sort of got my feelings out.

You're bringing out the best in me.

Counselling helps to get to the root of things.

It helps just to talk it all over with somebody.

I think that counselling is very wonderful. It's cheered me up.

I was 50/50 about whether or not to do the counselling, but I'm glad I did ... it's put me in a better mindframe.

Appendix A

Examples of Talking Mats

