



Steven Wibberley

Chief Executive
Cruse Bereavement Care



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As the UK's leading bereavement charity, Cruse were monitoring the COVID situation from early 2020; they even reviewed their old Swine Flu plans in preparation for the impending impact. Then in March, the severity was better understood, and everything changed very quickly.

Chief Executive, Steven Wibberley talks to us about how the charity adapted and modernised its services at breakneck speed. Specifically, how their new remote delivery model has significantly reduced waiting lists for their services and improved efficiency of its workforce and volunteers.

Initial response

Once lockdown became inevitable, two things happened which were essential to safeguard the charity's workforce and clients. Cruse shut down their offices and working spaces and moved all their paid staff over to homeworking. At the same time, they stopped all face-to-face work with clients. These two things happened practically overnight. Attention quickly turned to business continuity, specifically how the charity could keep their services running, and how they could ensure financial sustainability.

The charity had two main operational services that needed significant adaptation in order to keep running. These were training (and recruitment) of volunteers, and the actual delivery of bereavement support, which pre-COVID was primarily delivered face-to-face.

Remote training

The charity developed remote training and support for staff and volunteers, using Zoom, and worked with children's charities to ensure that their new approach would effectively safeguard any young people they were supporting. The training needed to suit both newly recruited volunteers, and ongoing professional development for existing volunteers.

A small number of volunteers initially stepped back, as they couldn't do telephone support work. For example, they didn't have private space at home and a small number of clients opted out too. Steven says:

“Doing our work this way has enabled us to work smarter and improve our efficiency. Our waiting lists have plummeted partly because things like ‘do not attends’ have less of an impact when you are picking up the phone rather than travelling for an appointment.”

Digital offer

Recognising the potential to offer a blended approach to bereavement support in the future, Cruse is now developing a digital offer. Part of which includes their recently refreshed website that now features a webchat facility. This has proved very popular with over 100 people using webchat on the day of launch! Further digital plans in the pipeline include setting up web communities and personalised content.

"For the first few months after lockdown, demand for our services actually reduced despite COVID; this is most likely because GPs weren't seeing the volume of people they were before and therefore were not referring to us. Our demand is now steadily increasing, and we do expect to be busier in coming months and years. We need to design our services in a way that means we can continue to meet that demand."

Future plans

Long-term the charity plan to move towards blended support; this would include options such as face-to-face support, telephone support, digital support, group work and 1:1 support. Steven says, "Bereavement is universal but also unique; we want to be able to offer a more tailored support package for our clients, based on their preferences and an assessment of need. We must avoid going back to the old days of having waiting lists". At the same time Cruse has also increased its training and consultancy offer to external organisations who are looking at how they support bereaved employees and customers during this difficult time.

When it comes to financial stability, Steven says that the organisation has really come together to tackle this challenge. The charity was successful in securing some emergency COVID funding and has made savings from the new ways of working. However, whilst the

organisation is financially viable this year, the future of the charity's funding is far from clear. Fast forward to the present day and into the future for Cruse. Steven describes the period from March 2020 until now and beyond as a journey, starting with the 'crisis management' stage and now firmly in 'the transition' stage.

Reflections

"Many people refer to 'Crisis' and then 'recovery', but recovery is the wrong word; 'transition' is right as we are going somewhere else, not back to where we were." The charity is now reflecting on what they have learnt in the past 5-months and what is useful for the future.

"We need to look at our homeworking set up, and virtual working with clients and understand how it impacts our strategy of 'Bereaved People First'. Looking back at the past 5-months, one of the more depressing things we have observed is the disproportionate impact COVID has on BAME communities. As a bereavement charity we need to ensure we are meeting the needs of these communities. We will do this by looking at the demographic of our workforce, volunteers and senior management team. Ultimately, we need to be confident that our service is inclusive and diverse."

Cruse is the UK's largest bereavement charity operating across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Like all charities, it needs volunteers and funds to be able to continue its essential work. If you can give either time or money to this essential charity, please sign up to volunteer with them [here](#) or donate [here](#). If you are interested in training for your staff to help you look after bereaved employees or customers, there is more information [here](#).