



2020/21 Report to Didcot Town Council

18 March 2021

Our work with Young Carers in Didcot and Across Southern Oxfordshire

With the onset of the first COVID-19 national lockdown in March 2020 Be Free Young Carers was quick to respond, cancelling the Easter planned programme of young carer social activities and moving all support services and volunteer befriending online.

Operating safely online required a review of our safeguarding policy and procedures, parental consents and volunteer training which was put in place without delay and remains under constant review.

In normal times many young carers experience unsettling life changes such as seeing the effects of an illness or addiction on the person they care for. Some also cope with bereavement, family break-up, losing income or housing. The pressures of school and the social isolation experienced by many often leads to significant stress, increased mental anxiety affecting their ability to access vital social support and educational opportunities.

With the first COVID-19 lockdown we quickly realised that young carers, confined to their homes would be under much greater stress and anxiety and found that many were taking on more caring responsibilities. The mental health of many was a real concern, they clearly needed even more support during this time. Accordingly, with our support services switched online and with revised safeguarding and social media policies and procedures in place we were able to offer young carers in Didcot and across Southern Oxfordshire:

- online befriending via Zoom and telephone;
- telephone contact with all families to ensure they could access food deliveries and to highlight those who were struggling mentally.
- food deliveries;
- regular contact with struggling families;
- online activities for young carers to undertake at home (creative arts, exercise, yoga);
- increased social media activity to engage families and young carers;
- collaboration with other charities and food banks to get food to shielding families;
- engaged local restaurants to share recipes for young carers;
- online drama programme involving young carers through a collaboration with the Oxford Playhouse;
- a new online Facebook closed group for 13+ young carers
- our quarterly newsletter to young carers.

During August we refreshed our website to provide more information on mental health issues and circulated a toolkit to local schools to help them better identify and support young carers in-school, knowing that schools would see an increase in mental health issues in September. To bring some joy to young carers and their families, in August we arranged a picnic on the park event in Abbey Meadows and in Didcot to give young carers and their families an opportunity to talk to each other (whilst obeying social distancing!).

Later in the Autumn, before the pre-Christmas lockdown, we were able to offer a limited number of trips at half term for smaller groups of young carers.

The stress and anxiety young carers normally feel has increased significantly during lockdown ... no school, no school lunches during the summer holidays, no socialising, no respite, confined at home with the person they help care for. Although young carers were able to attend school during the lockdowns categorised as vulnerable, many chose not to, afraid of bringing the virus into their homes.

To relieve the stress and anxiety we have been regularly using Soul Shine facility in Abingdon for groups of up to 6 young carers with complex family situations affecting the young carers. At Soul Shine they relax in a wonderfully calm atmosphere undertaking arts activities and yoga away from the stresses of home. Meeting other young carers in the groups has also had its benefits especially during the lockdowns. We are continuing to use Soul Shine.

Our usual Christmas social events and young carers party had to be cancelled; however we were able to put on a very successful virtual Christmas Party attended by approximately 30 young carers, including some from Didcot. In addition, before Christmas, knowing the impact of the latest lockdown on the mental wellbeing of young carers, we delivered 80+ mental health resource packs to young carers identified as most at risk, including a number in Didcot.

Operating within Government Guidelines our trained volunteer befrienders have continued to meet with young carers, including four from Didcot. These weekly 1 to 1 meetings have proved to be a real lifeline for young carers, especially at this time, enabling them to have quality time away from the home to talk through their concerns whilst having some fun. Feedback has been hugely more positive and uplifting than we predicted with parents saying they can see the positive change in their children.

Responding to the latest lockdown we have circulated our quarterly newsletter, copy attached, and details of the range of online activities offered for February half term, including a creative writing course and continuing with our drama project collaboration with Oxford Playhouse. We are continuing to contact families with young carers most at risk to ensure they receive the support they need.

With home schooling in place for the foreseeable future we are contacting local companies to donate laptops to young carers who are without any source of connecting to online schooling; some families need more than one laptop with siblings at different educational stages.

We continue to be committed to offer support to young carers in Didcot and across Southern Oxfordshire and are very grateful to the Town Council for its support for our work.