

VPAC - HertsHelp

Introduction

HertsHelp is a community of organisations in Hertfordshire commissioned by HCC. They work together to provide residents with support and guidance to help them get the best out of life.

During the pandemic, HertsHelp was the main port of call for residents requiring non-medical support. HertsHelp provided support through a sign posting service to other organisations and charities in Hertfordshire.



Evaluation aim - to explore the experiences of HertsHelp employees during the pandemic and identify the impact Covid-19 had on working practices, processes and systems in place within HertsHelp.

Method/Approach

Ten telephone interviews were carried out with HertsHelp staff in February 2021. All staff gave their consent to take part in the evaluation.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analysed by two Research & Evaluation Officers using a thematic analysis¹.

Findings

Meeting residents' needs

- Practical & emotional needs
- Caller dependency
- Hard to meet or inappropriate expectations

Many callers presented with symptoms of loneliness, depression and anxiety due to the uncertainty of the situation. HertsHelp staff were able to provide reassurance to them.

Calls about financial concerns increased due to furlough and school closures. Utility bills increased due to stay at home orders (particularly in winter) and children no longer had access to school meals. Children had no reliable internet to complete school-work. Many single parents, really struggled and several developed caller dependency. Inappropriate expectations from callers included wanting their debts paid off and free food parcels to resume in subsequent lockdowns.

Impact on working practices

- Coping with change
- Physical environment changes

Challenging for staff to adapt to remote working as used to physically turning to colleagues for help and support. New staff found the induction process hard.

Managed to cope and adapt though the utilisation of new technology. Although they missed face to face contact with colleagues, felt safer considering the circumstances.

Impact of Covid on call volume

Calls to Herts Help increased from 200 to 1000 calls per day

Impact on systems & processes

- Staff training
- Process for repeat requests

Staff training, modified to include remote shadowing and online buddy system. New processes put in place to deal with regular callers for repeat requests.

Staff wellbeing

- Stress & burnout
- Sense of helplessness
- Positivity towards helping residents

Staff felt overwhelmed by the volume of calls and emotionally drained hearing about the suffering experienced by their callers. However, they did feel a sense of positivity when they were able to help callers in difficulty.

Staff support systems

- Practical support
- Mental health & emotional support
- Team & management support

Staff felt supported by HertsHelp through access to counselling services and supervision. They were given flexibility in their working patterns and provided with prompt replies to their queries.

Communication

- Communication with external agencies
- Communication about HertsHelp
- Internal communication

Communication was an issue in many places. Internal communication and communication between councils and HertsHelp meant that staff were not up to date with the latest policies.

External agencies often gave out incorrect information about HertsHelp which led to callers expecting support HertsHelp could not provide. For example, medical support or paying off debts.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Improve communication about what support HertsHelp can and cannot provide.

Ensure better communication between councils and HertsHelp about policies. Encourage staff to engage in supervision and counselling to manage emotional stress from difficult calls.

References

1. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol. 2006;3(2):77–101.

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