

Black Country

In the Black Country people with multiple conditions are supported to progress closer to work, training or education through the Bridges project. 15 local partners – including NHS mental health providers, the council and other charities – work with local charity **Steps to Work** as coordinator so support can be tailored as needed. The 2019 Multiple Conditions Guidebook described the approach in the Black Country in a [case study](#).



In Autumn 2020, the Steps to Work Deputy Partnership Manager, Gemma Calvin, updated us on how they had adapted their approach in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did you do to provide ongoing support to people with multiple conditions during the initial COVID-19 lockdown?

As a project we made an early decision to move to remote working. This meant that by the time the country went into lockdown in late March our project officers were already using phone, email and video platforms like Zoom and Teams to work with people and organise the support they needed to move towards employment. Recognising the likely toll on mental health for people with multiple health conditions we assigned more staff to make wellbeing calls to all our participants. We also increased our social media presence, on Facebook and Twitter, to try and make sure anyone else that was struggling and needed support knew we were there.

How did the situation affect the people with multiple conditions that you work with?

As well as the impact on mental health, our participants with multiple conditions – most of whom were at high risk from the virus and therefore shielding – needed support in getting the basics such as food shopping. As time went on many were also confused about the guidance and needed help to understand new rules around social distancing and support bubbles for example.

What impact did you have during this time?

With everything that we set up remotely we were not only able to keep working with our existing caseload but we also had new people approaching us for support. Whilst we had to stop all face-to-face contact until recently, most project officers reported that their interaction with people had actually increased and they were busier than usual because participants needed a friendly point of contact to get them through the pandemic. Some project officers also reported that the participants were calling to check they were okay. This demonstrated to us the strength of relationship built between project officers and participants.

“We really felt the benefit of being in a partnership with so many other organisations during this time.”



Was there anything in particular that you think helped you achieve what you did?

We really felt the benefit of being in a partnership with so many other organisations during this time. All our partners were brilliant at sharing ideas and raising awareness of external support, such as COVID funds that participants could apply for to add to what we were doing. Our funders were also incredibly supportive throughout and gave us guidelines almost on a weekly basis to support the ongoing delivery of the project. Credit must also go to our participants, who by and large transitioned to remote working very easily.

“The importance and inequality of access to IT was very apparent during lockdown.”

What challenges did you overcome?

The biggest challenge we had was supporting participants who were not skilled in IT or who did not have access to the necessary equipment. The importance and inequality of access to IT was very apparent during lockdown. Some of our partners purchased more specialised equipment to support participants as they moved to remote working. For our project officers, if IT was an issue then they had to complete their sessions over the phone. We also purchased a lot of personal protective equipment (PPE) to allow the project officers to go to participants homes,

staying outside and socially distant, but dropping off activity packs to keep them engaged in the programme or food parcels if required.

Where are things now in terms of the support you are providing and what do you think the future holds?

We are now working with a hybrid model which mixes both remote working and face-to-face sessions, based on the preferences of the individual we are working with. We are also, though, planning ahead for further restrictions. We have created lockdown packs. These are full of activities like mindfulness and colouring, some PPE, and useful contact numbers. These are to help people to return to face-to-face support if they want it, but they can also be used should a participant need to self-isolate or experience any periods of illness. Our aim is that whatever happens people can still remain involved and engaged with the project.

One thing that we have found in the past is that the NHS can struggle to signpost to others in the community who could contribute to the work they do. Many of our participants with multiple conditions are affected by this lack of integration. We hope that our model of working in partnership, including with NHS partners, will help to demonstrate how interrelated all our work is and that by working together we can help prevent overload of the NHS system which in turn can then fail people with multiple conditions. From what we have seen COVID-19 too is adding to this need to work more closely across the NHS and in communities so we hope this may produce a positive outcome in the longer term.



Spotlight on inequalities

The Black Country is within one of the more diverse regions of the UK, with one in five people part of a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community. It was once an area of heavy industry with coal mining, brick-making and steel works. The high unemployment that came with the decline of these industries has created some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

Statistics show that the Steps to Work Bridges programme has always proportionally given additional time and support to BAME communities. This is partly because of the high levels of health inequality in those communities. To better address issues of inequality Steps to Work has just received approval from their funders to recruit four community champions to work across the partnership. Two of these will focus solely on the BAME communities.

For Natalie, a Bridges participant supported by Just Straight Talk (JST) to build her confidence, manage multiple health conditions and develop her computer skills, COVID-19 made her feel at high risk given the figures concerning people from BAME backgrounds. This led to further deterioration in her mental health and increased isolation. To help ensure the progress she had previously made would not be lost, JST supported Natalie to join her craft and other groups

online. They also helped Natalie access the local COVID-19 resilience fund to get money for food, including from the local fish and chip shop as a treat. Natalie felt overwhelmed by this kind gesture and how the community had come together in hard times. "It really brightened my day," she said. Natalie is now exploring with JST how she can become an Ambassador for BAME communities and pass the gesture on and organise events for the community when it is possible. For Natalie, it is this community spirit that made the difference to her.

"I am positive we can overcome COVID-19 together as a community"

- Bridges participant, Natalie

With community champions like Natalie, Steps to Work hopes to be able to make a difference to people from BAME communities and reduce health inequalities. They are also thinking about different ways to help people access the IT equipment and skills they might need during continuing restrictions and disruption to everyday life.

Shirley's story

Steps to Work and its partners on the Bridges project have provided support to people with multiple conditions above and beyond helping them move towards employment. This has been hugely appreciated by the people they work with as demonstrated by the many testimonies on social media.

As part of this review we heard from Shirley, who has a cancer diagnosis and poor mental health. For over a year Bridges has been supporting Shirley to overcome her barriers to employment from her physical and mental health issues, lack of computer skills and bereavement from the loss of her partner.

"It has been a lifeline. There was no way I would have been able to get the food supplements home without their help,"

- Bridges participant, Shirley

Whilst she was making good progress, COVID-19 has been incredibly challenging for Shirley. She has no family support local to her as they all live in Scotland and due to her physical health issues she had to isolate at home. During this time Shirley had her feeding tube removed, which marked a significant milestone in her cancer treatment. As swallowing is still difficult her GP prescribed a liquid food supplement. However due to a lack of delivery slots the local chemist told Shirley she would need to come and pick up the 120 bottles herself. Without transport this was impossible for Shirley. Recognising that without food no amount of computer skills would help, JST collected and delivered the 120 bottles to her door. For Shirley this practical help made all the difference and ensured she had the food she needed.

