

## **Learning from the Pandemic – response by topic from Royston Community Breakfast members (group organisers.)**

**Royston Community Breakfast** – run by Rotary, for the organisers of community groups to meet – asked all its members what they have learned from the pandemic, so we can be better prepared if something similar arises again. Here are the responses, sorted by topic so that you can scan down to find what you need. Grateful thanks are owed to: Gillian Morland (Coombes Community Centre), David Izod (Memory Café), David Allard (Ramblers, History Soc, WEA), Jackie Cotton (Home-Start), Ray Munden (Rotary), and another member (AM) who wishes to be anonymous. The initials of each contributor appear after each point. Gillian and Jackie have been our star contributors, bringing a great deal of valuable experience across a wide range of issues.

### **The Topics are:**

- A. Planning
- B. People
- C. Communication
- D. Financial
- E. Premises
- F. Operational
- G. IT, internet and telecoms.

### **A. Planning**

1. **Do not wait for the “authorities” to act** because they may not be able to do anything at all, or not for months, because they have other important priorities.
  - a. Agencies redeployment/ pandemic restrictions limited the services from Agencies. Agencies who have contact with families and are then able to pick up families needing support were not able to do this during the pandemic, either due to redeployment therefore making the teams short staffed or due to the restrictions on meeting/seeing families. Families also struggled as services were not available. This is an unknown as we were unsure how many families needed support but did not have access to our services. (JC)
  - b. Just start dealing with what you see needs to be done, and learn as you go along. (Learned from the Royston vs Coronavirus Facebook Group - SH)
2. **Expect that the disadvantaged will be hardest hit and try to cater for them.** What has happened and was not foreseen, is that the disadvantaged in society have again been the hardest hit. Our Chess and Bridge club largely populated with the older generation and can see no way back to playing for some time. Our Over 60's group are coming in for the first time this week – loneliness overcoming their concerns over catching the virus as many live alone and only come out once a week to our club. The problem is that younger more proactive groups who are now coming back are putting a heavier demand on our larger rooms which meant the day and time Chess and Bridge had has been taken up by another group and even if they wanted to come back I would not have the space to offer them. (GM)
3. **Learn from others**
  - a. Find a similar organisation with a national body that has National guidelines and follow these. I found right from the beginning the various organisations (for us it was the church) were really up to date with what needed to be done in order to return to the centre. NB All have had their own risk assessments and rules. For instance Table Tennis have only just decided how to get their people back playing, although they have not reinstated any competitive leagues yet, they are opening for practise play, so our Table Tennis group returned last week, but the badminton organisation were ready for play weeks ago and our badminton club have been allowed back now for about 4 weeks or so. However, some organisations are not doing themselves any favours as with a Drama Group here, who have rules from their organisation that parents delivering their children to Drama classes are NOT allowed in any of the centres. So this week I have parents delivering 4 to 5 year olds who have to stand outside the building and hand over their children to one tutor, who then has to try and wrangle all these very young children to the

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area they will be taught. Meantime schools and nurseries have been back and social distancing is not a problem in the centre, and a one-way-in and one-way-out system can be in place and all this can be avoided if the classes were allowed to handle the situation themselves. However difficult this is, we will do all we can to meet that expectation and rules they need to stick to and not complain that it is possibly a bit over protective. Every group is different and they must do what they need to do and we will try to help meet that requirement without complaint. The customer is always right. (GM)

- b. Share your experiences with others and learn from them. I have been in contact with several other community centres within NHDC and we plan a get together soon – maybe on Zoom – to talk over our experiences and how we have coped and how we are moving forward and helping each other. I would recommend community organisations to share their experiences and this survey is a beginning to helping towards that and Community breakfast can share things and possibly come up with ways to revitalise the community and move them towards what can be done already and as things open up, where they can go and how it is all working. (GM)
- c. Have a contingency plan ready for disruptive events & adapt it, as it is quicker than starting from scratch. Share it and follow it. See for example Sedgwick in Cumbria's Emergency plan, which is on their website & could be used as a template for other local areas.  
[https://www.sedgwickparishcouncil.org.uk/uploads/1/1/7/5/117598396/emergency\\_plan.pdf](https://www.sedgwickparishcouncil.org.uk/uploads/1/1/7/5/117598396/emergency_plan.pdf)  
(Learned from other groups & contingency planners - SH)

### 4. Plan to mitigate or minimise risks

- a. Anticipate that space may need to be used in different ways, and can serve fewer people. It is also clear now, which I had not foreseen, is that I will not achieve the capacity of hire I had before lockdown as it is the two larger rooms out of 6 we have that are being used and the 4 smaller rooms are too small to be financially viable spaces. So I am having to market those rooms in a different way – offering them for home workers who are struggling to work at home due to young children or space, or offering them as one to one consultancy spaces. Interestingly too, the mental health consultant and organisation that helps recovering drug and alcoholics have yet to show interest in returning and yet they are areas of the population who must have found the lock down hardest and are people we could have accommodated all through. (GM)
- b. We have learnt that we need to ensure our services are sustainable to continue our support during very difficult times, as we continue to see families struggling more with their mental health, children finding it difficult with the transition back to school (which feels different). (JC)

### 5. Plan for return and recovery

- a. Focus on what can be done now & plan your recovery. Coming to the centre, doing exercise – we have a Zumba group, NCT Yoga, Short tennis, Badminton, Table Tennis, dancing and Thai Chi – all happening right now – or exercising your brain by learning conversational French, Spanish or Italian, or for the older generation The Laurels who love to play Bingo or compassionate neighbours run by the Garden House Hospice who offer friendship, tea and chatting with the occasional activity and interesting talk. For children we have Karate, Little City, Majorettes, Drama and Rugby practise all in the centre now and church on Sundays, with more groups starting each week and some in October too. So being positive and communicating what can be done rather than what can't be done. (GM)
- b. Do the necessary Risk Assessment, etc. The committee and I worked hard to produce our Risk Assessment and Special Hire conditions for when we were able to open again – which was the 7th July and like everyone else we had little notice of this, but we were ready and set up so this was not a problem for us. We were lucky that we had ACRE which produced Risk Assessment and rules templates and we were able to tailor those to suit our needs. (GM)

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### B. People issues

- 1. Dealing well with worried people.** I have found that being supportive and encouraging and in no way dismissive of concerns or patronising in any way, is the way to handle concerns of anyone worrying about coming back in to the centre. Just as with anyone suffering with depression – you cannot say – Oh just snap out of it, you have nothing to worry about – you cannot say that to anyone worrying about Covid, it is just not helpful. Reassuring all concerned that we have done our bit and are fully compliant with government guidelines and have all the protections possible in place for hirers, it is then totally up to them to decide if and when they are ready to come back in to the building. (GM)
- 2. Plan who will deputise for key people** if they are unable to work, and train them to do key tasks. (Learned from resilience groups - SH)
- 3. Have one person who keeps abreast of the changing rules and regulations** & communicates with others. Keep 1 person on site full time. Keeping me on full time and not on furlough allowed for continuity and the chance to keep up with all the information on Covid as it became available. Someone had to be at the centre to flush toilets regularly and keep it secure and we were ready and to answer the phone, for when it was allowed for us to open again without any special requirements over the obvious signage and Covid necessities like sanitising liquid and paperwork. (GM)
- 4. Ensure that you have a supportive, engaged Committee.** What went well was despite having an aging committee who were all 'vulnerable' they all remained engaged and positive about the operation of the community centre. I have a very supportive committee. (GM)
- 5. Have a supportive, engaged community.** Community support has been wonderful and we have been grateful for receiving income from various organisations who have provided emergency funding due to the pandemic. (JC)
- 6. Keep furloughed staff informed.** We were careful to be considerate but very clear to all our furloughed staff what was going on, informing them at the earliest possible time so they heard first hand and not through social media about any changes to the centre which might affect them. (GM)
- 7. Have a person who checks in on people in your group** who may need this. We have a Welfare Officer and he has been checking on us. (AM). (& learned from Royston vs Coronavirus group – SH)
- 8. If possible, have a few younger people on board who don't have to self-isolate**, as over-70's and those shielding have had to. It is striking how many volunteers have had to stop – e.g. those working in Charity Shops, which has had a huge impact on their funds. Some public bodies assume that over-70s are inactive in society, whereas many of this age group are crucial for the front-line operations of the voluntary sector. (SH)

### C. Communication issues (see IT & telecoms issues further on.)

- 1. Get information (e.g. for users) up online early but allow government announcements to "settle" first!** We could have been better with getting information out on our website and Facebook, although we did put information out as soon as we knew of it and contacting our groups individually earlier; we still have not been in touch with some of them as other priorities dictate the work load. Governments sometimes "adjust" policy after it has been announced, so waiting till it has settled and you are sure of your facts is prudent and reduces potential for confusion. It also often needs to be carefully worded, so don't rush it. (GM)
- 2. Provide links to online support and information and follow up where possible**
  - a. We have provided links to our website and shared widely a large variety of YouTube and website links for lockdown activities. (JC)
  - b. We increased our use of social media to keep our profile raised and also to offer fun and educational ideas and activities. (JC)
  - c. Taking and sharing videos of activities we have provided enabled more families to access them. (JC)

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- d. Sharing widely a large variety of You tube and website links for lockdown activities to entertain the family have been appreciated. (JC)
3. **Find other ways to reach those who are unable to access/uncomfortable with online or telephone support. E.g. post/press/posters/socially-distanced face to face.**
  - a. We need to engage over all areas and not just social media, and use paper too, like The Listing, as not everyone is a computer user. (GM)
  - b. Some users were unable to access online or telephone support. Some of our families with poor mental health are unable to access online or telephone support and need face to face support which we have been unable to provide. (JC)
  - c. Some users lacked access to the right technology. For some families it was difficult for children to have access to the right technology to access online school learning. We were able to help provide some donated laptops to help with this. Parents would have mobile phones but not devices big enough for children to be able to do their schoolwork and access learning comfortably. (JC)
  - d. Some of our volunteers have not felt comfortable embracing new technology.
  - e. (One solution:) Regularly publishing a document with things of interest for users of the Café to read and do. The Memory Cafe has been unable to meet at the Old Barn since April. To maintain a sense of continuity I have been producing a couple of pages called Amusement Arcade. I am now up to issue 45! The idea is to meander through the pages which contain pictures, poems, copies of paintings, jokes, puzzles, commentary, history, science, space ,i.e. anything that might be of interest and for guests and carers to know that someone is thinking of them. The distribution list has grown as more and more people become aware of it and I now have a listing of about 70 people, most of whom don't have a memory problem but supply material. There has been good feedback from folks who have been reminded of cherished moments from their past. It is not as good as the social contact but it has brought a lot of people together. (DI)
4. **Socially distanced meetings**
  - a. The History Society are not, however, into Zoom and we have, so far, had one meeting in the Heritage Hall (the main hall downstairs) Royston Town Hall on 3<sup>rd</sup> September. Royston Town Hall started hiring in September but only the larger halls where numbers are restricted to 30. It is not possible to hire Room 11 or the Committee room. Face coverings must be worn. Members are required to book a place if they wish to come to the meeting and are requested to email me or to telephone me to book. I was able to accommodate everyone who had booked but three people, who had booked, did not come. Fortunately, no one was excluded as a result but with the next meeting I am requesting that those who book but cannot come, should inform me. (DA)
  - b. The Royston Ramblers have re-started their walks with booking required. A figure of 20 people (maximum) has been set and I led a walk on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September when there were 17. Sundays should not be a problem as we always get fewer than 20 participants. There are normally more on the morning walks but there has not been a problem with the first two walks. (DA)
  - c. Rotary walks have continued. I think we have abided by the rules! (AM)
  - d. Rotary Sunday lunches where one member hosts up to 6\*\* other people for Sunday lunch or any other time that suits, continued once two households could meet outside. We started off with BBQs, afternoon teas in the garden, picnics etc.! \*\*This has since been reduced to no more than 4 people being hosted. (AM)
5. **Virtual meetings, events & activities**
  - a. Virtual meetings using Zoom, etc.
    - The WEA, the U3A and the Ramblers have been / will be using Zoom and this is certainly a convenient solution to, hopefully, keep us going until things are back to normal. I have also been into Zoom for my language activities with Hitchin Language Centre and Lingualounge. (DA)

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- The numerous video links (Zoom, Skype etc.) that I have joined worked well, but I do not think they would work for the community breakfast where networking is the most important thing. (RM)
- b. Get paid-for software like Zoom, if you need it.
  - Free zoom calls are limited to 40 minutes for groups; you need to pay a subscription for longer sessions. (JC)
  - Sign up early if you need it. We tried to manage on FREE Zoom but this was limited to 45 minutes which was clearly not long enough for our Zoom meetings so we have had to sign up to Zoom and are paying each month to be able to hold meetings with unlimited time. If we had signed up earlier it would have saved some stress amongst some of the committee and given us the freedom to Zoom whenever we needed to, rather than try and hold conversations on email which were frustrating and not always providing the full conversation to all concerned which then caused annoyance and confusion, repetition and time wasting. (GM)
  - Rotary members jumped into Zoom fairly quickly and most members join every week. The local area in Rotary, loosely the A1 corridor clubs, did have a breakfast meeting in Letchworth, but this has moved to Zoom, no breakfast sadly!! We have also had a speaker meeting on Zoom and all district meetings have either moved to Zoom, or for some, meetings have been run on Webinar. I think some of our regional meetings and conferences may stay on-line in some way or other, maybe not always, but certainly in winter time. (AM)
  - Use of different online virtual meeting software for different purposes: Use of WhatsApp chat groups to keep everyone connected, sharing information, news and photos. We also used these to provide links to useful activities for children and links of sites to support with wellbeing for parents. Use of Microsoft Teams for the staff team for chat and meetings - we were quickly able to go online to talk together and respond to move our support online. Use of zoom for one-to-one meetings with volunteers and families as well as group sessions for training and family group sessions. This happened quickly so that we could respond to families and volunteers keeping us connected and giving seamless support albeit moving from physical face to face contact to online. (JC)
  - **NB:** Virtual Meetings using zoom and Teams are very tiring and it is difficult to spot the visual cues online from peoples' body language. There is a danger that group members will speak over each other, or be too intimidated to speak. There is also an issue that it is difficult to see what is going on for children in a family so making safeguarding more challenging. (JC)
- c. Virtual events

As the Kite Festival was cancelled, one of our Rotary members organised a virtual balloon race. The virtual balloons started from Moscow and went for a week. There were a number of other organisations besides Royston Rotary in the race. We raised over £2000 for local Home-Start. See info on the Royston Rotary website <http://www.roystonrotary.com/balloonrace.htm> (AM)

## D. Financial issues

1. **Apply for any relevant support schemes.** We have only survived financially this long, due to the governments £10,000 business rates grant which we applied for and got – this has paid the wages while on lock down, but we have used that now and will be using our limited capital from now on to continue. There is no doubt financially this year is going to be very poor, but our groups are returning and we are having to adapt to the 'new normal'. (GM)
2. **Minimise the impact on future revenue, staffing and premises, where possible.** If the level of occupancy for the centre remains low for the foreseeable future, priorities will need to be considered on expenditure, as less capital will be accrued which previously enhanced the centre and kept it in good condition with maintenance. So over a long time of say, 5 years, condition of the centre would deteriorate and we have to look ahead and see what can be planned to mitigate this effect. (GM)

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- 3. Consider how to adapt to less funding long-term.** (Funders may develop other priorities for a while and fundraising events may stop.) It has been more challenging as lots of our fundraising events had to be cancelled, affecting our income. We have been unable to organise our usual array of events... We have been offering some virtual fundraising with a variety of activities that was fun for people who were having to be at home. (JC)

### E. Premises issues

- 1. Run premises efficiently.** There is not a lot we could have done differently as we did not know how long it would be till we could open and how things were going to pan out, so without the benefit of hindsight we did all we could and have been very financially efficient. We turned off our outside lights, fridges and everything electrical that was not in use. As it was the summer the central heating was off anyway. We kept the hot water on as this was needed for cleaning, but then toilets and taps needed to be run regularly to keep water quality. Some community centres did not do this as they furloughed their staff and have had a legionnaire positive test, which has kept them closed for longer and cost money to correct. Our water clarity test before we opened was all clear. In fact during lock down we had the water tank emptied and cleaned, a job on our list for years to do. (GM)
- 2. Staying ready to open at short notice,** clean and fully Covid-prepared for anyone coming in meant we were able to host at least 3 sessions for the blood service. (GM)
- 3. Use the time to refurbish/repair premises.** I took the opportunity to get some major work done on the centre and we fitted a new sports hall floor and got some decorating done and doors replaced – we were fortunate that builders were still keen to work during the early stages of the shut-down. (GM)

### F. Operational issues

- 1. We have learnt to be more efficient** with our systems in place. (JC)
- 2. Flexible working enabled us to offer some evening appointments** which was helpful for parents who had younger children to talk about their issues and needs without disruption, or having to keep children safe during a call and also so that children were not overhearing. (JC)
- 3. Keep strategic stocks.** We had good stocks of cleaning materials, in fact, we had been teased by compliance and fire inspectors that we had rather a lot of cleaning stuff, but in the end we had enough toilet rolls to supply all our committee who needed some and plenty left still in stock. Cleaning materials were hard to come by at some points but we had everything we needed – so keeping 2 to 3 months' supply in hand was a good measure in the end. We are fortunate to have the space to store the items. (GM)
- 4. Ensure you get enough PPE.** We also allowed the cleaning staff to ask for whatever they wanted in PPE to make them feel as comfortable as possible to clean the centre. I bought disposable aprons, but not one has been used, but they love their personalised polo shirts which they launder each day and were allowed to choose the colours of. (GM)
- 5. If you are not able to do something, Partner with others to enable other services.** In this way we have been able to provide group sessions on mindfulness and parenting strategies. (JC)
- 6. If you don't know how to do something, look online.**
  - There are many useful and experienced local groups that you don't know about until you look. If you don't know how to do something, look for these online and join them if you can. (Learned from Royston & Villages Scrub Group on Facebook, who make scrubs for the NHS. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/232632261177419/> - SH)
  - The Listing also has a very useful database of sources of help on their website and has produced a lot of really valuable information each month too. (SH)
  - If you don't know how to do IT "stuff," there are many good short videos on YouTube – just search for them! (Learned from trial and error so as to manage the content of a website! SH)

### G. IT, internet and telecoms issues

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1. **Using an Answering service, including for bookings.** “When I was away on holiday, I accessed my emails and also the 1571 messages on my landline telephone from my mobile phone. (DA)  
*(BT 1571 is an answering service that answers calls when you are away from the landline phone or engaged on another call. A stutter dial tone tells you there is a new message waiting. It costs £3.54 per month and you can turn it off on your return.” See details on this link: <https://www.bt.com/help/landline/all-about-bt-answer-1571-voicemail>. If you need to make overseas calls from a landline, you can do this at UK rates via VOIP. See [www.Rebtel.com](http://www.Rebtel.com). SH )*
2. **Introduction of internet phone system (Circle loop)** which can be used on a computer and / or mobile phone to make free phone calls – no longer require desk phones thereby eliminating sharing of handsets. This has also helped with being flexible with remote working. (JC)
3. **Remote access to office systems enabled staff to work from home.** We were fortunate that we had just made our systems secure, to enable home working, before the lockdown. (JC)
4. **We quickly learned to use a variety of different technology, to ensure accessibility** for families and volunteers. (JC)

### Need further information or have questions?

Please see also the **checklist** produced from this document. If you need a copy of this or have other questions please contact the compiler of this document, Sarah Hillman on [S.Hillman@enabling-growth.com](mailto:S.Hillman@enabling-growth.com) or [breakfast@roystoncommunity.org.uk](mailto:breakfast@roystoncommunity.org.uk)