

Groundswell

Out of homelessness

1st April 2020

Dear friends and partners,

Groundswell's response to coronavirus – letter from the Chief Executive

As with every organisation, Groundswell are coming to terms with a 'new normal' which brings uncertainty and a whole new set of challenges for our staff, volunteers and the people we support. People who are homeless are disproportionately impacted by coronavirus; their health is, compared to the general population, extremely poor. People experiencing homelessness are more likely to have respiratory health issues, diabetes, or compromised immune systems. To add to this, 'self-isolation' guidance is almost impossible to follow if you are sleeping rough and tricky if you are in a hostel with shared kitchens and bathrooms. As a result of this, an incredibly large proportion of people who are homeless fall into the 'at risk' category when it comes to coronavirus.

The Groundswell team are committed to adapting what we do to provide appropriate solutions for this new environment we're living in. We have taken these decisions by talking to people who are or have been homeless, our experienced team of volunteers and staff and through consultations with health and homelessness partners – all whilst ensuring we keep the voice of those who are homeless at the core of every decision made and action taken.

Homeless Health Peer Advocacy (HHPA)

We have suspended most of our face to face advocacy appointments and all our health promotion in-reach sessions because:

- many services have closed or changed how they are working
- many of our staff and volunteers have similar health issues to the people we support including diabetes, respiratory conditions and compromised immune systems (or live or care for someone with these conditions); therefore, they are self-isolating.

We are still able to support some face to face work through a few staff members. If you do need support for a client in one of the [London boroughs we deliver HHPA in](#) please email HHPA@groundswell.org.uk.

We recognise the upheaval and uncertainty of coronavirus adds to the array of different challenge's homelessness already brings to a person. The feedback from partners is that our peer advocacy is an important and welcome service to offer. Working with our staff and volunteers we have decided to offer our HHPA clients regular welfare check phone calls. We have piloted this, and our Training Manager is finalising remote training to more staff and volunteers so we can deliver this in an effective, safe and sustainable way.

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Due to the reduced size of our HHPA team, we are first offering this to clients we have supported in the past six months, who for a variety of reasons have increased vulnerability. This is new to Groundswell and we will continue to monitor its effectiveness and how we can roll this out to support more people.

Providing practical resources

As soon as the Government began giving advice to stop the spread of the coronavirus we saw our place to step in – not only to ensure this information reached an often cut off group of people, but to ensure it was relevant and accessible to people who were homeless. We pulled together a group of volunteers and staff with experience of homelessness (many had previously slept rough and some still live in hostels or other forms of temporary accommodation), to adapt the guidance so it is relevant to people experiencing homelessness. We produced accessible guides on how to apply the Government’s guidance when [rough sleeping](#) and living in [shared accommodation](#); we continue to update these in line with changing guidance and have [translated them into Romanian and Polish](#).

The guides have been distributed via our HHPA partners in London, national homelessness charities, local charities across the UK and covered in several sector specific news. We continue to respond to feedback from people on the ground – both workers and those who are homeless – to ensure our guidance is beneficial to people’s situations. We endeavour to create further resources as the coronavirus situation develops, including to support those who have been moved into hotels, tips on managing mental health and well-being and advice to help people navigate their benefits.

Participation of people with experience of homeless is crucial in making decisions that affect their lives, including the design, development and delivery of policies and services. This is exactly what we aimed to achieve when we developed our [‘Listen UP!’ resources](#), creating a set of questions that local taskforces can ask themselves when planning a response to coronavirus for people experiencing homelessness. The national umbrella organisation Homeless Link have promoted these as good practice to their members across England.

Monitoring project

Our work promotes the value and importance of listening to the views of people who are experiencing homelessness and creating change based on what we hear. We also believe we can use our expertise to provide unique insight to the coronavirus pandemic and are implementing a new piece of research to deliver this. We want to be able to understand the impact of the coronavirus and the response to it from services and statutory bodies on people experiencing homelessness, and use this to inform the ongoing planning and delivery. We have started this process by engaging our staff and network of researchers and advocates who have experience of homelessness to understand their experiences on the ground. We are beginning to reach out to people who are experiencing homelessness across England to build this evidence base. The project is being rolled out in an agile way, building

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working relationships with partner organisations as we go and we are seeking additional funding to extend this project further. In the coming weeks we will provide briefings based on the information we have gathered.

Supporting staff and volunteers

Behind the scenes at Groundswell the well-being and progression support we provide remains a central part of what we're doing. The risk of the coronavirus and the uncertainty it brings to every part of society is a source of anxiety for us all. Our team is incredibly close, we thrive off being busy, human interaction and making a difference to people's lives. This sudden change in daily routine, the way we work, and isolation is hard to manage – particularly for some of our team living alone, who have limited IT skills, who are managing mental health issues or in recovery from addiction. As always, our team are rising to the challenge. We're continuing to put resource into frequent wellbeing calls with all staff and volunteers, creating group 'WhatsApp' chats (with a large amount of GIF sharing!) and trialling remote team meetings. We've also got support in place for staff or volunteers if they cannot access food or medication, or who need emergency finances due to coronavirus.

Other work and partnerships

We have of course had put on hold certain activities including our regular health promotion in-reach sessions across London, HHPA activities in Dublin and Cornwall and #HealthNow peer research in partnership with Crisis in Birmingham and Newcastle and Shelter in Greater Manchester. Our ongoing research work relies on the ability to engage with people experiencing homelessness and the current coronavirus pandemic is forcing us to shift the way we are delivering this work. The #HealthNow partnership with Crisis and Shelter is still active and relevant; we continue to meet at a national level to share learning and some local #HealthNow alliances are meeting regularly to support local response.

It's the early stages of this pandemic and none of us know what is around the corner. Nevertheless, the Groundswell team are committed to using their skills, expertise and experience to contribute to the solution. If you have any questions about our response please get in touch with your contact at Groundswell or email info@groundswell.org.uk where your email will be directed to the relevant person. To keep up to date with Groundswell's response please sign up to our newsletter and follow us on [@ItsGroundswell](https://twitter.com/ItsGroundswell).

Yours sincerely,



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