

Cluster Group Meetings May 2020

Introduction

On May 4 and May 5, 2020, 19 people from 16 organisations attended two online LINKS Cluster Group Meetings.

During these meetings attendees shared updates regarding how they were coping with the restrictions that the COVID 19 pandemic has placed on everyone, whether or not they were able to continue some aspects of their work or had to pause their delivery, the challenges they faced and issues arising from this unusual situation.

The Cluster Group Meetings were also a way of checking in with staff in the grant aided organisations to see what other support NCB could offer at this time as well as a way of giving and receiving support from peers.

Project Delivery

Delegates discussed the extent to which they were able to continue their project delivery.

Some groups have had to suspend much or all of their programme, as some of the projects demand face to face meetings or working alongside adults.

However, several have managed to amend their programmes so that they are meeting young people remotely via Zoom or some other platform. In addition, most are keeping in contact with young people and families via telephone calls.

Adaptations

Several grant holders mentioned making adaptations to their project delivery which included the following:

Providing practical help

- Creating packs for young people: creative activity packs, home learning/ education packs, baking packs, packs to help with mental health, learning different languages, personal development and gift packs.
- Meeting basic needs: e.g. food hampers, top ups for electricity or mobile phones.
- Making PPE using 3D Printers & filling orders for care homes, hospitals etc.

Increasing IT Capacity

- Tablets given to children's homes so that the young people could participate in Zoom meetings with support organisations such as Voypic.
- Providing some IT equipment such as tablets to families who don't have devices to help support learning

Continuing to offer individual support

- Moving one to one sessions for music therapy or education online.
- Offering online counselling for those who wish to participate via this medium.
- For some organisations engagement has increased since the lockdown.

Creating/sustaining social opportunities and fun

- Facilitating weekly social gatherings in virtual cafes/pubs (for young adults) and quiz nights.
- Setting up challenges between young people or between youth clubs, e.g. sports, cooking/baking, life skills, creative challenges.
- Discussion topics are now less sensitive and more fun.
- Online newsletters and e-zines with information, activities and opportunities for the target audience to share tips, stories etc.

Providing learning opportunities for young people

- Setting up online accreditation programmes such as OCN so that young people might use the extra spare time to get some qualifications.
- Delivering online safety workshop for very vulnerable young people.

Continuing to collaborate with other professionals

- LAC Review meetings were still happening via Zoom.

Issues for young people

The participants at the Cluster Group Meetings discussed issues that were arising for young people during this 'lockdown' phase of the pandemic. Those mentioned were as follows:

- ***Impacts on mental health and wellbeing***

Several negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing were noted, e.g. higher levels of anxiety among girls and young women; higher levels of stress and worry and disturbed sleep.

Young people falling away from education and routine leading to the development of poor sleep patterns, with some staying up all night and sleeping all day. Staff in some organisations have adapted to some of this and made themselves available in the late afternoon or early evening.

Some young people are experiencing significant mental health issues and some organisations have had to initiate a few emergency responses to young people.

For immune-compromised young people and their families this has been and continues to be a very stressful time. However, for some young people who have compromised immune systems, the fact that everyone now needs to stay at home more has actually been reassuring (they had locked down earlier and felt more threatened by COVID-19 when everyone else was still at school/work).

Some groups are promoting the 5 steps to mental health and well-being with young people, e.g. one per week for the young people to work on.

- ***Increased social isolation***

Social isolation experienced by more people- especially for young people who were already very isolated, e.g. those who had left care, with few or no family ties.

Young adult carers who had a part-time caring role now caring full-time and even more socially isolated than previously.

- ***Increased vulnerability***

Homeless young people being accommodated in different Bed and Breakfast Accommodation every week or few days has increased their vulnerability. Some grant holders are, therefore, trying to find these young people more permanent accommodation.

In some young people's homes there is a lack of privacy to discuss sensitive topics or to engage in online counselling, which may mean an increase in vulnerability.

- ***Employability Issues***

Those organisations who usually facilitate work placements have not been able to do so and are working on providing alternatives, e.g. resource packs for training, website links for transitioning from school to work for example.

- ***The impact of the remote/virtual world***

Some young people actually prefer remote contact such as those who find face to face interaction difficult (e.g. some young people with ASD) and some are actually thriving in this situation.

However, the online world has highlighted a lot of safeguarding concerns, especially for learning-disabled young people who are particularly vulnerable and whose parents are naturally very protective. Also younger children (especially those with a dual diagnosis of disability) do not want to sit at a screen.

However, some organisations which support learning disabled young people now have more engagement of siblings and parents in some of the online sessions. This has grown into a whole family approach which may not have been part of the original work plan but which may be kept following this crisis situation.

It was felt that Zoom fatigue may be setting in now with young people. At the start of lockdown it was a novelty but now some young people are not as engaged with it and are getting a bit fed up.

Access to the internet has been an issue for some young people. For example, there may be a lack of equipment, lack of broadband/Wi-Fi in some homes, especially for poorer households. Parents may not be able to afford a mobile phone for the young person anymore due to job losses and therefore having less available money.

Some young people are reluctant to engage in an online group (when they don't really know the rest of the young people) but are willing to engage in one-to-one support online.

However, other young adults are able to get involved in peer support WhatsApp groups and look at issues such as exams, employability etc.

- ***Increases in risk taking behaviour***

Some young people (especially those who don't have much parental support) have not been adhering to social distancing rules and have been becoming involved in anti-social/criminal behaviour.

There has been a rise in some areas of drug and alcohol abuse among some young people.

It was felt that there is a continuing need by grant holders to promote the stay home, stay safe message with young people who are tending to think that the worst is over.

Issues for organisations

The delegates at the Cluster Group Meetings also spoke of issues for organisations and the workers and volunteers in them. These issues included the following:

- ***Negative impacts on workers' mental health and well being***

As most people are now working from home there has been a blurring of the lines between people's physical and psychological home and work spaces. Challenging or difficult conversations are happening in people's homes, not a work or clinical setting as would have previously been the case. For some, young people want to talk to workers on the phone late at night. One consequence of this is that the worker's mental health has been negatively impacted as it is difficult to 'switch off' from work. This situation has highlighted the need for more support from employers for maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing.

- ***Online issues***

Initially some organisations discovered they needed new IT equipment as some systems were very restricting. However, this issue has been largely overcome and the system is now much more accessible.

Ensuring online safeguarding of young people was a challenge at the start but this has been overcome now due to staff becoming more familiar with the technology and with some platform providers strengthening privacy settings

- ***Fears about sustainability***

A lot of organisations fear for their long term sustainability. There has been little opportunity to do major fundraising as most activity in this area has had to stop (e.g. the Belfast City Marathon was cancelled; shops have closed) or income streams (e.g. from room rental) have dried up. Small fund-raising efforts by young people, staff or volunteers are unlikely to bridge the gap.

- ***Recruitment***

Recruitment of young people for projects (or next phase of them) is now very difficult as young people (naturally) do not want to interact with total strangers online. Some organisations are also getting less referrals to their projects as there is less interaction with other stakeholder organisations.

Some organisations were about to or had started to recruit new staff for their projects and had to pause this process. However, some have now decided to proceed with the recruitment using remote interviewing etc.

- ***Using this 'pause' productively***

Some organisations now have found themselves with more time for staff and/or volunteer development. Several are putting this 'spare time' to good use, for example, using time to upskill staff, volunteers and young people, e.g. more time for reading and developing more knowledge on certain topics; training young people to co-facilitate Zoom meetings; getting committees upskilled in setting up Zoom meetings and new ways to use assessment tools to ascertain the needs of young people.

Conclusion

Delegates appreciated having the opportunity to meet up remotely and felt that it was reassuring that they were not alone in their challenges. NCB reiterated its commitment to continuing to provide support via LINKS remotely over the coming weeks and months, with Annual Reviews and Exit Interviews continuing to be offered as they arise. In addition, grant holders were reassured that NCB will continue to share any information that is relevant with them. While any specific queries about their projects are best directed to their NLCF Grants Officer, at any point individual grant holders can seek support from NCB.