

The Norwich Centre

A strategy for addressing accessibility limitations

Introduction

The Norwich Centre is a registered charity which was founded in 1980 and provides a counselling service to the local population. Demand for its services is high and it has a well established reputation for providing a professional confidential service. The founders of the Norwich Centre were concerned to ensure that no one would be turned away for financial reasons and this aim is enshrined in the deed setting up the charity and published in its Mission Statement.

The Norwich Centre aims to make its counselling service as accessible as possible and recognises that although it effectively addresses the financial barrier to accessing counselling there may other barriers that may prevent certain groups from approaching the service. In order to monitor this, the Norwich Centre asks all clients to complete an equal opportunities questionnaire, and compares the data received from this with the Census information to identify any groups that it may not be reaching.

Additionally, in order to successfully implement a strategy to improve accessibility, the Norwich Centre must design a strategy that is realistic and achievable and which does not impact adversely on service provision. There is a delicate balance to publicising the service enough to reach all groups, but not so much that it cannot meet demand. In the early part of 2014 the waiting list had to be closed so that clients were not left with a long wait to for a regular slot. This is not a desirable situation.

Identifying barriers to accessibility

All clients who come to the Norwich Centre for counselling are asked to complete an equal opportunities monitoring form. The data from these forms is recorded onto a database and a summary is included in the Annual Report. The information is compared year by year, and also compared with the Census information for the local area. The Norwich Centre also invites feedback on accessibility.

Any barriers identified are noted and potential ways improve accessibility are discussed when the Annual Report is presented to the Trustees. This information is taken into account when the budget for the following year is set.

Barriers to accessing the service

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Barriers that have been identified as needing addressing fall broadly into three categories:

1. Financial/affordability – can clients afford to come?
2. Accessibility for those using wheelchairs or who require assistance with sight or hearing. Can the client find us and gain access to our service?
3. Knowledge of the service – how do clients hear of our service and how might groups that do not access our service be enabled to do so?

1. Financial barriers

In providing a service which enables clients to access counselling and pay what they can afford, the Norwich Centre must find ways to fund this via the Bursary Fund, and this means that any additional costs involved in improving accessibility need to be funded from additional fundraising. In recent years the number of clients unable to pay at least £15 has increased dramatically, leading to cuts in administration and management, and in the support it is able to offer the counsellors, most of whom give their time voluntarily. This has led to the creation of the Bursary Fund which is a monitored fund that all clients can apply for to enable them to have counselling. This was introduced in April 2014 and in the first four months funding of £2500 was required to support these clients. This information will enable more accurate budgeting and the data will inform fundraising strategy.

2. Wheelchair access and assistive technology

The Norwich Centre raised funds to build a wheelchair accessible annexe containing a counselling/training room and toilet, completed in 2007. The décor was designed to help those with a visual impairment.

The Norwich Centre has also recently purchased a hearing loop to assist those with a hearing impairment who have a hearing aid with a T setting.

One of the volunteer counsellors is qualified to level 2 in BSL.

3. Promoting awareness of the service

Publicity needs to reach as far into the local community as possible and the two main ways in which the Norwich Centre publicises its service are its website and the annual mailshot to GP surgeries.

The website was redesigned in 2013 and 2014 will be the first complete year it has been live. The numbers of clients who find out about the Norwich Centre via the internet will be monitored to see if the new design has affected the numbers of clients who learn about the Centre online.

The Norwich Centre also publicises itself via Facebook (since 2012), Twitter and LinkedIn (since 2013) and aims to increase community engagement via social networking.

Networking and outreach is another way to reach into the local community, by raising awareness of the service. A significant proportion of clients hear of the Centre by word of mouth. Links with other related services and community groups can be very significant, for example it was noted in the 2012 Annual Report that no clients identified themselves as Hindu or Muslim and so establishing links with the local Mosques and Hindu Temple would raise awareness of the counselling service provided by the Norwich Centre.

The Trustees recognise that the time involved in attending networking events and meetings is important, but that the need to maintain income by working with clients means a lack of staff availability, even though all staff give more time in support of the work of the Norwich Centre than they are contracted for. The trustees have discussed in the most recent meeting in August, the need for a Deputy Director, a role that existed previously but which was made redundant in 2009. The Trustees propose to investigate whether it would be possible to apply to charitable trusts to fund this role, thus enabling the Centre Director to delegate some of the responsibilities of the current role and allow time for outreach and networking.

Planning for the future improvement of accessibility

The strategy for addressing accessibility limitations is focused on an ongoing process of identifying limitations through reviewing and comparing data obtained from equal opportunities monitoring, and feedback from clients. Data is reviewed annually and barriers that are identified are discussed by the trustees. Plans to improve accessibility are discussed by the trustees and incorporated into the overall strategic plan, taking into consideration financial and staffing implications. The implementation of the plan to improve accessibility is reviewed annually as part of the data review.

Dr Caroline Kitcatt
Centre Director
11th September 2014