

## Overview

Faced with a complete ban on face-to-face, classroom training, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, organisations and companies throughout the UK were urgently looking for alternative ways to deliver their training needs. London Borough of Islington was one of many local authorities left unable to effectively train its workforce either for mandatory or elective training, whilst also wishing to offer staff support in their work during the Covid-19 emergency.

## The Solution

London Borough of Islington approached Talking Life as we already had a proven track record of delivering many social care related classroom training sessions to them over many years. Talking Life was already developing alternative means of delivering training to its many public sector clients within health and social care and was able to suggest on-line training, using a range of virtual solutions including Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams. Zoom was considered to offer a more flexible experience for training as it allowed 'break-out' rooms and microphone muting, two key facilities which enhance delivery.

Talking Life recommended some adjustments for this on-line training with smaller class sizes (the optimum turns out to be 15), allowing both trainer and attendees to get the best experience and course length was varied in consultation with Islington Council's commissioners; one day courses were split into two sessions, 3-hours long and sometimes days apart (2 day courses could be split into 4 sessions) and regular breaks were factored in to avoid Zoom 'burn-out'

Talking Life was then contracted to deliver 19 different training topics between April and October 2020 including: Working from Home & Maintaining Wellbeing; Team Resilience, The Mindful Manager in Times of Crisis, Bereavement in the Workplace, Mental & Physical Wellbeing, Change and Adaptability, Managing Stress, Delegation Skills for Managers, Working with People in Distress, Working with Difficult to Engage Clients, Leading in Times of Change, Problem Solving & Creative Thinking, Motivation & Engagement, Learning Difficulty and Complex Needs, Holding Difficult Conversations, Bias Training for Managers, Stress & Resilience for Managers.

**Webinars:** We were also contracted to produce a series of Webinars for the Council, in order to brief larger numbers of staff who may have been working remotely during the pandemic but needed to be kept up-to-date with new or existing working practices. These webinars were recorded and distributed to commissioners for onward transmission via internal networks. Topics included Bereavement and Mental Health.

## Managed Service

Talking Life managed the contract from start to finish, and appointed a dedicated contracts manager and event co-coordinator in order to oversee the smooth running of the programme and liaison with London Borough of Islington commissioning team. This involved organising suitable dates, and managing the technology and registrations. We set up a website page that handles Islington's bookings with a list of events sent to a number of places. The commissioner enters the delegate details and email addresses and the delegate gets an automated confirmation. We provide the trainer with a list of delegate

emails and the Trainer/Event Co-ordinator send out the invitations for Zoom including any materials and evaluation links. Evaluations are collated and sent to the commissioner post training.

The courses & webinars were also quality checked by our Managing Director to ensure continued quality and assessment. We also organised a post training evaluation 6 months after the end of the training delivery.

## Delivery

On-Line Zoom sessions took place across all topics on 18 occasions between April and July, 2020 with 6 more planned before late October. Each session was evaluated and the results were fed back to the Commissioner after each session. Webinars were recorded and distributed to the Commissioner who broadcast these to staff through the internal network.

## Outcomes

The feedback to these virtual courses and webinars has been overall very successful. There have been few, if any technical issues and attendees have taken to the format with general enthusiasm. Trainer Sean Liddell, who delivered 11 of the initial courses confirms the 'virtual' experience has been well received but as a trainer and facilitator he has had to make some adjustments. He reports:

"There are several factors that are different when conducting virtual training; the first obvious one is that the body language is less obvious to see - micro expressions can be missed, especially if people are reluctant to turn on their video. For the trainer, there is more concentration required on watching people's reactions on the 'gallery view' to pick up on what we would see more easily with full body communication.

This also works the other way around and I, as the facilitator have to ensure my body language from the waist up conveys the feeling and energy I want it to at any given point. I have found that I expend the same amount of energy as I do when face to face training and usually end up quite tired at the end of a morning and afternoon session."

"I have found that people prefer a slightly shorter session with regular breaks on the hour and this really helps the flow. Also, keeping delegates unmuted is very effective as it mirrors the face to face and they are more likely to say something off the cuff rather than thinking about where the 'raise your hand' button, is which is vital to get honest comments, reactions and feelings."

"Having a breakout room facility is excellent and really helps the sessions; delegates still get a chance to talk in smaller groups which helps the personal connection as well as engaging in a smaller team exercise."

According to our trainer, people are very well mannered when it comes to questions: "Mirroring the face to face training, I have encouraged questions throughout. If two people start to talk, one will always apologise and offer for the other person to talk first. I very rarely have to manage interruptions or overtalking and this would happen anyway in the live setting."

Overall, Sean reports that delegates have responded really positively and that this bodes well for future 'remote' sessions: "the feedback I have got has been excellent, really positive and most people's views are that they want to continue with a blend of virtual training and face to face as it saves so much time, expense and travelling."

### Conclusion

The training has had a significant effect on the well-being and practice of the staff at London Borough of Islington, many of them working within social services. The format has been well received and technical issues have been few. Staff undertaking the mental health, well-being and resilience courses are now more resilient, and more effective in doing their work in a time of crisis. This training has been delivered in a very cost-effective way as there have been no travel or accommodation costs, venue costs nor refreshment costs for the Council to pay. The Webinars have given the Council the opportunity to inform, update and train large numbers of staff cost effectively, through a convenient, easy-to-distribute, professionally designed and presented format. This programme of training was designed and delivered within weeks of the start of the Covid-19 emergency and has shown that 'Virtual' training has a significant role to play in the training 'mix' in the future.

***"The Mental Health Webinar is really good. I really like the graphics and I think the section on conditions is excellent as to how it explains them, especially OCD and phobias."***

- Learning & Development Consultant, London Borough of Islington

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ISLINGTON