

HEREFORDSHIRE VISION LINKS TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

Trustees during the year

Glynn Bailey (Chair)
Andy Bailey (Deputy Chair)
Debbie Baker
Kevin Bound
Robin Dunford
Tony Ford
Alan Leary (Treasurer)
Debbie Payne
Ellie Tanner
Derek Wright

Staff during the year

John Eden (Chief Executive)
Mark Brock (Rehab and Mobility Officer)
Julie Cavanagh (Volunteer Co-ordinator)
Isobel Powell (Resources Co-ordinator)
Dan Sergent (Events and Membership)

On March 16th 2020, the Chief Executive and Trustees took the decision to restrict access to the Vision Links premises at 26 Widemarsh Street, Hereford, as the prevailing view was that the COVID situation was deteriorating, and close contacts in confined/indoor spaces should be minimised or avoided. The decision affected the social groups and clubs that meet at Vision Links. In any case the Trustees were a week ahead of the government, who asked everyone to remain at home/work from home if possible. The entire staff team was asked to remain at home, and the Sensory Service face to face service was temporarily switched to telephone and equipment supply until the guidance caught up with the pandemic.

Following the Chancellor's decision to offer Furlough support, the CEO and Trustees immediately placed all staff on furlough, except for the Rehab and Mobility Officer. Upon lifting of restrictions for the first time, it was determined that restrictions were still adversely affecting normal operation, so the decision was to continue with furlough funding until the viability of activities other than the Sensory Contract could be assured. Staff were rolled on and off flexible furlough until well into 2021. Consequently, we offered a collection/delivery service option from the Resource Centre, together with support for self-organised groups in the Vision Impaired Community, as and when they required assistance. HVL did a lot of work connecting clients with delivery services for food and essentials, and gave regular updates on what was to be improving, and often innovative solutions from large retailers and small independent producers and suppliers. A lot of help was given navigating online ordering systems with major supermarkets - smaller suppliers tended to provide boxes of produce for a fixed sum via city and rural hubs, and we were able to connect clients with these services. We also made referrals/connections to local volunteers who came forward in number to assist in the community, to collect shopping, prescriptions etc. We issued the Office mobile for services users to contact the team, especially during the early lockdown - this meant that existing clients already had a message divert options (via HVL switchboard) to the Rehab Officer, and new referrals/non-contract clients could use the mobile. In fact, a significant number of clients used Messenger and other online platforms to make and continue communications.

The Vision Links Facebook page was very helpful in disseminating information to the VI community, particularly around access to food and medical supplies etc. The CEO and Trustees reviewed the situation on a regular basis and the Chair, Vice-Chair and Treasurer were involved in service changes/staff requirements throughout. For the entire period covered by this report, the COVID pandemic has affected service delivery, service take up and referral levels.

Sensory Service (Herefordshire Council Contract)

The Sensory service has been impacted significantly by the current pandemic - we have had to change the way the clients needs are assessed and how to deliver appropriate solutions. The number of clients referred by the hospital reduced somewhat at the outset of the lockdown, with all clinics and non-essential hospital activities being suspended/cancelled. The resulting reduction in CVI referrals has meant that we can concentrate on fully supporting clients who are already in the system, and reduce waiting times for service.

As hospital services re-opened, CVI referrals have re-commenced, although the reduction in clinics over the 'holiday' period, and the reduced consultant availability has meant that we have some capacity to reduce waiting times, and concentrate on completing work suspended earlier in the quarter. The ECLO role - based at the Eye Unit - was on hold earlier in the summer - firstly, all 'non-clinical'/essential staff were told to work from home, and secondly, there was a recruitment exercise to appoint a new person to the post. This was to be Val Humphries, who is known to Vision Links and has done joint work with us over a few years.

Many VI people are still reluctant to fully socialise/engage with services, and demand for our activities and events services is low, although for home visiting and volunteers-led client support it is an improving picture.

The Rehab and Mobility Officer did devote a significant amount of time to telephone assessment and support - where it was possible to do it. For certain eye conditions, the limitations on a client are fairly consistent, and the techniques and appliances that will be of value are similar (eg Macular Regeneration) it is the extent of limitation rather than the type of limitation that needs to be ascertained. Mark Brock has undertaken socially-distanced work with clients - often taking advantage of the good weather to see clients outdoors - this has kept the level of waiting time within tolerances, although a winter pandemic/second phase could have a significant impact.

The amount of time (and resources) applied to telephone work increased by approximately 75% over the latter 2 months of this report. The Resource Centre continued to process stock orders and mail or deliver requests for aids and appliance issue/renewal, and statistically, the last two months have seen issue levels at broadly pre-COVID levels. We were fortunate that two items from overseas suppliers were in the UK just as lockdown commenced, so we had around six weeks' worth of lighting available for issue, and sufficient spares for long canes over the first few weeks of lockdown. Availability and order processing with our suppliers is running better than pre-COVID at time of writing.

Referrals 2020/2021

Referrals were down to 54 from an annual expectation of around 140 - Low Vision Scheme referrals were down to six, when we would expect many more. The hospital was diverting most capacity to addressing the COVID situation, so clinics were fewer, and private practice optometrists were affected by restrictions in non-essential trading etc. The Rehab and Mobility Service took the opportunity to eliminate waiting times, already modest, with the average wait being a matter of a couple of days before the first contact.

Quarterly Contract Meetings

The Contract Management Meetings were held quarterly, as customary, with meetings via Zoom taking place throughout 2020 and early 2021.

Redhill Rehab Centre

HVL is intending to be a regular user of the proposed Redhill Centre, operated by Herefordshire Council, together with involvement from the NHS. Several meetings via Zoom were held to determine the scope of the scheme and the input from vision and hearing impaired service professionals. This centre is situated to the south of Hereford City and will be to the advantage of a sizeable population in the south of the City and wider South Herefordshire.

Thanks

The Trustees and Chief Executive would like to thank staff, volunteers and service users for their forbearance during the COVID pandemic - we ensured that critical services were maintained, and where possible, client requests for help were met.

