

## Supporting children's mental health during the coronavirus pandemic

Blue Smile has a long history of providing excellent mental health support for children across Cambridgeshire. Last year was extraordinary with the coronavirus pandemic bringing changes to our lives, previously unimagined. Our response was flexible and we adapted our service to ensure the continued support to children, parents, carers and schools when our usual face-to-face way of working was impossible. In some ways, 2020 has been a year for reflection, with many of us re-evaluating our priorities and considering different approaches to the challenges we now face; and looking back helps Blue Smile to ensure that our work remains effective. This review spotlights the changes we made, their impact on the children and families we support and the learning we will carry forward to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of children into the future.

### Max overcomes his fears during lock-down



Blue Smile's support during a time of uncertainty and change proved to be a 'lifeline' for many – just like Max.

*'Not having family and being on lockdown was lonely and isolating. My child, who suffers mental health issues, and I looked at his weekly session as a lifeline.'* (Parent)

Thank you to all of our supporters. Your generosity helps children, like Max, to believe in a happy and hopeful future.

Max\* (9 years) came to Blue Smile because of heightened anxiety. Often reluctant to leave Mum he arrived at school in tears and struggled to settle over the day; this affected his work and friendships. Although anxious at first, Max used drawing in his therapy sessions as a way to explore and express his fears about bad things happening to him or other people.

When the coronavirus pandemic forced the March lockdown face-to-face therapy sessions stopped. But Blue Smile swiftly launched a phone call support service and, working alongside Max's school, his therapist undertook weekly calls with Max and his mum. Sadly, Max's grandfather was admitted to hospital with coronavirus and although he recovered, Max refused to leave the house, even for a walk, fearing he too might catch the virus. The phone calls could not replace 1:1 therapy but the emotional support and guidance from the therapist meant that Max and his mum could learn and practise strategies, such as controlled breathing, to help manage Max's anxiety.

Gradually, Max ventured outside again for walks with Mum and felt secure enough to return to school for the last few weeks of the summer term. Therapeutic support continued and school reported that Max was managing the school day with all its new, socially distanced routines, and was able to begin to engage in school life.

\*All details have been changed to protect a child's anonymity

## A note from the Charity Director

'When we were planning the charity's activities in late summer 2019 for the coming year little did we know that Blue Smile would face challenges never seen before in its history. At that time we were continuing our journey towards a leaner, clinically led organisation, ensuring that the largest possible proportion of our funding was directed towards the provision of our frontline services. We started the new academic year with 54 clinical workers providing support to children in eight Partner Schools and 24 Outreach Schools across Cambridge, East Cambridgeshire and Fenland and our head office reorganisation was largely complete.

In March it became clear that the Government were likely to impose a stringent lockdown and it was obvious our normal methods of working would need to cease. Our primary concern was the wellbeing of the children we support over what was likely to be a deeply unsettling time. We did not stand by; we planned and executed a bold change of direction – moving to an online and telephone 'Keeping in Touch' service to continue support children and their parents/carers.

Such a significant change in direction in a matter of a few weeks was, in my opinion, our most successful endeavour this year and I want to pay tribute to everyone involved. Despite facing their own personal challenges, our practitioners developed and undertook this new way of working, our fundraising team sourced funding, and our office staff and trustees tackled the logistics and oversight framework. Together, we were determined to support children in the best way possible.

With some lead time required for the new service we knew we wanted something special to support our 'Blue Smile' children at home. We created individual art packs for every child so that they could feel supported by Blue Smile in the very early stages of lockdown. Having secured funding, we assembled the packs and delivered them county-wide for our children to use.

During 2019 – 20 we supported 285 children across 32 schools, adapting our service to meet the changing environment. We have carried many learnings forward and continue to offer remote support where needed. I am so proud of our staff this year. They make the difference that is Blue Smile, to help every child for as long as they need.'



**Jess Manley**  
Charity Director

## More children year on year

1,496

Children helped

30,630

Therapeutic sessions provided

181

Clinical staff trained

## What we do

- ★ Blue Smile is a children's mental health charity, which provides expert arts-based therapy in schools
- ★ We work in a way that is fun for a child – for as long as is needed
- ★ We support adults around the child too – with parent/carer workshops and school staff trainings.

## Why we are needed more than ever

Lockdown has  
Sometimes been stressful  
and this can make me  
feel anxious.

Having counselling online  
has helped me manage  
my anxiety better 'cause  
I can talk about what's  
been going on.



The effect of the pandemic has been particularly difficult for children and young people

- ★ 1 in 6 children have a probable mental health disorder, increasing from 1 in 9 in 2017 (NHS Digital 2020)
- ★ As many as 83% of children and young people with existing mental health difficulties reported those difficulties worsening during the pandemic (Young Minds 2020)
- ★ The increase in mental health problems was more pronounced among primary-aged children (NHS Digital 2020)
- ★ NHS mental health services for children currently treat only about one third of children with diagnosable mental health conditions: leaving many seeking support elsewhere.

## What we did during lockdown

- ★ Set up a remote service to offer children regular phone call support and online therapy
- ★ Set up a phone call listening and support service for parents, carers and school staff
- ★ Provided therapists with additional training to ensure they could work confidently with children and adults using phone calls and virtual platforms
- ★ Created a new coronavirus webpage with helpful information, guidance and advice: [www.bluesmile.org.uk/coronavirus\\_information/](http://www.bluesmile.org.uk/coronavirus_information/)

# 94%

of parents say their child's mental health has improved because of Blue Smile

# 88%

of teachers say children's mental health has improved because of Blue Smile

# 81%

of children with very worrying mental health issues improved

The pandemic brought a change to our way of working but in 2019 – 20 we:

- ★ Helped children and school staff across 32 schools
- ★ Completed parent resilience groups with Relate Cambridge – part of our two-year project: 'Stronger Families – Building Resilience'
- ★ Commissioned an in depth safeguarding audit. We have grown considerably since our last audit in 2015 and wanted to ensure that safeguarding remained a priority across the charity. "There is great pride in the high standards of service delivery and great commitment at all levels to make the charity the best it can be.....Everyone recognised that safeguarding is the priority for the charity at all levels" (SAFECIC 2020)
- ★ Trained up 56 Blue Smile staff including specific training on delivering phone call and online support
- ★ Completed part one of a research project with Cambridge Hub Impact Labs to explore alternative ways of gathering children's views about working with Blue Smile. Part two of the project went on pause when schools closed; we hope to continue in 2021.

## How do we give children the best support possible?

Blue Smile has always been a charity that seeks to learn and improve because we want to excel and give children the best support. Therefore we put great store in the feedback we receive from children, parents, carers and schools. We use this feedback proactively to improve our service. We also listen carefully to the views of the wider community and the findings of other mental health organisations to ensure we provide the most relevant and effective service. During the pandemic we believe it has become more important than ever to listen and respond to our children, their families and the local community.

### Listening to children and parents/carers?

In regular phone calls with parents, carers and children our practitioners listened to what families had found challenging during lockdown: struggling to cope with stress, anxiety, relationship difficulties, understanding COVID and loneliness were common themes. In response to this we set up a new web page, specifically dedicated to providing information and guidance such as 'Talking about Coronavirus with Your Children' and 'Helping Children Cope with Change'. This webpage continues to be updated in response to feedback from service users and our later topics included 'Advice for the Start of the New School Year'.

Blue Smile has always worked with children 'for as long as it takes' to improve their wellbeing and recently we have developed our service to support more parents and carers too. We delivered a pilot group with parents and children working together and, in collaboration with Relate Cambridge, we delivered wellbeing groups to parents and carers alongside one-to-one therapeutic interventions to their children. Early positive feedback is already informing service development for 2020-21; we aim to introduce joint parent and child therapy sessions.



### Listening to schools

Since Blue Smile started in 2010 our school-based model of support has enabled us to work closely with school staff to get the best outcomes for children. When lockdown happened, schools helped us to identify which parents (as well as children) might benefit from phone call support and helped us to initiate contact with families at home so they did not have to wait long before calls started. We also listened to what schools said about staff wellbeing and set up phone call and online support for school staff too.

### Listening to the wider community

We monitor our service against external reviews of local mental health needs to ensure that we continue to offer relevant support. A recent Cambridgeshire and Peterborough schools survey of need during the pandemic found that:

- ★ School staff wanted longer forms of support that will "help [pupils] for as long as it takes" and parallel support for parents
- ★ 77% reported that they want mental health services to be able to see pupils for face to face sessions in their education setting, as long as it was safe to do so

We have listened to the call for us to return to face-to-face work – if safe to do so; and have initiated plans to provide enough cleaning/hygiene kits and individual therapy kits to make this as safe as possible.

## Our thanks to...

Blue Smile was recognised by the Children's Commissioner (January 2020) as an 'excellent charity'. This is only possible due to the generous support we receive. The past year brought challenges to fundraising never seen before but so many of our supporters rose to the challenge with creativity and sheer determination. We would like to thank everyone who has helped us, including...

### Individuals

Our Major Donors, our Ambassadors, 'Friends of Blue Smile' group, Supporters, Trustees, Volunteers and Regular Givers

### The Community

1st Comberton Brownies, Abbots Ripton Village Hall, Asda, Aviva Community Fund, Brampton Golf Club, Cambridge South Rotary Club, Cooperative Community Fund, Corpus Christi College, The Disney Store, Downing Place United Reform Church, Duende, Ecclesiastical – Movement for Good, Grand Lodge of Cambridgeshire, Impington Village College, Maggie Brown, Overpower Fitness, Philip Tyler and the Steps in Time Dance Group, National Citizen Service, New Cambridge Singers, Ninja Theory Ltd., Queen Edith WI, Queens College, Rotary Club of Soham Staploe, Second Saturday Community Café, Sidney Sussex College, Sing! Community Choir, St. Benet's Church, St. Faith's School, St. Mary's Church, Starbucks (Grafton Centre), Tesco Bags of Help Covid19 Communities Fund, The Mid-Anglia Centre of the Caravan and Motorhome Club, Trinity Hall and Woodlands Surgery

### Corporate

Cambridge Assessment, Granite Coast, Kirkland & Ellis International LLP, TTP, WSP Cambridge, Ewing Associates, Savanta ComRes, TimeSpace Technology, Spotify Cambridge and Cooke Curtis and Co.

### Trusts and Foundations

Albert Van den Bergh Charitable Trust, Awards for All, Cambridgeshire Community Foundation, Chapman Charitable Trust, Coronavirus Community Fund, Eastern Counties Educational Trust, Garfield Weston Foundation, Gwyneth Forrester Trust, Hauser Raspe Foundation, Homelands Charitable Trust, John Coates Charitable Trust, Masonic Charitable Foundation, Monica Rabagliati Charitable Trust, The Evelyn Trust, Mrs Smith and Mount Trust, The Pixel Fund, Sir Jules Thorn Charitable Trust, The Batterson Chivers Foundation, The Betty Lawes Foundation, The Childwick Trust, The Edward Gostling Foundation, The Henry Smith Charity (Improving Lives), The Hobson Charity Ltd, The Lady Hind Trust, The Newby Trust, The Paragon Trust, The Pettit Charity, The Red Hill Trust, The Strangward Charitable Trust, Warburtons Families Matter and We Are Beyond

### Fundraising champions

Jolyon Glynn – cycled 60 miles to raise £300  
Sarah Day and Anita Gatt – ran half marathons and raised £1,900 & £1,500  
Louisa Hay – drew pet portraits to raise over £1000  
John Gooch did the couch to 5K challenge to raise £2,100  
Cheska Tyler raised £1,200 on behalf of Blue Smile  
Jennifer Ling raised £2,685.00 on behalf of Blue Smile

By leaving a gift to Blue Smile in your will, you can support Cambridgeshire children to live happier lives and have brighter futures. Together, let's make building children's resilience and life prospects our legacy

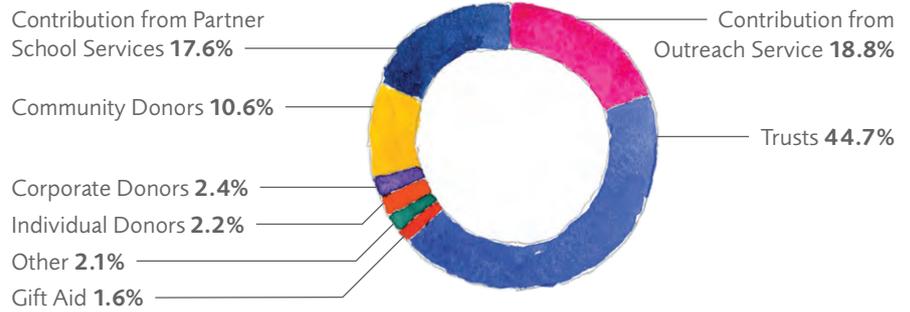
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[info@bluesmile.org.uk](mailto:info@bluesmile.org.uk)

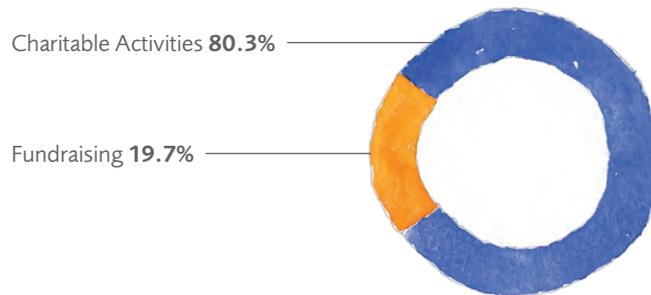
Or call:  
01223 314725

## How we fund the help we give

### Our income £489,756



### Our expenditure £367,360



## Looking forward

Following the changes to our service, due to the coronavirus pandemic we want to take our learnings from this time forward as we continue to respond to the needs of our service users. We will:

- ★ Continue to offer a phone call and online support service
- ★ Introduce joint parent and child therapy sessions
- ★ Improve our digital processes and systems to improve efficiencies and reach more children.

### How your donations help

- ★ £900 provides a child with a term of specialist one to one arts-based therapy
- ★ £365 provides a kit for a therapist to work in one of our Outreach schools
- ★ Donations of £10 – £100 will provide resources for therapeutic work.



Thank you to everyone who helps to put smiles on the faces of children and adults alike with your creative and inspiring fundraising activities!

*Our family was very lucky to benefit from Blue Smile's expert therapy support when our son was struggling with anxiety at primary school. Years later, we're still thankful for that early intervention, which made all the difference to him and to us. The need for specialist mental health support is as high as it's ever been; Blue Smile's team has had to completely change the way they work to ensure the children the support they need. I wanted to give them something back and show that their hard work and dedication really matters.*

A parent who took on a fundraising challenge for Blue Smile

