

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 be 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 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

The Norwich Centre
7 Earlham Road
Norwich, NR2 3RA

Phone: 01603 617709
E-mail: info@norwichcentre.org

Registered Charity No 1005967

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 to 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

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 counselling services offered to local organisations and businesses, this means that any additional costs involved in improving accessibility need to be funded from additional fundraising and income streams.

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 purchased a hearing loop to assist those with a hearing impairment who have a hearing aid with a T setting.

We endeavour to make sure all our staff have received disability awareness training. We have a relationship with a local trainer and expert who offers training to our staff.

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 2020 and is reviewed regularly to incorporate appropriate changes and feedback received.

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

Networking and outreach is another way to reach into the local community and raise 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 2017 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.

We review our marketing and communications regularly to adapt to feedback and assessment of what is working and what needs changing but must acknowledge the limitations of minimal budget and lack of staff availability as they are focused on the day to day work of the centre.

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.

Maggie Southworth – Centre Director

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