Charities and Covid 19

A Support Through Court Perspective

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Whilst 2020 brought difficulties for everyone in relation to the global spread of Covid-19, the charity sector was particularly affected. 1 in 10 UK charities were expected to face bankruptcy by the end of 2020, with the sector experiencing an estimated £10bn shortfall following an increased need for services.[[1]](#footnote-1) 8 out 10 charities are reported to earn less than £100,000 a year.[[2]](#footnote-2) NVCO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations), classifies charities earning less than £100,000 as small charities and found that nearly two-thirds of these charities have made significant cuts to services.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I spoke to Nicky Bancroft, Birmingham manager for Support Through Court, in November 2020 to get a first-hand view of the pandemic related issues experienced by small charities.

Support Through Court is a charity which provides emotional, digital, practical and procedural support to people unable to afford legal representation. Their support primarily focuses on those facing proceedings in the civil and family courts. Nicky emphasised that the charity’s ethos focuses on allowing clients to retain their autonomy so they can find ways of managing their own case. In this way, volunteers act as a supporting figure as opposed to an advisory one.

When asked about the challenges experienced by the charity during Covid-19, Nicky focused on four main areas: resources and size of the charity, supporting those without access to technology, uncertainty regarding volunteer retention and funding.

**Resources and Charity Size**

During the first lockdown, the lack of resources available to the charity became apparent. Nicky mentioned that the Birmingham Office did not have a phone with an answering machine at this point. This limited the ways clients could make contact with the Birmingham office to email. Fortunately, the charity had recently established a National Helpline service. Staff and volunteers were also able to make return contact by phone, ensuring that their number was withheld when calling from a personal number.

Moving to a fully online system also came with its challenges. As a small charity, Support Through Court were required to consider how exiting IT systems could be adapted to suit new ways of working whilst ensuring the charity remained GDPR compliant. New pieces of technology were introduced; however, Nicky attributes the success of the new system to the charity’s overall ability to respond swiftly to the new circumstances, which can be easier for a small organisation.

**Supporting Clients Who Cannot Access Technology**

Technology opened up important opportunities for the charity through the introduction of a volunteer staffed telephone helpline in March 2020. The helpline was created in partnership with Birmingham City University and allowed the existing bank of volunteers to support clients from home without having to travel into the court. The helpline, however, also made the charity aware of the number of vulnerable clients who were not receiving the face-to-face support they really needed.

Support Through Court was aware of the importance of in person support for these clients in providing emotional support through a friendly conversation over a cup of tea. The charity, therefore, decided to open its offices when it was safe to do so, with Birmingham being one of first to reopen in August 2020 utilising a triage system to arrange appointment only sessions. The appointments were time limited and required a pre-appointment conversation with the client to ensure they had key documentation, allowing volunteers to use the sessions effectively.

**Volunteer Intake**

Nicky also reinforced that the organisation, unlike law firms, is reliant on the work of volunteers for the delivery of its services. To achieve this, there needs to be a consistent system of training and recruiting volunteers which has been made difficult by the pandemic.

Support Through Court has to limit the intake of student volunteers and Nicky explained that the reasons for this are primarily due to training and funding. Volunteers working from home through the telephone service needed to be experienced enough to work unsupervised but with support available from a duty manager scheme. The reduced capacity of the organisation also meant that Support Through Court would only work with universities they had a full, formal partnership with. Full, formal partnerships provided a necessary form of funding for the charity.

Social distancing also affected volunteer intake as the number of volunteers who could observe as part of their training. In 2019, the Birmingham service had the capacity to train up to 80 volunteers, which could not be achieved due to social distancing measures in 2020.

Everchanging Covid-19 precautions also influenced the charity’s recruitment and training procedures. When the offices reopened in August 2020, Support Through Court received lot of enquires from graduates and the charity recruited some of them. Support Through Court were conscious that many of their regular volunteers were at increased risk from Coronavirus due to age and it was unclear how this might impact on volunteer attendance.

These volunteers were trained quickly in case infection rates rose to create a robust team of volunteers if people needed to self-isolate.

Student involvement has also been limited as supervision and support is harder to provide virtually and involving students is reliant on clients choosing Zoom or email queries as their communication method. This is because emails can be checked before being sent out and experienced volunteers can be present in Zoom meetings. Whilst this is a reduced opportunity, Nicky maintains that it is still a valuable opportunity for students, which is currently hard to come by.

**Funding**

Support Through Court is fortunate to be supported by the Ministry of Justice. Despite reduced client numbers the Ministry of Justice have maintained their financial commitment to the charity as they recognise it provides a much-needed service. HMCTS also provided support as Support Through Court is not required to pay accommodation or phone line fees for their in-court offices. The fundraising team also worked tirelessly to apply for specific grants available at the time, which helped the organisation narrowly reach their yearly target.

Whilst this is positive, Nicky reinforced that the independence of the charity rests on obtaining corporate partnerships and through community fundraising- which is difficult to achieve due to Covid-19 measures. This means that the charity is still experiencing financial pressure and traditional forms of funding are crucial in allowing the charity to continue helping people.

**A Silver Lining**

Despite the many Covid-19 related challenges experienced by the charity, Nicky is proud of the volunteers’ work during this time. Even though support could not be delivered in the same way, the volunteers’ commitment to adapt and deliver support through the telephone line meant that there was never a gap in accessing support. Support remained accessible for those who needed it, even in person support, when it was possible. Nicky explains that many organisations were unable to provide in person support in any form during 2020 so she is proud that Support Through Court were able to reintroduce that form of support safely.

Support Through Court has shown that Covid-19 has challenged charities in multiple ways such as resources, funding, and technology, but despite this charities have continued to support those who need it during this difficult time.

1. Patrick Butler, ‘Coronavirus leaves 1 in 10 UK Charities facing bankruptcy this year’ *The Guardian* (London, 9 June 2020) < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/coronavirus-leaves-one-in-10-uk-charities-facing-bankruptcy-this-year> > accessed 10 January 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paul Lynch, ‘Covid: Small Charities face slow death’ *BBC News* (London, 6 Nov 2020) < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54754902> > accessed 10 January 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Patrick Butler, ‘Coronavirus leaves 1 in 10 UK Charities facing bankruptcy this year’ The Guardian (London, 9 June 2020) < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/coronavirus-leaves-one-in-10-uk-charities-facing-bankruptcy-this-year> > accessed 10 January 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)