



2021/22 Report to Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

31 January 2022

Our work with Young Carers in Abingdon-on-Thames and Across Southern Oxfordshire

The delivery of our support services to young carers in Abingdon and across the area during 2021/22 continued despite being affected by the pandemic.

During the early lockdown of 2021 the pandemic restricted our face to face work; as a result we continued to be creative in using Zoom and Teams in contacting young carers and continued to circulate our quarterly newsletter.

The lockdown highlighted a concerning issue of young carers struggling with home schooling, revealing families without online access, others needing more than one machine for siblings and young carers using, sometimes sharing, smart phones to access teaching. Be Free YC responded by successfully campaigning for laptops for young carers. Many local companies and organisations donated machines and funding for new machines. As a result over 50 young carers in Abingdon and across the area received a machine to properly equip them to access schooling at home. Of particular note was the involvement of Sophos of Abingdon for which we are very grateful.

All our online registrations and activities continued operating within Government Guidelines.

Feedback from families and young carers including those in Abingdon continues to highlight the mental impact of the pandemic. The additional stress and anxiety young carers were, and are experiencing, focused on worrying about the health of the person they care for, worrying about bringing the virus into their homes and worrying about their futures. We have seen real hardship and have been working effectively with other agencies, including foodbanks to improve these situations. The mental health of young carers is a real concern and will clearly impact for some time beyond the pandemic.

As the year progressed and the guidelines relaxed, Be Free YC was able to deliver face to face activities during the Summer, including a well attended family beach trip to the Cotswolds Water Park and a family fun day. It was very clear that young carers welcomed the social interaction and the opportunity to have some fun.

Our wonderful team of volunteer befrienders maintained their links with young carers, meeting weekly 1 to 1 to give some quality time for the young carer away from the family. Before Christmas a group of young carers and their befrienders went on a trip to Wookey Hole, Somerset to explore and meet Father Christmas. It was a long day, a great experience and so enjoyed by the young carers. Our trips, including this one, had pick up points in Abingdon.

Late Autumn 2021 saw the impact of the new COVID variant which restricted our operations to online. Nevertheless in collaboration with Shipton Hub we distributed Christmas hampers to 80 families and arranged an online Christmas party which was well attended by young carers from Abingdon and across Southern Oxfordshire.

New initiatives introduced this year were changes to our young carers service offer and counselling in school.

The service changes were introduced in September 2021 to offer a more targeted support to teenage young carers who are a particularly hard to reach group. A secure Facebook page was launched together with monthly 'Hangout' meet ups. The location and activity for a meet up is chosen by the young carers and are proving increasingly popular. Currently, we have over 50

young carers signed up to the Facebook page and 19 attending the meet ups including 9 from Abingdon. These meetings are invaluable bringing these teenage young carers together; we are starting to see friendships materialising beyond the meet ups, all of which is helping to reduce the isolation, stress and anxiety they have been experiencing during the pandemic.

The counselling service involves a volunteer trained counsellor on her placement year meeting with a young carer in school once a week over a defined period. Numbers are understandably limited by the capacity of the counsellor. The young carers chosen for this service are struggling to cope with the current situation. To be honest, we need more counsellors; this is proving to be a very successful service making a real difference to the young carers involved. This service is in its infancy, we are working to extend this service into secondary school in Abingdon this year.

We continue to be committed to offer support to young carers in Abingdon-on-Thames and across Southern Oxfordshire and are very grateful to the Town Council for its support for our work.