

Sustaining Disability Services online during COVID-19

Joan O'Donnell, Mac MacLachlan, Deirdre Desmond

1. How disability services responded to closure of face-to-face services

2. The emergence of online services

The Problem situation

- Disabled people and their families now at home with little support
- Some people experiencing isolation and exacerbated mental health issues
- Poor levels of digital literacy amongst some staff as well as people who access services
- Lack of technological readiness within organisational infrastructure.

Methodology

- Interviews with 12 service providers to understand the circumstances they were in regarding staff and organizational capacity, enablers and restraints on connecting with people online, innovation and design of online services

"We ran out of Wi-Fi at one stage and staff were using their own mobile phones as hotspots to create, zoom classes, and so staff have gone beyond what they would be expected really, so they were using their own equipment, their own phones, to still make that contact"

Organisational Responses

- Innovation emerged in ad hoc and isolated ways within organisations
- Different Platform preferences (Zoom, Microsoft Teams most popular).
- Wide range of sessions: from Art to Yoga, to training programmes

Complexities:

- Keeping contact with people and being a source of support
- Access to devices and broadband
- Managing technology including online facilitation
- Designing, Programming & delivering for wide range of need
- Creating conditions for connection and psychological safety
- Balancing Individual & group needs, individual & family needs
- Balancing work/life balance

3. Findings

Meaningful connection and participation can be sustained online

- Deepening relationships between people accessing services, staff and family members
- Greater participation for some who could not attend due to health or travel or anxiety,
- Less participation for those without access to broadband/devices.
- Shifting power dynamics between organisation and service delivery teams/ attendees (who now began to facilitate some sessions).



4. Next Steps

Enhance collective learning in the design and practice of running online community spaces for and with disabled people

Longitudinal Qualitative Research Project:

1. How can collective learning support effective development of online services for people with disabilities?
2. What conditions are necessary to create meaningful connection in online platforms?
3. How can social learning enhance professional practice that supports meaningful connection?
4. What are the systems wide implications for professional practice and service design?

"I think we're going to be learning from this for a while. It's a once in a century type thing: no previous pandemic will have happened with the internet, for example, and the kind of global connectivity we now have"

Disability services acting as Complex Adaptive System

- Organisations operating far from usual level of equilibrium could acted as self-organising systems that kept system in operation