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## **Making our Services Accessible to All**

### **Context**

Off the Record offers a range of mental health services for young people in the London Boroughs of Croydon, Merton and Sutton. We're committed to making our services fully accessible to everyone and that means taking serious steps to remove barriers and reach out to those who might find it harder to make contact with us.

What might stop young people accessing our services?

- Lack of **knowledge of services** (including possible misconceptions).
- **Lack of specialist facilities** e.g. access for young people with disabilities or language needs
- Whether the support offered is **'fit for purpose'** in terms of national standards/guidelines, type of support offered, availability (opening hours, venues, response times), effectiveness
- Perception of services/types of support as **not being relevant/acceptable for some groups** of young people e.g. young black men or LGBTQI+ young people, either because of cultural norms or stigma or because service doesn't reflect that community in terms of staff composition, building environment or images used in publicity/website

Strategy for addressing these areas:

### **Knowledge of the service**

Our services are self-referral but many young people are signposted by professionals, friends or family, or find access through posters, cards, leaflets and the internet. Thus, our publicity and networking need to be up-to-date and effective.

Building our profile with young people: increasingly young people are likely to access our website as a first point of information and can 'sign-up' for support through the website. We have a dedicated worker renewing and updating our website and the website has been adapted for search engine optimisation. We are active on social media, publicising our own activities but also re-posting on behalf of partners. Members of the team visit the largest college in the area weekly to offer information about our services and we regularly attend other community events.

Building our profile with professionals/local community: we regularly promote our services to local professionals and service providers including GP's, schools/colleges, mental health services. Promotional materials are sent out around any key activities e.g. our regular support lines and webinars. Our community workers and schools teams particularly work in partnership with other services such as Croydon Drop In, Croydon BME Forum, Legacy Youth Centre, Sutton Uplift. We also work in partnership with local CAMHS services in all boroughs including through SPA/SPOC (Single Point of Access/Contact) arrangements often taking direct referrals.

Off the Record has a strong reputation amongst local professionals which is maintained and developed through our partnership working and through our work on local strategic partnerships such as CAMHS Partnership Boards in all boroughs. This work further builds knowledge of the service amongst a wide range of professionals.

### **Lack of specialist facilities**

Physical access: the charity's main buildings in all boroughs have access ramps, ground floor counselling rooms and accessible toilet facilities. However, we are rarely approached by young people with physical disabilities and need to undertake direct work to better understand how to promote access for these young people. In Merton we work from a shared building which means that young people have to access through a communal reception area that may be off-putting for some.

Location: in most boroughs we operate from one main site which may not be easily accessible for young people from different parts of our boroughs. For example, our main Croydon building is located in the north of the borough, an area not particularly accessible for young people in the south or east of Croydon. It is also in an area that some young people may be reluctant to access particularly in the evenings. Since the recent pandemic we have been offering telephone and video counselling, therefore making it easier for those who find it difficult to travel to access our services. This offer will continue alongside the ability to access support face to face.

Language: the charity is skilled at working through interpreters particularly in our refugee and asylum seeker service which is accessed by large numbers of young people with more limited English. This service has specific funding for using interpreters. Our general counselling services don't have specific funding for interpreters but we will aim to make interpreters available for any young person who needs it, particularly through partnerships with statutory providers. This includes BSL interpreters.

### **'Fit for purpose' mental health support**

National standards/guidelines: Off the Record has been part of the 'Children and Young People's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies' (CYP-IAPT) programme working to national standards and committing to ongoing service improvement and development.

Off the Record is also a member of British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) and our Croydon counselling service is BACP accredited. This accreditation has to be renewed annually and helps to ensure we're continuing to meet high professional standards which is important in building confidence amongst young people and professionals about the quality of our services.

Type of support: our counsellors and mental health staff have been trained in many different ways of working and through different programmes although they all work within a broadly humanistic framework. We're committed to offering a range of different types of support including text based, telephone and video appointments that allow access to young people who are unable or unwilling to attend counselling in person. Some staff have specialist training and we are able to offer a limited number of CBT and IPT-A interventions. We also offer group interventions and online webinars for young people to help meet young people's different needs and preferences.

Availability: Off the Record operates 6 days p.w. including offering evening appointments to help make our services more accessible at times that work for young people. We run a weekly Saturday Support Line which also operates through holiday periods and at times of increased stress for young people e.g. exam results days. We will shortly be extending the support line hours to 6 days p.w. to further increase accessibility. We're committed to ensuring young people have access to help at the 'point of need' not the 'point of service availability' and in 2022 we're introducing a new First Contact Team to make sure that all YP have fast access to initial engagement and support. This will be particularly important in

addressing service waiting times which have increased over the last year due to an ever increasing demand.

Effectiveness: Off the Record uses a range of CYP and adult IAPT compliant outcome measures to monitor effectiveness of counselling with young people. The adult IAPT measures specifically measure levels of depression, anxiety and phobias. The young person's CORE measures the areas of risk, well-being, functioning and problems. Outcome 'scores' are collated and reported quarterly to service commissioners. Recently, we have also started looking at sub-sections of the outcome data for specific populations e.g. young black men and this has identified specific work that is needed to improve outcomes for this group which are outlined in the section below. In addition to the outcome measures, young people are invited to provide feedback formally through 'Experience of Service' questionnaires and informally through our regular 'Have Your Say' group.

### **Lack of Relevance/Acceptability**

Gender: our general counselling services are disproportionately used by young women (70%) rather than young men (30%). We understand that young men can sometimes find it harder to feel ok about reaching out to talking therapies and we're working to address this through challenging stereotypes in our advertising, website and social media; recruiting more male counsellors as role-models; and going out to where young men gather rather than waiting for them to come to us. We are also now meeting increasing numbers of young people who define as non-binary and moving forward will need to make sure that we find strategies to make sure our services are relevant and acceptable for them.

Ethnicity: overall our statistics in terms of ethnicity of our service users are broadly in line with borough statistics e.g. 60% of young people using our Croydon counselling service are non-White British. However, we are particularly aware of the much smaller proportion of young black men accessing support and that those who do access counselling tend to have poorer outcomes than their 'white' counterparts. We are actively reaching out to young black men through our community team e.g. training local barbers to have mental health conversations, working in the community with those impacted by serious youth violence. We will also be embedding a new inclusion and diversity training programme for all staff in 2022 including considering how unconscious bias may impact counselling outcomes.

Sexuality: LGBTQI+ young people are significantly over-represented in mental health statistics with particularly high levels of suicidal ideation as a result of stigma, isolation and bullying. Despite this, focus on creating relevant and acceptable services more commonly focus on issues of gender and ethnicity rather than sexuality. We recognise that there is substantial work to be done within Off the Record and other counselling services to address this inequality. One of the motivations for creating our online counselling service was to create a more anonymous service that might be more accessible to those facing stigma and in the last year 37% of online clients identified as LGBTQI+. This is not matched by numbers accessing our face-to-face services. We have seen a marked increase in the number of 'trans' young people approaching counselling in the last two years and any strategy to address inequality of access in terms of sexuality will need to include the needs of these young people.

Diversity: we have a large and diverse staff and volunteer team in terms of ethnicity, age and gender which hopefully enhances young people's experience of accessing a service that is relevant to them. However, there are challenges in terms of smaller numbers of male staff and a disproportionate number of 'white' women particularly at service management level. We are actively seeking to address this by promoting staff and volunteer vacancies within BAME communities and through the new diversity and inclusion training programme in 2022.

We are committed to ensuring that all our information, both online and on leaflets and posters, depict a diverse range of young people in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and faith. This is also key in terms of our social media postings.

### **Reviewing this strategy**

We are always open to new ideas about how we can genuinely make our services accessible for all. This strategy will be reviewed annually but we welcome feedback at any time.

*Last updated – December 2021*