



# BRIDGE

## CREATIVE

KEEPING PEOPLE  
CONNECTED PROJECT

Evaluation

## INTRODUCTION TO BRIDGE CREATIVE

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Bridge Creative is a Third Sector organisation that supports adults with a learning disability and autistic adults across County Durham to reach their potential and find meaningful paid employment. The organisation's ethos is driven by the needs of those within the community, who are often overlooked and unsupported, to overcome the many barriers society has placed in front of them. Their main goal is to support people to gain work experience and move into paid employment.

They provide a safe and supported work environment for people to gain the skills and experience needed to be able to find a job. They also understand the many barriers that prevent people from moving into employment and tackle these as the first steps to people being able to achieve their goals. Bridge Creative supports people to build confidence, improve mental health and wellbeing, increase social interaction, develop relationships and find meaningful, fulfilling opportunities that improve their lives. They support people to overcome barriers such as social isolation, lack of experience and opportunity, mental health and reduced access to services.

“

I love working with Bridge Creative and it has honestly got my confidence up so well. It has changed my career and I love what I do.

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# BACKGROUND TO THE KEEPING PEOPLE CONNECTED PROJECT



The Keeping People Connected project was developed in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 emergency, where people were required to stay at home under 'lockdown' with no social face to face opportunities outside of the household and limited support networks. As such

people were at significant risk of loneliness, uncertainty, risky behaviour (including personal management of Covid-19) and isolation. The project was co-designed from mid-March 2020 through a collaboration of 12 community and voluntary sector organisations, co-ordinated by the Learning Disability Network and Inclusion North. The project went live across North Cumbria and the North East on 14 April 2020. Bridge Creative were one of the voluntary sector partners on the project.

During the pandemic the Keeping People Connected service was the main focus of Bridge Creative's work, supporting people to keep safe, well and connected. The service is ongoing and offers regular emotional and mental wellbeing support for adults with a learning disability and autistic adults across County Durham, as well as supporting people to understand and keep up to date with the latest Covid-19 information. The service also aims to build confidence, improve social interaction, develop friendships and connect with other services to ensure people get the support they need.

Support is provided via phone, text, email and social media. Daily group video calls include group chats, wellbeing sessions, games, quizzes, etc, and there is a closed Facebook group offering a safe space for people to socialise online. There is a focus on supporting people to be safe online. In addition to online support, physical activity packs are also posted out to people and doorstep support has also been provided for those who need it. The service is available 10am-4pm each day, Monday-Saturday.

**There are three different levels of support based on need.**

**Intensive** – contacting people at least once a day. People receiving intensive support usually live alone or have few support networks in place. They may also have moderate to severe mental health problems, poor physical health or a lack of emotional support.

**High** – contacting people at least three times a week. People receiving high support usually need support with social interaction, confidence-building, and lower level mental health issues such as anxiety or loneliness.

**Maintenance** – contacting people once a week. People receiving maintenance level support usually need the reassurance of knowing the support is there if they need it. It is a regular check in with people to see if they need support with anything. As and when support is provided Bridge Creative's contact with the person increases but the issues can often be dealt with quite easily and people return to needing maintenance level support.

The team move people between the different levels based on their changing needs and circumstances.

Referrals come from Wellbeing for Life, Police Community Support Officers, GP surgeries, Social Prescribing Link Workers, Homegroup, Durham Enable, ROAD, Wear Valley and Durham Dales Affective Disorders Team and self-referrals through word of mouth.

## DATA

The evaluation gathered a range of data to get a full picture of project activity and impact. This included

- Quarterly impact surveys (November 2020; April 2021; September 2021)
- Semi-structured interviews with staff
- Video interview footage of people who have benefitted from the service

The project counts total clients – this number includes the people who are currently not receiving any calls or support but who could become active if their needs changed. Active clients are people currently receiving support, whether this be directly receiving calls, or accessing the closed Facebook group.

## IMPACT - IN NUMBERS

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The maximum capacity for the project within the funding available is **100 active clients**, with **85 people receiving at least one call a week**. The rest would be **accessing online support**.



The service has **run without a waiting list**, which is part of its success. The service **can take referrals immediately** and make contact with the person straight away.



The service has supported over **170 people** across County Durham since its inception in April 2020.

The project is in demand and **regularly goes beyond its maximum capacity** rather than create a waiting list or turn people away.

Around **17% of the 109 people** being supported in November 2021 were living alone and the service has been particularly vital for this group of people.



The service tracked how people were feeling, using a questionnaire with a graded scoring system. This enabled them to see if things like confidence, wellbeing and mental health were improving, staying the same or deteriorating. It also helped to measure the impact of the project and to plan future activity to meet people's needs. For example, between April and September 2021, people's confidence on average had gone down, but social interaction and overall wellbeing had increased.

## IMPACT - IN WORDS

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C D

Examples of the types of support the team have provided are

- supporting people to ensure they are on the Learning Disability Register to get their vaccine
- providing equipment like an iPad, inviting people onto IT skills courses and supporting them to access other leisure opportunities online
- providing equipment like a 'text-to-speech' pen to support someone with low literacy to access their mail, especially doctors' letters and bank statements. Supporting people to increase their independence and to stay safer
- supporting people to understand the information about Covid-19 they found online and to know how accurate and reliable it was, for example what anti-vaxxers have posted
- doing research to help connect people to access other opportunities in their community
- sharing Clinical Commissioning Group communications via social media including promoting the vaccination bus and walk-in vaccination clinics
- picking up issues, such as experience of online bullying, and planning workshops around these
- supporting people who tested positive for Covid-19, delivering food and keeping up daily contact
- picking up safeguarding issues and working with other agencies to support people into safer situations

*"I would have been dead or living on the streets without your support, I've had the best night's sleep in years and I can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel".*

## Examples of the project providing new opportunities are:

- supporting people to run some of the online sessions, including the weekly wellbeing session and some of the quiz sessions
- supporting people into virtual, online volunteer placements to help build skills and confidence
- supporting people into employment despite the pandemic
- having a social life online, finding a new community, making friends, filling the gap that Covid-19 created, or the gap that was there anyway but had been hidden

*"I love working with Bridge Creative and it has honestly got my confidence up so well. It has changed my career and I love what I do."*

*"They have promoted the next level in my life"*

*"He loves the course [creative placement] and loves working on the project. He talked about a funny thing that happened yesterday that made them all laugh - he was working on a pallet and accidentally screwed his glove to the wood!"*

## What the people who benefitted said about the difference the project made:

- the project gave me more freedom, more independence, more confidence
- helped to bring me out of myself
- helped to keep depression at bay – I could be honest about how I was feeling
- helped to keep me motivated and active
- helped keep me safe and happy – there was someone looking out for me
- helped me build new skills
- I got more people to talk to

*"I'd be lost without you"*

*"Thank you so much honestly for all of the help you have given me."*

*"Bridge Creative has been a lifeline and I have never seen anything like it before. It is wonderful. I have told so many people about it."*

*"He would be dead now if it was not for Bridge Creative, he just would not have been able to cope."*

*"I want to tell you this, you are really special to me because you have been there for me every time I have been down."*

*"I feel more in control, and have the power to get in touch with you, message you on WhatsApp. I feel good and feel able to ask for help from you if I need it."*

## IMPACT - IN MONEY



The service started on 14th April 2020 and has received various pots of continuation funding to enable it to run until the end of November 2021.

A total of  
**£71,070**  
has been received for  
the 20 months of work.

Based on the project running at capacity, with **100 active clients** of which at least **85 receive at least one call per week**, this is at a **cost of £8.75 per person per week**.

This is the equivalent cost of a panini and a latte at Costa.

# ANALYSIS

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There are several aspects to Bridge Creative's Keeping People Connected project that stand out as contributing to its success and effectiveness.

It has been highly responsive to both the changing Covid-19 situation and to people's changing needs and has consistently changed over time to respond to these.

The team actively look for the barriers that get in the way and prevent people having the same opportunities as others, and they work hard to remove them. The service is extremely flexible about what they are prepared to do to support people. If they do refer people on to another service, they stay involved with the person and help to follow up to make sure things are happening. There is no time limit to the support people can receive.

*"We know the impact on people of being passed from service to service."*

The project has not just supported people with a learning disability and autistic people but has also provided valuable support to their families.

The project is very person-centred and works with people where they are at now. As each person makes progress, Bridge Creative do not step away or bring their involvement to an end. They keep thinking of new ways to support the person to progress to the next level. They respond quickly to any feedback they get and to any changes for the person. They celebrate people's achievements and support them to move on, in their own time, on their own terms.

The project promotes high levels of peer support. Lots of opportunities are created for people to take on new tasks, try new things and to take on more responsibility. People's achievements inspire each other to raise aspirations.

The project has created a safe space and ongoing trusting relationships. Within this environment people have felt empowered to disclose unsafe situations. Regular video calls have also enabled the team to witness situations that otherwise might be hidden. There are also enough people in the team so that everyone can find someone they would like to support them and there is a diversity of experience to deal with the wide variety of issues that come up.

The project uncovered high levels of mental health needs, loneliness, suicidal thoughts and boredom. For many people, the project has been the only regular social contact they have had during the pandemic.

The need for this project will not end as Covid-19 is brought under control. People have more anxiety about coming back out of lockdown, and many have lost some of the independence skills they previously had.

The project has only uncovered issues that were there before the pandemic and will remain after. This project came about because of Covid-19 but it was needed before and it will continue to be needed.

# CONCLUSION

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Bridge Creative's Keeping People Connected project is an excellent, highly cost-effective service that should be re-commissioned. It is easing the pressure on statutory services by offering regular, reliable, flexible, person-centred support to at least 100 people every week, for the cost of a coffee and a sandwich.

Pre-pandemic, County Durham had one of the highest levels of unemployment among adults with a learning disability in the country, at just 0.6%, compared to the national average of 6%. This includes all forms of paid employment (part-time, zero-hour contracts, self-employment), and it is likely to be even lower following the pandemic. At the same time, there has been a reduction in many other opportunities that people with a learning disability and autistic people would have had access to pre-pandemic. The Keeping People Connected project works alongside other Bridge Creative initiatives to support people into volunteering and employment and to connect people to social and leisure opportunities.

People are reporting long waiting times for other services, making the continuation of the Keeping People Connected project even more essential.

Bridge Creative, like many other organisations are facing recruitment challenges to be able to sustain the service at its current level. The Keeping People Connected project should be re-funded for a minimum of 3 years, to support Bridge Creative to grow capacity in the organisation, to help ensure future sustainability and to ease recruitment pressures by being able to offer full time contracts.

Bridge Creative need to update their costings for the project, reflecting the rising costs of delivering services, including inflation in 2022 being an estimated 4% and the rise in the National Living Wage in April 2022.

A fully costed 3 year plan should be created to sit alongside this evaluation for the consideration of funders and commissioners.

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Written by Inclusion North.  
November 2021