

AWARE Response to Questionnaire UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 - Rule 9
Request to AWARE Reference: M2/R9R/AWARE

Please see below in response to the information requested:

We have focused our responses on questions 1-3 and not commented on the further questions

1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to Northern Ireland only.

AWARE is the Depression Charity for Northern Ireland. We are a regional voluntary organisation established in Northern Ireland in 1996. We are the only charity in Northern Ireland dedicated exclusively to raising awareness of depression as a serious mental health condition and to enabling people with depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder to access support to help them with their condition. AWARE was founded by people with personal experience of depression and bipolar disorder. People who were concerned about the negative impact this has on peoples' lives and the lack of understanding and support available in the community at that time. They were driven by a passion to ensure that others should not suffer as they did. This user led ethos remains a key driver of AWARE's work and the majority of our volunteers and staff bring to the organisation the unique insight of personal experience.

We provide the following services to people with depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder:

- Support groups for people with depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, their families and carers
- Education and training programmes including Living Life to the Full, Mood Matters, Mindfulness and Mental Health First Aid
- Information outreach, public talks, booklets and factsheets
- An interactive website

Our Vision is of a future where everyone can talk about their mental health openly, access services appropriate to their needs and develop the skills and knowledge to maintain positive mental health

Our Mission is

- To promote emotional health and wellbeing
- To help people build resilience and maintain positive mental health
- To ensure people with depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder are aware of and can access appropriate support
- To increase public understanding of depression and reduce the stigma surrounding the illness

AWARE is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity in Northern Ireland. The work of the organisation is confined to Northern Ireland only.

2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.

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AWARE provides services to the wider community in Northern Ireland. Our services are open to anyone impacted by mental health – this includes those specifically experiencing depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder but also has a wider remit in educating the population about good and poor mental health, how to look after their own mental health and how to support others who may be experiencing poor mental health.

3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and May 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland.

During the pandemic AWARE continued to offer our services but in a diversified manner.

Specifically, we each week provide (a) support groups in 25 locations for people suffering with depression and (b) a range of education seminars/ programmes and training courses to support people to learn more about mental health.

Pre pandemic these services were all provided face to face. Due to Covid restrictions we moved these to online services but continued to support those in need. Indeed we found during the pandemic that we supported many more individuals than we normally would due to increased pressure and needs and the availability of our services online.

We were able to set up our support groups online so that individuals could still link in for peer group support. We were able to help our members navigate around how this would work and support their needs around linking in online through ongoing support and information over the phone initially to ensure they could link in if possible.

We also set up What's App groups for all our established groups to ensure support group facilitators and staff could keep in touch with members and members could keep in touch with each other. These proved to be very successful and very supportive to our members, particularly during lockdowns where individuals were unable to leave their homes or those who were living alone. These What's App groups continued post lockdown and some groups have continued with these, managed by the facilitators or members themselves.

We continued to be active with our Support Mail and Support Calls services and encouraged our members to link in and avail of these as they needed to. We saw an increase in this service activity from 2020 – 22, particularly during the 'hard lockdown' periods and during the Winter months.

We also set up a 'Check in service' for our service users where our Support Officers would phone and check in with our members to ensure they were doing ok and have a chat and keep connecting and letting them know we were still there to support them. For some of our service users this was the only contact they would have on a regular basis. From some of these calls staff could signpost as needed or liaise with other agencies on behalf of the service user. This service ensured our members stayed in touch with us and were able to reconnect and attend our groups again once they were reopened.

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Once restrictions were lifted and we were able to safely re-open our groups, we did so with all safety measures in place – ensuring social distancing was in place, use of hand sanitiser, masks as needed etc. This ensured members felt safe to return whilst still being able to benefit from the peer support which is invaluable to them. We were also able to identify some venues that were no longer fit for purpose once we were fully operational – due to space issues and ventilation issues that were highlighted as a result of the pandemic. We were active in sourcing new venues for our groups as needed and successful with new venues for many of our established groups

By May 2022 we have been fully operational with all face to face groups back up and running successfully. We have continued to provide online groups as an option for some individuals who now prefer this option and also continued with some What's app groups and check in calls as needed

Due to lockdown restrictions, we saw an increase in people engaging with us digitally across our online platforms. In order to meet the mental health needs of the public at the time, we shared mental health information and resources on our website and social media channels. We put a strong focus on engaging our audience online through video content to ensure we remained a source of support for those in need. We also diversified our fundraising strategy, running virtual fundraising campaigns in place of face-to-face events.

Our education programmes were all re designed for online delivery making it more interactive and interesting on an online platform. We designed a 28-page online booklet for managing your mental health during Covid and challenging times and widely disseminated this through all contacts in schools, community groups and workplaces. We mailed out to schools and included resources, signposting and online delivery options for students. Videos and updates on practical things to do to look after their mental health were sent to schools regularly as well as updates. At the initial crucial stage of COVID we were able to act quickly and immediately offer and deliver mindfulness and 6 week CBT based programmes online in 2020 for those experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression. We reached almost 2000 participants.

The demand for Workplace and workforce support increased and delivery initially took the form of short Mental Health talks. Workplaces were particularly requesting information on managing Mental Health whilst working from home. We designed a programme and delivered this along with support resources for home working. We significantly increased training online to those who support others with their mental health in the PHA's Mental Health First Aid programme. To include health professionals, community leaders, teachers etc.

Yours Sincerely

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Personal Data

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