

Seizing the opportunity to do things differently

Outsourcing remote assessments to an occupational therapy service provider has helped Hampshire County Council to improve waiting times. Here we look at how the project worked and supported service development.

Long before a state of health emergency was officially declared by the UK government in May 2020, as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, professional concerns were already widespread about how local authorities across the UK could continue to deliver cost effective, quality social care services to the elderly and most vulnerable people in our communities.

The pandemic hit the ball into the air and right over the outfield fence; local authority social care waiting lists soared and became substantial in most areas. There was a massive demand for occupational therapy services, with people presenting more complex needs because of delayed health interventions.

Employing occupational therapists in local authorities became an issue as many sought better conditions with the NHS or other employers. One RCOT member surveyed in the latest Workforce Survey report (RCOT 2023b) summed up the problem, saying: 'Being told not to work to gold standard due to capacity issues provides a huge amount of stress.'

A decision to outsource

As part of Hampshire County Council's response to the changing landscape, the local authority's Reablement Team seized the opportunity to do things differently in the short term, outsourcing services to improve waiting times, and using the experience to support the implementation of new ways of working in the longer term.

Michelle Logan, Service Manager for Hampshire County Council, explains why they decided to outsource assessments and how this has helped.

'We sought to outsource some of our services last year, due to a combination of the impact of the pandemic on waiting times for occupational therapy, as well as to temporarily fill a vacancy gap within the service. This was a large scale project; 1,600 assessments were outsourced across the county,' she says.

'What this gave us was the opportunity to take stock, review our ways of working, and then develop a methodology to help manage demand. We were able to look at how new ways of working could support our occupational therapy workforce in embracing digital technology in line with the Health and Care Professions Council's *Digital skills and new technologies standards* (HCPC 2023) and RCOTs *Digital occupational therapy guidance* (RCOT 2023).'

Michelle adds: 'Our countywide view on the distribution of work and time enabled us to consider how we might organise our resource to optimum potential. As a consequence, we realised that a significant proportion of our work could be completed remotely. This would not only save time but improve people's outcomes by providing an assessment sooner.'

'As we capitalised on remote, virtual assessments and reduced our waiting times, we improved the pace at which we implemented virtual working, rolling out workshops, and changing our casefile audits and supervision with staff to ensure that virtual contacts were being utilised.

'It helped us to identify the potential benefits of a remote approach for many service users, but also when we need to opt for a face-to-face assessment. Adopting such an approach resulted in a further 700 people being removed from the waiting list.'

Planning, delivery and review

Access Independent was successful in its bid to supply community-focused, outsourced occupational therapy services to Hampshire



County Council. Catia Teixeira, Occupational Therapy and Social Care Administrator, worked with the council, from strategic planning to delivery and post project review:

'Our outsourced team was charged with helping to clear the backlog, reduce waiting times, and support improved patient care,' Catia explains. 'We carried out 800 assessments over the first six months; the majority of these were done remotely and required major adaptation.'

'With over 20 self-employed therapists working on the contract, this was challenging. The referrals would come to me on Friday afternoon and on most occasions there would be at least 50, sometimes around 80.'

'I would carry out the triage process with the client first, explaining what a remote assessment would involve, for example mobility and property, daily activity, medical history and medications. They were given the option to have a friend, relative, or neighbour join them for support in all, or part, of the process.'

Of the assessment process Catia adds: 'The remote assessments were undertaken by our occupational therapists, mostly via WhatsApp or Facetime. We would always complete a holistic assessment and most of the recommendations we put forward covered more than a single need.'

'This meant that the individual received more complete care, for example if they had been referred for a bathing assessment, we would also identify that they might struggle to get in and out of bed or a chair, or have difficulty with stairs.'

'This holistic approach meant that the client could benefit from preventive measures being introduced too. Not all applicants were initially happy with the remote process, however the scepticism as to whether it would meet all of their needs was, in most cases, quickly overcome.'

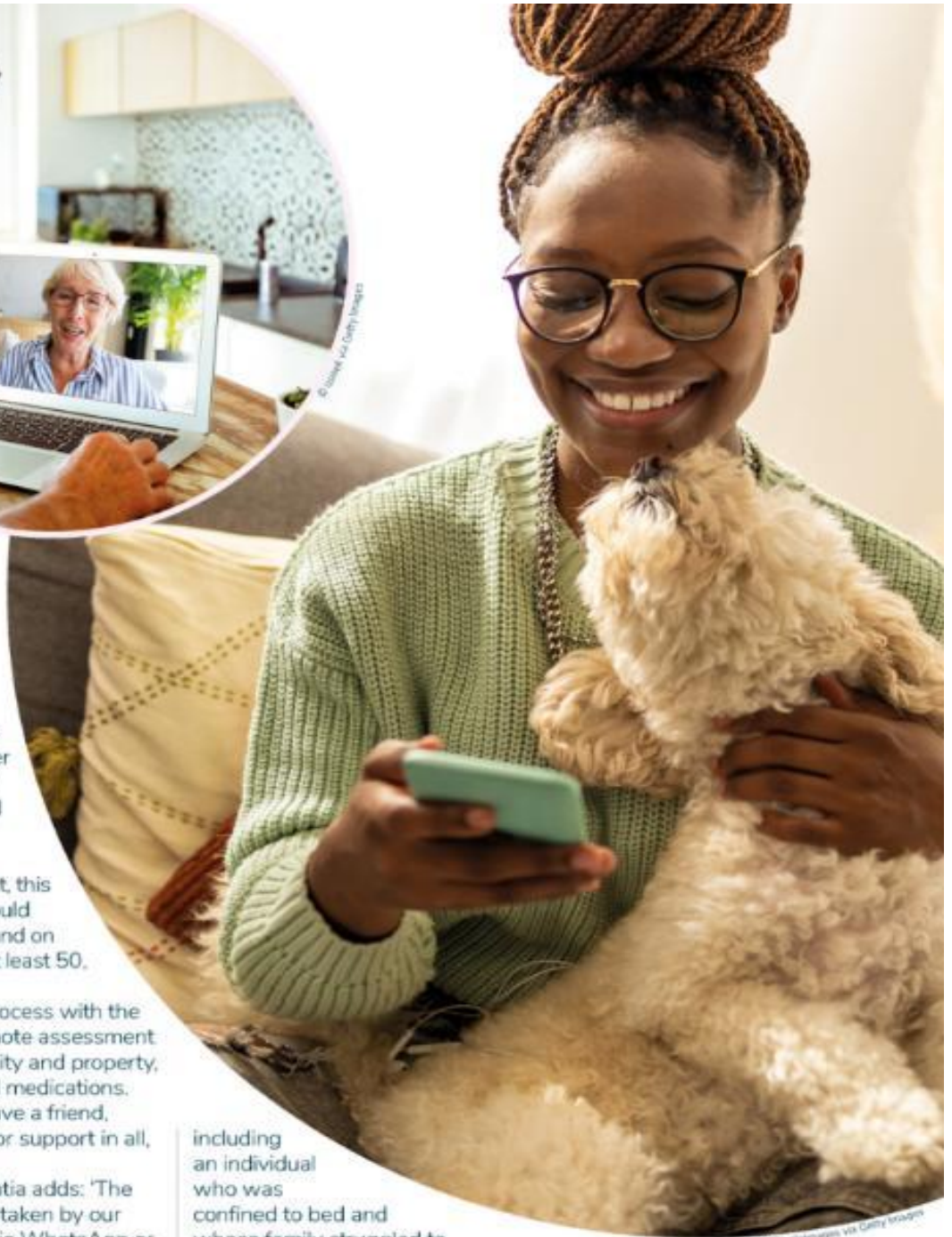
She goes on: 'There are many examples of where the practice worked particularly well,

including an individual who was confined to bed and whose family struggled to support him in the property in which he was living at the time.'

'His occupational therapy assessment took place in potential new accommodation and it was agreed that this met his needs much better. This allowed him to move in the same week and live more independently with carers, much to the relief of his family.'

'In another case, a client was referred for remote assessment for a stairlift and bathing. Our point of contact was the spouse who was experiencing their own mental health challenges and was feeling extremely overwhelmed.'

'Following two remote assessments, the client quickly got the equipment and support needed. A subsequent call from the spouse confirmed



how pleased they were with our support and how much this had helped their own mental health.'

As well as removing the need to travel to meet clients, with the obvious time and environmental benefits, the outsourced occupational therapy team saved additional time through remote assessment by being able to complete paperwork during the process and order equipment and seek landlord permission straight after the call.

Michelle comments: 'We considered outsourcing as an opportunity to review processes, to question, and to look at the way we did things – enabling us to work smarter with meaningful and measurable goals.'

'Working with a private outsourced service provider also enabled our local authority to review and capitalise on best practice within commercial operations, and to implement this within our processes.'

'In terms of outcomes and results, the number of people on the waiting list overall reduced, but we still had significant numbers of referrals coming in. The biggest impact therefore was on service flow and, as a result, waiting times. By the end of 2022, we had reduced our waiting times for an assessment by 12 months.'

'However, it wasn't just about reducing numbers. We worked in collaboration and built a partnership with our provider. They took the time to understand our processes and ways of working, highlighting where they felt something could or should work differently.'

'For example, the need to work consistently, not only in our own services, but across district and borough councils, to embed occupational therapy principles across the entire service, was highlighted as an opportunity. This is an area of work that has been picked up by our newly appointed lead occupational therapist.'

'From our perspective, this was more than just outsourcing work, as it supported service development.'

Provider perspective

The outsourced occupational therapy service provider attributes the huge success of this project to collaboration and trust. Thanks to the Reablement Team's helpfulness, responsiveness and trust, and the support of Hampshire County Council, processes and protocols were adjusted along the way, applicants were regularly surveyed to find out what worked well and what was less successful, and training was provided where needed.

James Derbyshire, Operations Director for Access Independent, says: 'My top tips for

creating the optimum environment and getting the best results with this type of work are: ensuring frequent communication between all parties; outlining clear requirements and objectives for the project; focusing strongly on the mobilisation and implementation phase; starting recruitment earlier than you think you need to; and being realistic, honest and transparent with partners and customers even when things go wrong.'

Michelle agrees: 'Outsourcing isn't simply about finding a provider, it's about finding someone you can work with in open and honest partnership with a clear vision of what you are trying to achieve both for your organisation and the people who need our support and services.'

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Health and Care Professions Council (2023) *Digital skills and new technologies*. Available at <https://bit.ly/41GOaz8> [accessed 22 December 2023].

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Five top tips

Ensure frequent communication between all parties.

Outline clear requirements and objectives for the project.

Focus strongly on the mobilisation and implementation phase; if that goes well, everything else will usually fall into place.

Start recruitment earlier than you think you need to.

Be realistic, honest and transparent with partners and customers, even when things go wrong.

Words **STEPHEN NAYLOR**, Managing Director, Access Independent. Visit <https://accessindependent.co.uk>