From the physical to the digital: Migrating SurvivorsUK Group Work online during the Covid-19 pandemic

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'I was nervous online, but knowing I was getting help was very good for me because at the time I was depressed and suicidal, so even on Zoom it was a relief.'

– Service user

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Introduction

SurvivorsUK was established as a service for male survivors of rape and sexual abuse, to cater for people not provided for by other services.

On the 23rd of May 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first national lockdown across the country, ordering people to 'stay at home'. On March 26th, the lockdown measures legally came into force. For SurvivorsUK this meant an abrupt stop to all face-to-face services. One-to-one therapy stopped, as did all groups.

All charities that provided front-facing support services were faced with a question, did they stop all services and wait for Covid-19 to pass and lockdown lifting? (Worth remembering that the Prime Minister had said on the 19th March 2020 that the UK could '*turn the tide of coronavirus in 12 weeks*'). Or, do they find a way to migrate their in-person services online.

SurvivorsUK decided to hire an external consultant on online facilitation to advise and support the migration of services to digital.

This report will focus on the impact of that migration, with special consideration of:

- **The core group.** Both the current group that transferred from in-person to online and the next core group that started online.
- **Two additional social groups.** The creative writing group and the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) group.
- **Staff members.** Interviews with staff members were carried out to deepen the understanding of how Covid-19 and the migration affected the charity.

Methodology

Digital one-to-one interviews, group interviews and online surveys were used to capture data from as many different service users as possible.

Group interviews were facilitated by an external facilitator and a member of staff. The external facilitator led the group interviews and the member of staff attended to ensure emotional safety and to take notes. Notes were taken anonymously. The online survey collected no identifiable information about those who completed it to ensure impartiality and confidentiality. Staff interviews were also conducted anonymously by the external facilitator alone.

Numbers engaged:

- **12 members of the core group were interviewed**
- **10 members of the social group were interviewed**
- **3 staff members were interviewed**
- **26 service users completed the online survey**

Facts and stats

63% of respondents reported that online group support had affected their ability to cope with the pandemic in a positive way

95% of respondents accessed more than one form of support online from survivors and 30% accessed 3 or more forms of support

Pre pandemic – 20% of core group members reported living outside of London

Online only groups – 41% reported being outside of London (incl. Wales and Scotland)

Face-to-face average group size of 10 – Online average group size of 7

People leaving the groups dropped from an average of 1.2 per group in person to 0.8 online

55% of respondents had received extra direct support to transition to online working

104 people accessed core group support online

What the service users told us

Accessibility and travel

Service users with physical accessibility needs acknowledged that travel and the group building presented difficulties. One service user who uses a power chair (electric wheelchair) told us the journey to the groups was not easy but they missed the in-person interaction.

Long journeys also took an emotional toll on some service users and digital engagement meant anxiety or fatigue through travelling was no longer an issue for them.

However, some service users who lived with family or in shared accommodation told us that due to the emotional nature of group work, it was very difficult to process these emotions and be in the same physical space with family or flat mates. They missed the separation of home life and therapy. In addition, the journey home provided 'decompression time,' to allow difficult emotions to settle.

Accessing the group from home presented issues around confidentiality, as shared living did not guarantee confidentiality for that service user or the rest of the group. Other service users did not like having to access groups in their bedrooms as this felt invasive and it was difficult to manage strong emotions in such a private space.

Technical and practical support from SurvivorsUK staff

Counsellors and facilitators of the groups providing technical and practical support were integral to some service users being able to successfully access support. Key areas of support were:

- **Informal conversations with facilitators.** Before starting the online groups, anxious service users valued facilitators explaining how online groups worked, what to expect and how to get additional support.
- **Digital support in between group work sessions.** WhatsApp and online chats with helpliners at SurvivorsUK provided useful emotional support in the run up to and after starting online group work.
- **One-to-one support.** Service users valued knowing they could talk with the facilitators in between group sessions if they needed support.
- **Engaging in other SurvivorsUK services.** Attending 'drop in' sessions or SurvivorsUK social events before starting the core group helped to manage anxiety.
- **Paperwork.** The introduction and information sheets were very helpful to service users.
- **All in this together.** Knowing that the facilitators, counsellors and charity staff were also nervous about moving online helped create a feeling of belonging and togetherness.

Some service users reported that they struggled to access the link to the groups at different times in the week and this added to their anxiety and fear of being forgotten.
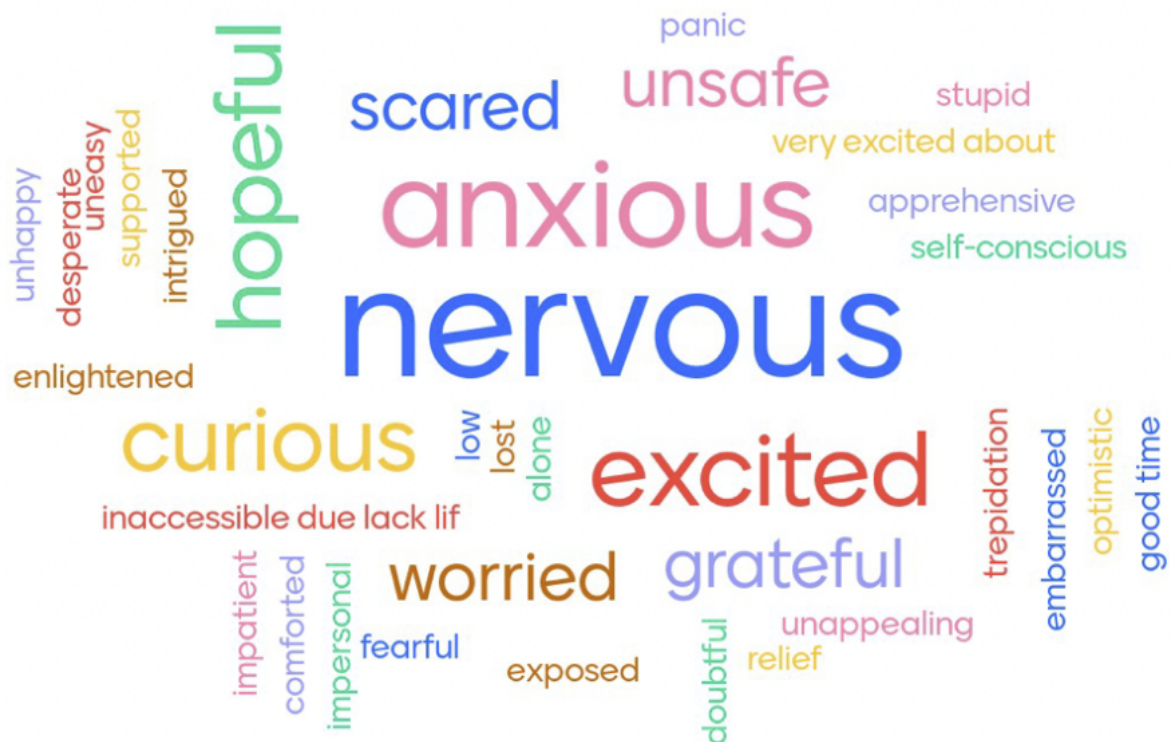
The challenges to online group work

Online group work came with the expected practical frustrations and challenges. Bad Wi-Fi, online and video call fatigue and difficulty in communicating in large numbers and talking naturally were all challenges.

However, the emotional challenges that emerged were clearly specific to online therapeutic group space. Service users felt that the online format meant it was harder to contain all group members emotionally. One service user told us that as a group, they did not know how to manage someone having a panic attack. Other service users felt that some group members were too vulnerable to be contained emotionally online and that the assessment process should account for this. This feedback raises questions of what is needed for service users to feel safe when confronted with another group member who is visibly emotionally unwell.

Explicit ground rules helped mitigate against other less emotionally charged behaviour that made service users feel unsafe, such as cameras being kept on, not walking away from the camera, trying not to be late etc.

Privacy was noted as one of the biggest challenges of working online, with respondents to the survey noting both that the lack of privacy in their own homes because of cameras was hard but also being able to see into each other's houses was at times triggering.

Word cloud created by service users when asked: *What three words would you use to describe how you felt about accessing support/therapy online BEFORE you began?*

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The benefit of online group work

As with the challenges, there were some expected benefits of working online for service users. Online groups opened the service up to those not in London as well as those with mobility issues. It also cut down on expensive travel costs to or across London. Plus, during the lockdown, groups over Zoom provided a much needed connection and a ready-made social circle.

Some service users told us that they preferred online groups to in-person meetings. Some service users found it a better way to show greater vulnerability and intimacy. They could see and hear other members more clearly and this felt powerful. Others with high social anxiety felt that the small talk was the most anxiety-inducing part of meeting in a physical space and this was limited online. Other people said that it was easier to attend when they were feeling particularly bad or in a lot of mental pain.

The impact of accessing online groups as well as SurvivorsUK in lockdown

Service users stressed that being able to access SurvivorsUK services was a huge part of their lockdown journey. Access to mental health professionals both in groups, on the helplines and the option of having one-to-one sessions in between the groups provided a safety net for many service users.

'Facilitators are respectful, they take your ideas on. Makes me feel like I'm part of something. I feel very blessed and fortunate that we have these groups.' – Service user

Facilitators

A recurring theme through all conversations was the support provided by the staff at SurvivorsUK. One participant noted: **'My experience of Survivors facilitators is that they can hold stuff that I didn't believe was holdable.'** Support was received by participants in a range of ways, through the online chat function, one-ro-ones with group facilitators and more traditional counselling sessions. Through the support of the facilitators one participant noted that it **'was really enriching to feel like I could say anything and was free to let it flow**.'

'Zoom and Whatsapp have made me feel safe. Knowing people from the group are there if I need is great.' – Service user

Word cloud created by service users when asked: *What three words would you use to describe your experience of working online with SurvivorsUK?*

Social groups

During the pandemic, SurvivorsUK ran a number of online support groups outside of the core group process. These were spaces covering a range of topics and using different mediums which included creative writing and Dungeons and Dragons.

'The idea is that it's creative, not therapeutic, allowing the therapy to take place which is another angle.'
– Service user

Creative writing

The creative writing group was started before lockdown and ran its first sessions in person before moving online. The process consisted of a 6-week initial programme and a monthly 'open mic' afternoon was also offered, in direct response to a request from a participant. The participants noted many of the same challenges with the core group, such as privacy and lack of processing time.

It was noted that the space provided by the creative writing group offered a different approach to support with a facilitator describing it as a space for 'magical connections and catharsis' one of the participants

noted: '**There was a certain level of bonding that I don't think I have got from any other online group discussion or classes that I have ever been to**.'

The open mic afternoon provided a regular drop-in space for people to come together and share what they had been working on. This space was requested by one of the participants to maintain the support and connection that had formed as a result of the 6-week programmes and overall was a huge success.

Dungeons and Dragons

Dungeons and Dragons is a role-play game that is played over an extended period of time, where players create characters in the game and go on a campaign together to achieve a goal. Each character is made up of different characteristics with different levels of skills such as strength and intelligence. The players make decisions for their characters and respond based on what they think their characters would do.

The Dungeons and Dragons group had been in development pre Covid but it was during the lockdown that the first two groups were established online. The groups provided a social space for participants to explore a different world using their characters. The therapeutic part of it is quite unconscious and not as explicit as some of the other groups, and in creating this space it gives participants an opportunity to work things through in an unconscious way through a third person.

While two groups were started there was some drop-off and there is currently one group running, which has been running for around eight months. Of the participants we spoke to, only one had prior experience of Dungeons and Dragons but all noted the impact they felt it had had. A facilitator noted that through their characters, participants had 'explored things such as gender identity and family dynamics'. As the group developed, a talking space was added both inside and outside of the game, with an additional session added to explore some of the themes that had come up. There was also a short break mid-game where participants could explore anything that had come up. This provided space for participants to reflect and explore what they had played with through their characters.

While this group could have been run face-to-face, the participants said that only one of them would or could have attended a face-to-face meeting and that meeting that way would have been a barrier to access. Another noted that they felt they wouldn't have come because they had never tried Dungeons and Dragons before and trying it online felt safer than in person.

What the staff told us

How did you feel about running support groups online?

All members of staff interviewed spoke of their hesitancy and anxiety around moving to online working. Staff told us they didn't feel comfortable using technology with one member of staff noting that they hadn't used a computer until their thirties. Another cited that the moment before the first online session was the most anxious in their professional career. The fear around technology was felt by all staff interviewed with it being listed as the main personal anxiety for them.

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In relation to professional anxieties, the safety of the space for participants as well the lack of non-verbal signals were the main challenges. One member of staff noted they had believed that it wasn't possible to work safely online before transitioning during the pandemic. There was a particular emphasis on the loss of the 'buffer space' around groups such as having a chat by the tea urn or being able to build community by sharing food. This was linked with concerns around participants not having space before and after sessions to decompress while travelling to and from sessions and the loss of their usual coping strategies due to the pandemic.

Challenges of delivering online

A number of challenges were noted by staff.

Not being in the same physical space as participants created challenges in particular around supporting people who disassociated during the sessions. Staff noted it was a challenge at times to recognise dissociation, particularly if there was a poor Internet connection. One member of staff worked to agree on a support system for a participant who disassociated but recognised the challenges in it. They noted the intrusive nature of other participants viewing the dissociative episode up close and not knowing how long any episode might last.

Another challenge centred around being able to know if a person was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, without the social indicators you would see in a face-to-face setting.

It was reported that while shorter sessions were initially advised at the start of working online the group were keen to keep the three-hour sessions they had been used to in face-to-face work. This meant staff felt particularly drained after the session, noting the exhaustion was more than it would be in face-to-face work.

Biggest opportunities working online

Overall, staff were positive about the work that had been done online and all indicated a desire for it to continue alongside face-to-face working.

The biggest positive impact of online working was the accessibility that it brought participants, with those unable to join previously because of geographical location or due to access needs and disability. One member of staff felt that the groups had created a space that transcended the digital barrier. One facilitator noted that 'people can roll out of bed and be in a safe beautiful space to feel connected and liberated. Being online brings a magic that transcends the barriers and provides meaningful and powerful relationships.'.

'People have joined from all over the country and people who care for someone. They can be seen and heard and held wherever they are in the country.'

– Service user

Support before moving online

All staff reported feeling supported through the process of transitioning. While acknowledging the rapid nature of the move felt like it was a 'scramble', it was recognised that this was a reflection on the

general feeling about the pandemic rather than the SurvivorsUK response. All staff received training on Zoom and reported learning from each other as the sessions began.

Staff felt supported by senior leadership and felt able to reach out for help – there was always support available on the phone or email if needed. This support was both practical in relation to training and the move online; but there was also personal support and reassurance – a feeling they **'had my back'** during the process.

The addition of technical support around the practicalities of booking rooms from team members meant the staff felt able to concentrate on delivering without feeling overwhelmed with all the new 'things to do'.

It was noted that the existing frameworks survivors had around delivering group work made the transition process easier. Frameworks such as contracting were developed for staff to adapt to their respective groups.

'Work was done quite quickly around the contract and training so I felt quite held, so even if it was a bit of a scramble, I think that was more the nature of the pandemic than what we were doing.'

– Facilitator

What support helps you deliver online safely?

Staff reported safety in the online space as one of their biggest concerns when moving to the online space, and several things were put in place to ensure the safety of both staff and participants.

All staff noted that the contracting support was key in creating a safe digital space, with SurvivorsUK providing a general contract laying out the details and expectations of the group. This was then adapted on a group by group basis to suit their individual needs.

Staff repeated that support from senior staff was key in building confidence in spaces, one participant noted the comfort of having an 'on call facilitator' in case both co-facilitators were unable to connect or had technical issues.

Supervision was also identified as an important support structure for staff, for them as individuals but also as a group supervision process that began during the lockdown. This gave space to staff to share challenges but also ideas on best practices and engagement ideas. Senior staff were also named as being instrumental in providing support and one-to-one conversations when needed.

Summary

Data limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this impact report. The service users consulted were those who attended one or more of the SurvivorsUK online services or groups. There were some service users who did not engage in services and this impact report and therefore their voices are missing from the picture. The reasons for this are many and subject to speculation.

Digital exclusion. Some may not have had devices in which to access support. Others may have had devices but no safe space to sit online for weekly sessions. A lack of safe space could mean anything from temporary accommodation to living with people to whom they have not disclosed abuse.

Discomfort or mistrust of technology. Some may not have felt comfortable online or learning new ways of making video calls. Some may have felt that online platforms were are not trustworthy or confidential places. Others may simply have not wanted to engage online because it didn't feel emotionally safe or that it was a poor substitute for in-person groups.

Some criticisms of online services reflect the difficulties of group work in general. We cannot know that when service users say: `It's hard to know how to manage, if someone has a panic attack over Zoom'* if they would have managed better in person. A small percentage of service users also told us that assessments needed to be more rigorous, as some people with moderate to severe mental health needs were hard to be in an online group with. These highlight some of the challenges that come in attending group work in general, and we cannot know how much online lessons exacerbate these experiences.

We can, however, be certain of practical criticisms of online work. Lack of private or safe spaces to join the call, bad connections, no 'buffer time' travelling to and from and lack of devices or good Wi-Fi are all very specific and difficult issues, often with no resolution. We also know that some service members chose not to engage with online services at all and their voices have not been heard in this report.

The criticism has for the most part been outweighed by the reports of how important SurvivorsUK online groups have been. Service users have cited just how invaluable online group work has been and some have told us they prefer online services. Much of this is based on improved accessibility and convenience as well as how diligently SurvivorsUK staff have worked to get it right. Below are the key themes that service users and staff members have told us worked for them.

Six key themes

1. Accessibility, technical support and being human

Service users who found travelling to and from groups challenging benefited from the online services. This was reported by people who were living with disabilities as well as anxiety or mental health conditions.

Options to have one-to-one check ins in between the group sessions and the drop-in groups helped service users manage anxiety, get practical support and acclimatise to being online.

SurvivorsUK staff who were open about their own anxieties with online work created a sense of *'we're all in this together'* that was helpful and humanising.

2. Big group, small group model

Specific ground rules to online engagement were useful, as not everyone starts with the same skills, knowledge and comfort level around online video calls.

A mixture of small groups and big groups, utilising the break-out room function on video calls were useful for service users to build closer relationships in the group and share more of their stories and experiences. It also served as a way for facilitators to check in with each other, and flag any concerns as well as take a break.

3. To therapy or not to therapy

Non-therapeutic groups, such as creative writing, D&D and the get together groups that started in-person and migrated online stayed consistently well attended. They suffered from the same challenges that the core group did, lack of private space, limited access to devices or good Wi-Fi.

Having social groups was a great comfort to service users, particularly at a time of social isolation. Having activities booked in the diary and knowing what they would be about and what was expected of them was seen as valuable.

There was also a positive response to the therapeutic impact of the non-therapeutic groups, providing space to process and explore feelings and experiences through different mediums with different people.

4. Geographical diversity

Online groups provided access to people all over the UK. Groups no longer were as London-centric. This benefited SurvivorsUK and the group service as it was suddenly available to people from all over the UK. Service users were also grateful that they could access groups and acknowledged that geographical diversity was enriching to the group experience.

5. Giving it a go is better than playing too safe

At the beginning of the lockdown many organisations within the sector were confronted with the dilemma, *is it safe enough to move services online?* The risk of it being too upsetting, psychologically triggering or doing more harm than good was real and SurvivorsUK also had this concern.

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What service users consistently told us was that they valued SurvivorsUK 'giving it a go.' The services online, while challenging at times, also served as a critical lifeline to many, both socially and psychologically.

6. Innovation is key

Across both core groups and social groups, the ability to be agile and innovative in the approach and delivery was key to its success – recognising that groups simply couldn't switch from one to another, and that there needs to be thought given to the transfer and what will and won't work online.

Allowing space for things not to work, to try new things and to have the support of the organisation helped to create online spaces that best served service users.