

# 'I don't think there's a substitute for meeting up face-to-face'

Since its inception in 2017, The Ace Project has helped the lives of teenagers and young adults across Suffolk.

The charity was set-up by Suffolk resident Jo Flack, who, following her own experiences with OCD and anxiety, combined with her time spent in the education sector, saw that a local mental health service dedicated to young people was sorely needed.

"Following conversations in the community, it really highlighted there was a gap for young people who were leaving school and had nothing to engage with that met their emotional needs," she explains.

"I'd also suffered with anxiety as a child, and when I was younger it was never really picked up on. Then in 2015, I became incredibly unwell with OCD. It was truly debilitating and really affected my wellbeing. I struggled to get the support I needed, and that was definitely a factor in founding the charity."

After giving up her teaching role, Jo began dedicating her time to helping the youth of Suffolk, providing a much-needed lifeline to those who needed it.

"It's not been an easy journey," Jo reflects. "I have worked voluntarily on the project for years, investing my heart and time into it because I believe in the work we do and am committed to empowering young people with mental health difficulties to live the life they want to lead."

Prior to lockdown, the charity did this by hosting weekly

**Danielle Lett** spoke to Jo Flack of The Ace Project which provides mental health support for teens and young adults



wellbeing workshops. These provided a much-needed space for young people to come together as a support network of peers, in order to learn and practise skills for wellbeing, as well as build up a sense of confidence and self-worth.

After successfully registering as a charity in 2018, the service was then awarded core funding via the National Lottery Community Fund.

"This was huge for us. It was the biggest pot of money we'd ever been awarded, and it promised some great expansion for the project. We hit January 2020 feeling really confident, knowing we'd have more time and resources to do what we wanted to do. We hit the ground running, and had lots of exciting partnership opportunities to really expand the project."

But when lockdown struck back in March 2020, the entire country was thrown into disarray and panic. And this could not have been truer for the countless mental health services and providers who found themselves suddenly unable to physically see their clients

Jo quickly found herself having to come up with a flexible plan

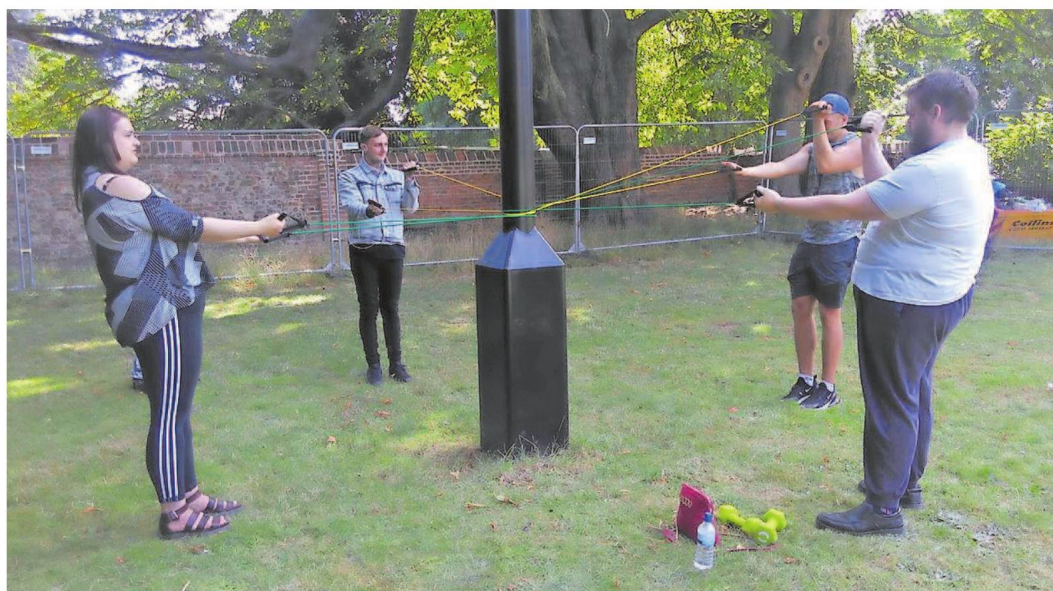
that enabled her to still support her cohort, while still remaining Covid-compliant – and cancelling workshops simply wasn't an option.

"That forward momentum we had really suffered as a result of Covid, and it was a difficult time for the charity. We had young people out there who we were either already supporting, or because of our new pot of funding, were waiting to access the service.

"The key thing was to make sure we could still offer something for these young people who needed support – otherwise they wouldn't have come to us if they didn't need it. We couldn't abandon the young people at a time of great need – we had to think of something quickly."

Like every other sector and workplace, Jo quickly took to technology to ensure she could offer her clients something – and managed to come up with a solution.

"It was a sharp learning curve for me, but young people are quite tech-savvy, so I had a pool of experts to draw from who were instrumental in planning what virtual-only mental healthy support would look like," she says.



Prior to lockdown, teens and young adults would meet in weekly workshops, with the aim of improving their mental health, wellbeing and self-confidence

Picture: JO FLACK



Jo Flack,  
co-founder of  
The Ace Project  
Picture: SARAH  
LUCY BROWN

Instead of using Zoom or Teams, Jo and her team opted for Discord – something the group felt best suited their needs.

"It's a platform the young people like and felt it was going to work the best for them over this time – it's got phone, video call and chat capabilities, and the security you need to set up a server."

While Jo and her cohort adapted to the strange, new, digitally-led world we all found ourselves in, she herself admits nothing can compare to human interaction – especially when it comes to improving a person's mental health.

"I honestly don't think there's a substitute for meeting up face-to-face," she says.

"Bearing in mind our charity is all about helping people with confidence building and learning skills, that isn't the same as doing it virtually. I'm so happy we live in this digital world whereby we can still offer a service to the young people, but one kind of virtual remote service isn't appropriate for all young people, even for those who are able and willing to engage. It's just not a substitute for connecting in person."

But with lockdown restrictions easing, and if all goes to plan, social distancing rules set to be scrapped next month, things can slowly but surely start to get back to normal – something that Jo cannot wait for.

"The young people and I are very excited to get back to doing face-to-face delivery, and we're hoping to start that the week commencing Monday May 17. Our challenge throughout lockdown has been the fact that because we're such a small, grassroots charity, we don't have our own venue – so where places could've perhaps opened when restrictions allowed because they're a charity, we struggled to do that."

But with things looking up, and normality appearing to somewhat resume, Jo is hopeful for the future, and is especially thankful for how lockdown has brought her closer to other charities.

"One silver lining of lockdown is that, because a lot of the other volunteering and community sector groups found themselves in the same boat, there was a lot of supporting each when it came to helping the people we work with."

That time spent working with partnership organisations allowed The Ace Project to build up networks, and see where any gaps might be in the mental health sector.

"One of those in particular is one-to-one therapeutic support for young people, so we've got a small pot of funding to start doing some of that. But of course, it costs to pay a therapist and hire a room to do that support.

"It's going to be a challenge to





get back to where we were pre-Covid, but we're very excited about the future. Once this is all over, we will – all of us – be stronger because of the resilience we have developed in overcoming the obstacles presented to us by Covid-19.

"Come the summer, if all goes well, we will be running our weekly wellbeing workshops again, giving young people the opportunity to engage in physical activity for wellbeing within a small cohort of people."

For anyone aged 16-24 who feels they may need the support of The Ace Project, Jo says the best way to get in touch is via email. "Contact me and I will then explain what we offer. It's then a case of meeting up for an initial assessment, and we will go from there," she says.

**To learn more about The Ace Project or to find out how you can help, visit [www.theaceproject.org.uk](http://www.theaceproject.org.uk) or email [the.ace.project@hotmail.com](mailto:the.ace.project@hotmail.com)**

Once lockdown restrictions ease, Jo cannot wait for her and her cohort to meet face-to-face again

Picture:  
JO FLACK



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