

Cllr Millard: Welcome to talk Richmond. This is episode seven. I'm Jim Millard. I'm your host and this week we'll be discussing young people's mental health and the impact of the current coronavirus crisis on that. I'm joined by Lydia, the vice chair of Kingston and Richmond Youth Council. She's a student at Orleans Park School. And Deborah, Manager at Off The Record, Twickenham, a wonderful charity we're very lucky to have in our borough providing drop-in counselling information and sexual health services for young people in the borough. Welcome Lydia and welcome, Deborah. Thank you very much for coming in and joining us.

The idea of this episode is just having honest chat with you both about how young people might be feeling right now and how they can get support from charities like Off The Record. Hopefully this episode equips young people, parents and carers with information on how to better support mental health and where to seek out help where needed.

Deborah, could you tell us a bit about yourself and tell us about Off The Record?

Deborah: OK, well, I've been at Off the Record for, I think 24 years now. I was a counsellor initially worked as a counsellor for about 7 plus years and we've really since the start always provided the same service. We've always provided counselling for young people 11 to 24 year olds, and we don't have the walk in service isn't open at the moment because the counselling is all online, but we do run a walk-in service which will reopen someday, as soon as possible, and we do a sexual health service on a Monday afternoon for young people, which the sexual health service is still running. A lot of the young people across the borough use our services. I think we worked out once that one in three of everybody who's grown up in the borough has at some point come to Off The Record for some reason. We see a lot of young people - I think the main age group we see here is the 14 to 16 year olds who often reluctant to sort of use other services and they like coming to Off The Record because it's out of school hours, it's discrete, it's confidential, it's free, and it's easy to access. The young people can get in contact with us themselves, although often it's parents, but equally often it's the young person who gets in touch and a lot of GPs, I mean all the GP services across the borough refer to us, so we were very well known.

Cllr Millard: Lydia, please introduce yourself, I'd love to hear more about the youth council.

Lydia: Hi everyone, so as Jim said my name is Lydia Roebuck and I'm the Vice Chair of the Kingston and Richmond Youth Council and essentially the Kingston and Richmond Youth Council is a group of democratically elected young people. Who meet every Monday and discuss things and talk about how we can improve the borough or both boroughs for young people.

Cllr Millard: Could you share with us what are your thoughts and feelings when lockdown was first announced?

Lydia: Well, when lockdown was first announced, I was pretty apprehensive to be honest and I'm pretty sure a lot of my friends were too. It was this new thing, coronavirus, there wasn't a lot out there about what it was, what it could do, how it was transmitted, and I was definitely nervous about being at home for the whole time, being excluded, not being not being able to see my friends and also just being thrown into online school was really unsettling because it was a whole new way of life that I had to adopt to.

Cllr Millard: and what was it like having to stop seeing friends?

Lydia: I struggled with it quite a bit. I must say I was I was quite lonely because I don't think you fully appreciate how much time you spend with your friends and what you talk about when you're at school. But when I was at home, I do have two siblings, but it's just not the same as being able to have a nice chat with your friends. And yeah, you can FaceTime them etc. But I miss having like a hug from them and saying hi to them and high fiving them and whatnot. So, it definitely was really difficult.

I think for me, on the positive side, I was able to really understand like how important self care was for me and I was able to relax a lot more, which is something I've struggled with in the past and I was just able to really reflect on my mental health and also although being with your friends at school is good, it can sometimes be a really hard environment to be in because there's a lot of judgment. Young people are often not that nice to each other, so it was nice to give myself a break and really appreciate the time that I had at home to relax.

Cllr Millard: Yeah, yeah, and Deborah. What were your concerns for young people's mental health when schools closed and we were advised to stay inside?

Deborah: Well, I suppose really, you know, Lydia's put it very well. All of those things, really. I mean just the fact that we know that you know the young people we see are so in crisis and so in need of the services we provide and desperate to come and to suddenly not be able to provide them was really very challenging for all of us.

when we actually went into lock down, the amount of work, that kind of went in, the time that went into moving over to an online service that we had to write an entire sort of online policy for, you know, working remotely and look at all the risk assessments and all that kind of thing. And it was a huge piece of work.

Cllr Millard: did you see referrals rise?

I think for those young people who had a lot of struggles with safe social anxiety or academic pressures and stuff like that, for them it was a relief and they, you know, we've got the feedback from them that they could just sit at home and relax and not have to worry about those things. And then of course there were other young people who if the issues were family issues and not getting an at home and difficulties with their parents and all that kind of thing you know clearly the pressure on them increased hugely because they were stuck at home with their family. And you know, not having any escape from it, and I think some of those ones are sort of particular hard hit because they weren't necessarily able to access online counselling, because they had no privacy. It's a very vulnerable conversation and they couldn't, even if they sometimes had a bedroom but couldn't trust that parents and siblings wouldn't burst in. They simply weren't able to use, take that space and you know, have regular counselling. I think it's interesting that the numbers for something like ChildLine rocketed, but for Off The Record, at least for the sort of the first few months of lock down, it was relatively quiet. It's only just beginning to get really busy now.

Cllr Millard: OK, so have you managed open your doors again to young people?

Deborah: - a few of our counsellors have come back and the rest is still working online so we're managing to see some of the people who been waiting on the waiting list for very long time wanting

face to face counselling. But there's quite a lot. I think people are also beginning to be more willing to try online counselling as time goes by because, they're getting more used to it as a medium anyway, you know they're talking to their friends and family and so on.

Cllr Millard: Well said yes, and Lydia just come back to you. You're obviously back at school now and the situation is ever changing. Stricter measures on socializing are currently being introduced and who knows by the time people are listening to this, there may be more. We just don't know. But all these sort of changes, obviously anxiety inducing again for all of us, but I wondered how is this making you and your friends feel?

Lydia: I think for a lot of my friends it is causing and for myself causing a bit of anxiety because we're sort of thinking there's going to be a second lockdown, and that's going to impact our exams and how well we do in school. And that's definitely a concern, is always niggling at the back of our minds because we don't want to go back home because the level of education just isn't the same as being in the classroom.

I am very concerned about the impact on my future. Again as I said before with my exams and not being in school, I don't know what my exams are going to look like, what my grades are going to come out, which six forms I'm going to be able to go to, which universities, if I'm even going to be able to go to University in person - that's a major thing. I am very concerned also about getting a job you know, going into a workplace, exposing myself to COVID-19 as well, I'm definitely very nervous about that.

Ad: Hello we're happy to announce the launch of this year's Community Heroes' Awards. This is a chance for you to nominate a person, business or community group from your local area who you feel deserves recognition for the outstanding work they've been doing to help their community. Whether it's a young person who inspires their peers, someone who has gone out of their way to support their elderly neighbour, a community group that has helped out in local parks. We want to hear who your local heroes are and why you feel they deserve an award. But you need to act fast. The deadline to nominate is November 9th so go to Richmond.gov.uk for more information and get nominating!

Cllr Millard: And having heard about some of the concerns young people might be feeling right now, Deborah, what should a parent or carer do if they're concerned for young person in their life?

Deborah: One of the things you want to say is to a parent is don't get anxious and don't panic yourself because that just makes a young person worse. But of course you can't tell somebody not to feel the way they're feeling, but there's something about trusting that young people have resources, and trusting that they've got the capacities to deal with, you know what's going on for them and to work it out. So it's not about coming in and being too advice-giving or telling them what to do or tell it you know, giving them the impression that what they are is wrong, which is undermining. But it is, I think, if a parent can be open and curious and want to be involved and ask questions, that can help. And if they feel out of their depth, obviously they can go for more specialist help, like somewhere like Off The Record.

Cllr Millard: We're so lucky to have this service in our borough. Lydia, listening to this, do you have any tips for anyone listening?

Lydia: If you're a carer or a parent validate your young your child's feelings. That's definitely something that I know a lot of my friends have struggled with, is their parents just don't believe what they're saying? They don't believe that they could be struggling with this mentally and that's one of the most frustrating things is that you feel these things you don't know because you know what they are, but your parents don't even think that what you're feeling is right when whatever you're feeling is always right, because that's how you're feeling. So that's one thing I would. Like a major thing.

Cllr Millard: I'm pleased to note that the new voluntary top up council tax scheme for contributions on a voluntary basis will be going partly towards Off The Record.

Deborah: Yes, no, that's right. I mean, that's absolutely fantastic. We've been blown away really by the support we've heard from, you know, local residents in this borough to donate towards that fund and you know this year with coronavirus and everything happening so we haven't been able to do our own fund raising in particular, it's going to be absolutely invaluable in enabling us to carry on and off for, you know, a full service this year. You know, it's absolutely fantastic.

Cllr Millard: and the level of generosity is really sort of absolutely blown us away, and it shows how much both Off the Record and MIND are held in high esteem by residents and how much local residents are aware the young people's mental health is a really important priority.

It was great to hear from Deborah and Lydia about how young people might be feeling right now and the support services that are available to them in this borough. Feelings of anxiety and stress during a time like this is totally normal, and you're not alone if you're feeling this way. Starting these conversations with young person in your life might be challenging, but there are plenty of helpful organizations and services out there, like Off The Record, to offer a helping hand.

Check the show notes below for further information on supporting Young People's mental health. If you have any questions, email us on talk at richmond.gov.uk please. As always, do subscribe and leave. A positive review would be very good for my wellbeing. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.