



Interview with Stephen Sharpe (Life CEO)

April 2020

Skype interview with Stephen Sharpe (Life CEO) and Elizabeth Parsons (Director of Advocacy)

Elizabeth Parsons: Afternoon!

Stephen Sharpe: How are you?

Elizabeth Parsons: I'm fine. Thank you. How are you?

Stephen Sharpe: I'm very well indeed. Thanks.

Elizabeth Parsons: Good, and thank you very much for your time this afternoon Stephen. We have a few questions that we'd like to ask you. But before we kick off with those maybe for some of the audience who haven't met you before do you want to explain a little bit about who you are and why we are talking to you today?

Stephen Sharpe: Yeah, that's great. My name is Stephen and I'm the CEO of Life charity. It's a very grand title but in reality all it means is I work with the senior leadership team and the trustees to make sure that we have an effective strategy in place to support all of our beneficiaries and all of the staff team that work so hard.

Elizabeth Parsons: Thank you. So bearing in mind that we know sort of the world is very upside-down at the minute with everything that's going on with COVID-19. Like many organisations Life has also been affected in a few different ways as well. Would you like to tell us a little bit about how Life is dealing with the COVID-19 situation and how we're managing it over the next few weeks?

Stephen Sharpe: Yeah. It's a real challenge. Who would have thought just three or four weeks ago that we would be in COVID lockdown? The biggest challenge for us ... well, there's a number of them, really. One is just moving to virtual operations - making sure that the staff team can work from home where that's possible and that we can keep all of our services going. We must remember that Life employ a good number of key workers that make sure all of those homeless women and their children in our Housing continue to be supported regardless of the situation we find ourselves in. Similarly with the Online service that we offer - the tens of thousands of women reaching out to us each year - we need to continue providing that support. It's been right challenge.

We've also had a bit of a challenge in things like accessing the PPE equipment - that personal protection equipment that all of our staff team need. We've also had challenges with the

supply chain for some of our pregnancy tests and a few other things as well as countries close down their borders.

So it's been quite a challenging time for us all.

Elizabeth Parsons: Can you talk us through the story of how all of this happened from Life's perspective? So obviously we've had about two weeks now in lockdown, but there were obviously some stages before that where Life started to consider what we were going to do and how we were going to manage it. So could you maybe start at the beginning and tell us a little bit about what the thought processes were?

Stephen Sharpe: Yeah. Well, charities like us tend to have plans in place. They're called business continuity plans. And those sorts of plans try to plan for disasters and crises such as this.

So the very first thing we did was got the senior leadership team together to review the business continuity plan that we have in place. Now, of course that plan wasn't quite right. Lots of things needed to be amended to allow for what is an international crisis and so the senior leadership team very quickly moved. They identified ways in which they could work from home, that they could work virtually. We undertook an assessment of essential and non-essential services, of essential and non-essential functions within the organisation. And we started to plan to ensure that we could operate from any location. That even includes things like being able to plan when our computer systems fail, make sure that communication continues even if we have just to telephone, pencil, and pad.

So it's assessing all of those sorts of things and putting measures in place to make sure that come what may the organisation can continue operating. And that's what we did. The senior leadership team met between two and three times a week as they built that plan up. It took us just about seven days to provide a very detailed plan that would secure our position for the first three months of this COVID lockdown.

Elizabeth Parsons: Because obviously I mean, this is a situation that none of us I think have ever really lived through or experienced anything like it. So I mean with that in mind, and so many of the changes that you mentioned to having to take place ... I mean we do have clients that are in our Houses. We have long-standing clients who have practical support from us as well. And obviously it's been a big change for our staff. So you know, how is everyone coping with the new strategies going forward for the next few weeks?

Stephen Sharpe: I think it's very challenging. There's two elements to the staff team at the moment. You know, unfortunately or fortunately depending on which way you look at it, we've had to place a number of the staff team into the government employee retention scheme. And that in its own right is stressful for that staff team and for us as a whole because we're starting to lose key members of the team as we place them into the furlough scheme and they themselves are finding a challenge.

We've then got all of our key workers and our essential workers that are beavering away to make sure that our services continue. And of course absolutely central to that is making sure that our key workers are safe on that front line, making sure that they've got the necessary PPE equipment that we're hearing so much about on the television at the moment.

It's vitally important that we keep our services going. They are life-saving for many many many people, and it's down to our frontline staff staff that they are continued.

Our housing is bursting at the seams now. We're pretty much up to capacity there at the moment and our Online services similarly have seen, you know, a boost in the number of people that are reaching out to us.

Elizabeth Parsons: So, I mean, you mentioned that obviously the increased demand. So by exactly how much has the demand increased for our services?

Stephen Sharpe: Well, that's a very specific question on exactly how much (!) but pre-COVID-19 we had about 70 to 80 women a day reaching out to our Pregnancy Matters™ Online service. So they can reach out to us over the Internet, through digital platforms - email, telephone. I suppose they could even write a letter with they wanted (!)

Those numbers have increased from about 70 a day up to a 170 a day, which is our average at the moment. So it is a huge increase.

We've been having to retrain some of our staff team to cope with new questions coming forward. So we had to make sure that we're specialists in how COVID-19 is impacting women with pregnancies.

And of course at this time of lockdown we're saying we think we're seeing the early stages of a baby boom. So there's lots of unplanned pregnancies with women coming through very nervous about what the implications are for them. We're here to help.

Elizabeth Parsons: Yeah, I mean I and that is certainly no small amount of increase, is it? I mean, do you think our services are able to cope with the demand, or what strategies have got in place to deal with that over the next few weeks?

Stephen Sharpe: Okay. We've got the challenge that all charities have got - is that at the time of this increased demand in our services, we've had suddenly a drop in income. The drop in income for us is very very serious. We've lost about a million pounds worth of income from closing our charity retail stores, and that income was turned off overnight.

Of course, there were additional strains now on our supporters who themselves may be experiencing financial hardship. The charity sector as a whole is looking at about a 30% reduction in donations.

So for us, these are the challenges that we are faced with at the moment, making sure that at a time of less resources we're able to respond to a greater need as its presented to us.

But the staff team are pulling together. We've transferred all non-essential staff to support our essential services now, and there's quite a change in our day-to-day operation at the moment. But it's working well. The staff team have been outstanding in their flexibility and their willingness to help.

There is of course another challenge for all the staff team that are in the government retention scheme, because they've been suddenly removed from the organisation, and we are in regular contact with them. Some of them are setting up mutual support groups - particularly, our retail team are doing a wonderful job there. But everybody is feeling that strain - those in the furlough scheme are feeling out of context, out of touch with what we're doing a time when really they'd love to be helping. It's a challenging time for us to be in and we're very grateful for the government putting those sort of measures in place.

Elizabeth Parsons: So given all of these changes again, I mean if you had a wish list, you know, what sort of support do you think Life needs over the coming months? Is there anything the government could do? Is there anything our supporters could do?

Stephen Sharpe: Okay, if I, you know, if it really was a wish list my first wish is that it all comes to an end and our staff team can come back and we can get back to normal operations.

Being slightly more realistic, there are two things that we need. We need to provide some stability for our staff team and stability for all of our residents and clients that are coming to us at this time. Life all around us is not stable. It is out of control. It is not normal. We've got to provide some stability and calmness there. Unfortunately, we're not getting that much from the media at this time. So that's really really important. So if people can just remember us in their thoughts and prayers that's really really really important. Keep in contact with us. Let us know that you're thinking about us.

The second thing is money. It's not a great thing to talk about but it's really really important to us at this time. All of our costs are going up and our income is going down. So we've already launched a number of emergency appeals to our support base. We've got crowdfunding running out there. And it's really really important that people come forward and dig deep during this time. Even if you are a regular donor and only gave just last month, every penny helps in saving lives. And all of us our supporters, I can hand on heart say, that all of our supporters - your support is saving lives on a daily basis.

Elizabeth Parsons: So we've talked about some of the challenges that we're facing but what do you think has been your proudest moment? What has made you feel proud as CEO over the last couple of weeks?

Stephen Sharpe: I think one of the proudest moments is seeing the senior leadership team with the trustees just coming together and gelling. They are laying aside their own interests, their own needs, and just stepping up to the plate, and ensuring the organisation is going.

You forget all of the staff team in the organisation have their own families. They have their own challenges. But they are there every day working hard. Many of the team are up at six o'clock in the morning. I start to see messages coming in and things progressing, and that will continue on to 10 or 11 o'clock at night for those that work in the evenings. And that makes me very very proud to see them gelling together like that. The trustees similarly have been an incredible support to us over this time.

But the other is for those staff team out on the government retention scheme. It's really hard for them at this time. And the retail team in particular have come together, gelled well, and they've set themselves up in their own support group. So that you can see as the highs and lows pass, they're there supporting each other and making sure that that camaraderie and morale is kept high. And of course, we're looking forward to all coming back to work and into the team soon as possible.

Elizabeth Parsons: That's brilliant Stephen. Thank you so much for your time this afternoon and for, you know, answering our questions so well. Is there anything else you'd like to say to the people watching?

Stephen Sharpe: It's just to thank you. It's a thank you if you've been a supporter; it's a thank you if you are going to support us moving forward. We cannot do it without your support. Your support is the difference between life and death for many of the people that were working with. That's what Life is all about. It's all about saving lives. And with your help we can continue to do that. So, thank you.

Elizabeth Parsons: Thank you very much.