



Empower Consultants CIC is a BAME led social enterprise, offering information and advice to people with mental health problems. We work with vulnerable adults to help them understand, manage and improve their mental health and money issues. We have an active and informed advisory board with a broad range of skills, experience and knowledge gained from working with the South Asian and BME communities across Manchester for over 30 years.

Empower Consultants (CIC) was set up in light of the pandemic by a qualified Social Worker as a result of an identified need for culturally sensitive social care services, by this we mean services that are responsive to the attitudes, feelings and circumstances of the individual that have a distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic or cultural heritage.

Empower Consultants CIC began their first project TALK Rona in October 2020 funded by Lottery community fund for six months. This is the second lot of funding received for the project from National Lottery to provide a COVID-led mental health support line to support South Asian communities.

This evaluation report will cover the essential work carried out in the last 6 months.

Facts and Figures:

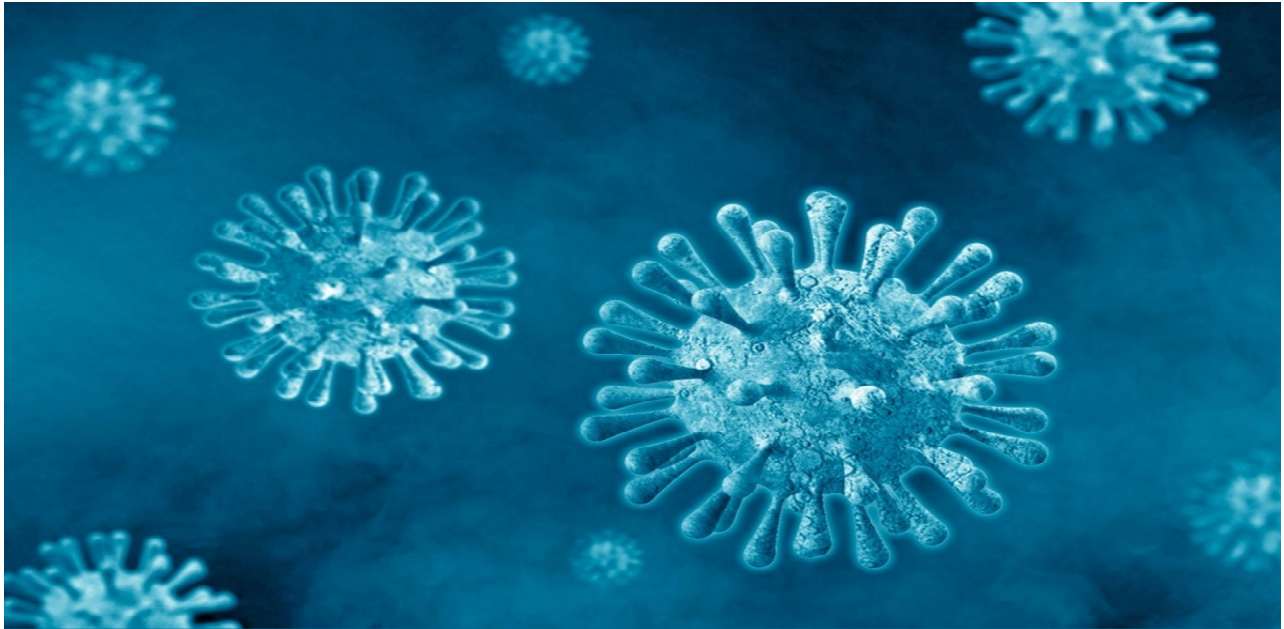
We know that COVID-19 virus affected the world on a global scale, the following statistic were given by the BBC:

“People from South Asian backgrounds were 20% more likely to die than white people from COVID-19. Other minority ethnic groups did not have a higher death rate” (BBC News, June 2020).

More recently researchers at the Medical Research Council Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine, University of Oxford, have identified the gene responsible for doubling the risk of respiratory failures from COVID-19.

This gene called LZTFL1 *“can be found in 60 percent of people with South Asian ancestry and the researchers say that it may be able to explain the excess deaths seen in some of the UK communities”*. (The Indian Express, November 2021)

Greater Manchester has one of the highest proportions of BAME people in the North of England. The detention rates of the South Asian people are highlighted within the Mental Health Act reform. The project aims to provide a support service to this under-represented group, by implementing the new guiding principles outlined in the Mental Health Act which was updated in March 2021.



Our Project Aims:

Talk Rona is a dedicated helpline providing support to people who are under pressure and are experiencing emotional transference and stress post Covid-19. The geographical area covered includes Manchester, Trafford and Tameside. This is a confidential service targeted at meeting the cultural needs of the South Asian Community.

The aim of the project is to support people in crisis, signpost those in need to the appropriate services to ensure their needs are being met in order to meet the objective of promoting a better understanding of mental health and wellbeing with cultural sensitivity. The helpline provides support in a variety of languages such as Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali.

TALK Rona is operational Mon to Fri between 9am and 6pm. The service is managed by a qualified Social worker and supported by a team of three part-time mental health practitioners, known as, COVID-19 Advisors. In addition, there was mentoring support provided from two external professionals, one of whom worked with Greater Manchester BME Network and the other who had experiential learning experience for over 30 years in mental health and advocacy.

Key Findings

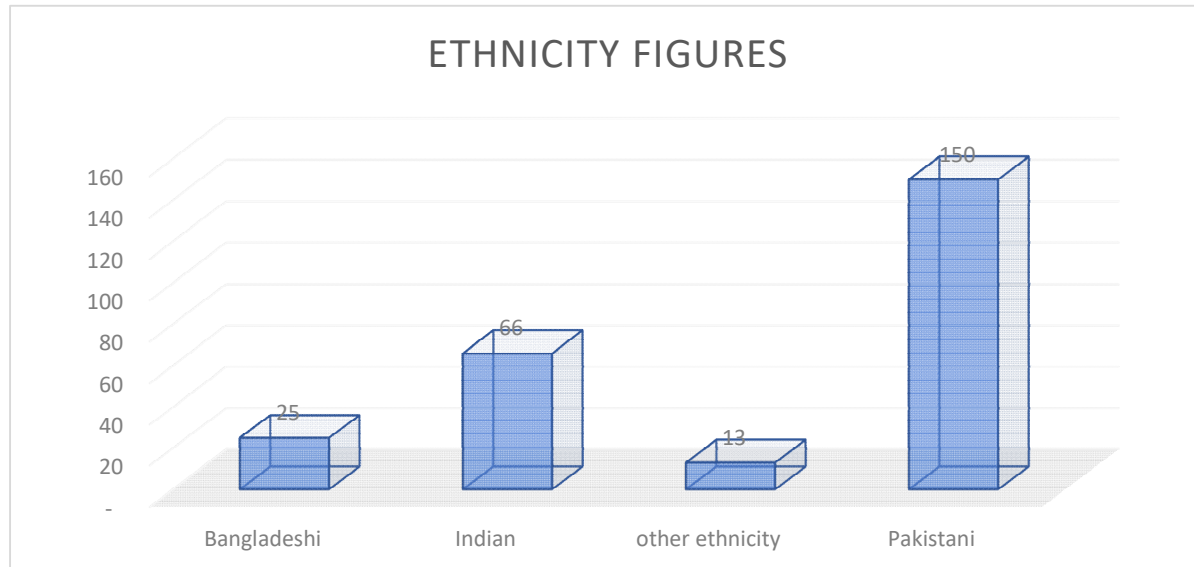
Our language and culturally appropriate service has enabled us to work with the most vulnerable individuals and develop a better understanding of their needs. Our evaluation of the service has evidenced the need for further one to one advocacy and mental health support in the following areas:

- Emotional transference - As individuals do not want to burden their family members with their concerns.
- Complexities in accessing health and social care provision – Long waiting times and cancellations for health appointments and reviews. It was found that some professionals struggled to support individuals from South Asian backgrounds as they were not equipped with the knowledge surrounding their culture.
- More understanding around culturally appropriate services provided by statutory providers and threshold services.
- Complaints with services, such as housing providers and health workers.
- Support around managing finances.
- Addressing queries round travel guidelines.
- Providing information around the COVID-19 vaccine roll outs, COVID passes and registering with the NHS app.
- Support with attending online meetings and basic IT skills. Members from the South Asian community struggled with this aspect. Lack of knowledge surrounding the social media platforms and limited IT skills proved difficult for them to reach out and access support.
- Isolation – Many people from the South Asian community felt isolated. Due to the additional language barrier it was hard for some that lived alone to understand the rules around the restrictions.

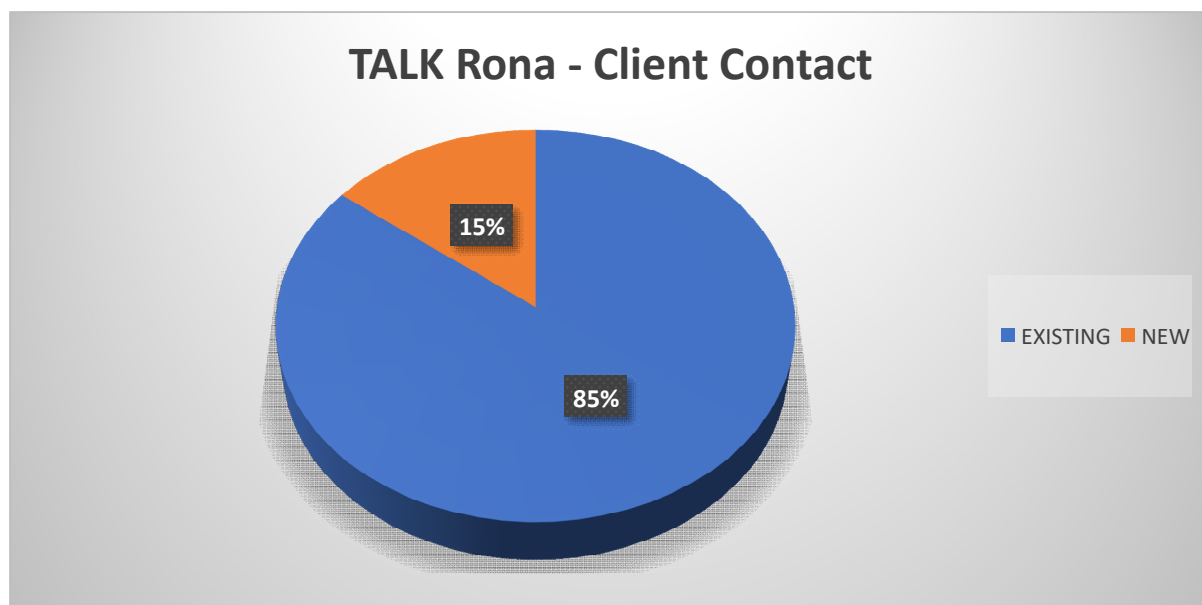


Findings Expanded

The project has been running since October 2020. Since the start of the project TALK Rona has reached out to over 700 households. In the last six months the TALK Rona service has reached out to 254 households. Here are our ethnicity figures for the last six months.



We have found 85% of people who have previously accessed our services have returned and built confidence with us to address their ongoing issues.

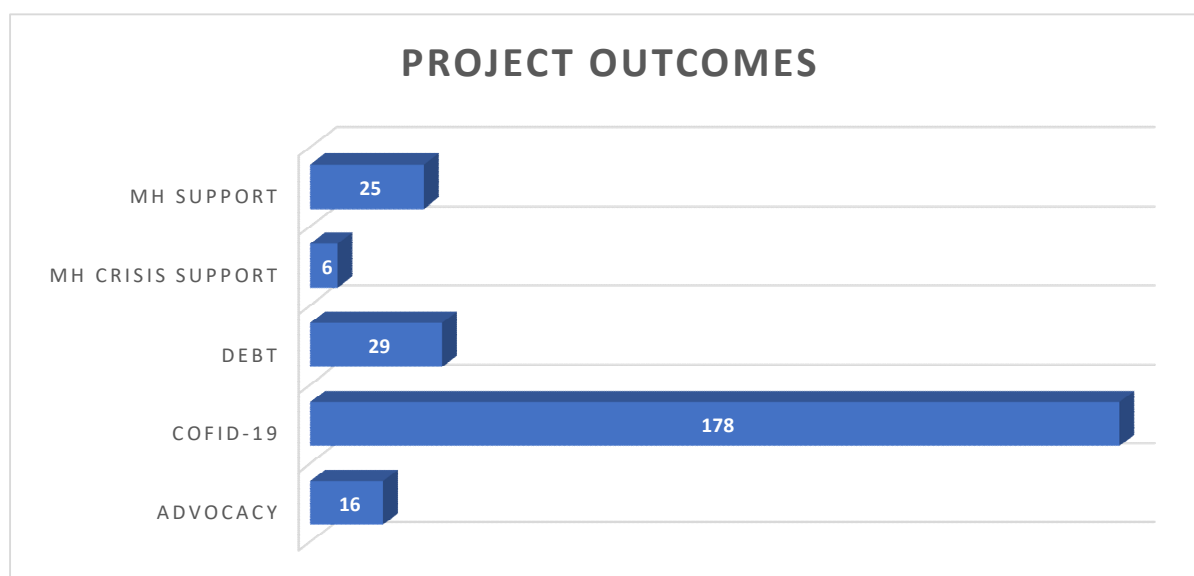




TALK Rona has provided formal support to assist people with health and social care needs, to understand their rights, and the type of support available; to help negotiate understanding of care and welfare services and to give a voice to vulnerable people on a variety of different issues with cultural sensitivity.

Many of the service users we have worked with have little confidence, feelings of low self-esteem, and are anxious and afraid to leave their homes and access services. We worked with these people to build their confidence and signposted to appropriate agencies by connecting them with mainstream services where necessary.

Below are the following project outcomes met from the 254 household contacts.



These categories are further defined below;

MH Crisis Support – Suicidal thoughts, anxiety, stress, behaviour placing one at risk/harm. A crisis situation can be caused by a multitude of factors such as, marriage breakdown, burden of caring responsibilities, debt, housing and employment issues etc.

MH Support – De-escalation strategies, referrals to appropriate services, liaison with relevant professionals, Self-care and understanding of triggers and patterns of behaviour.

COVID-19 Information – Lockdown rules and restrictions, travel arrangements, requesting PCR tests and LFT's, rules around isolating, access to services, appropriate PPE guidance, support to access equipment and food banks.

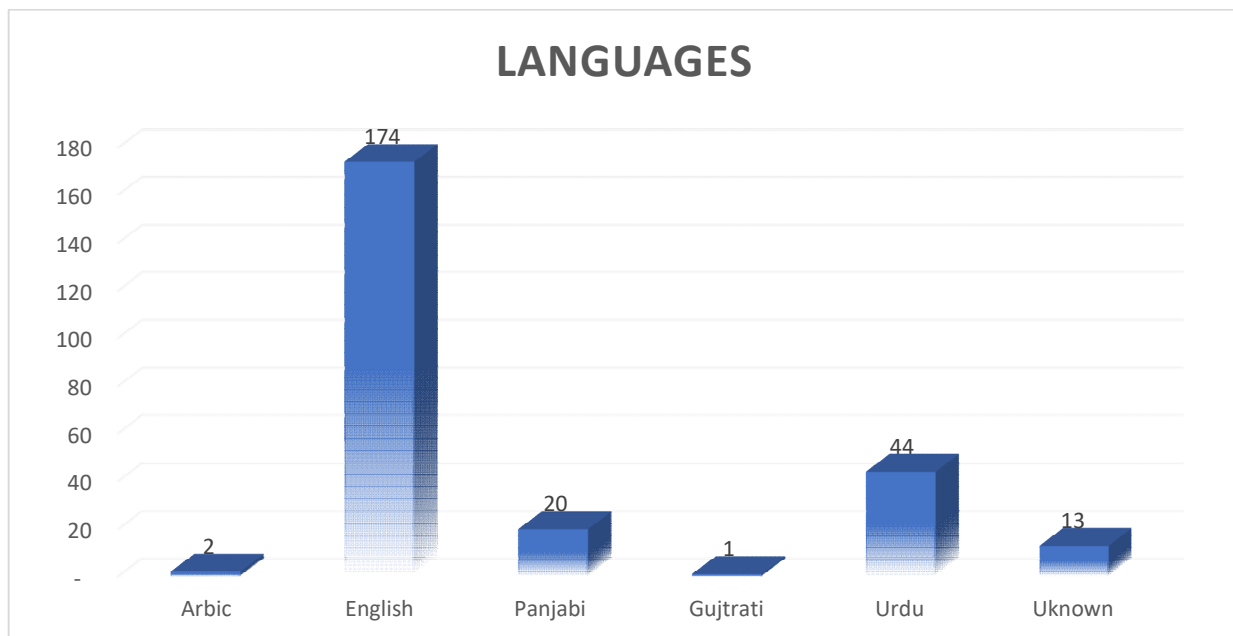
Debt- support offered around government schemes, how to consolidate debts, Job vacancy alerts, loss of income, working out how to save money by calculating the house-holds income and signposting to step change for further debt support. Empower consultants CIC have created a partnership with step change,



a debt charity, to support those individuals that have spiraled in debt and arrears due to COVID-19. We offer a 60 second debt test available on our website.

Advocacy – Representing the client in several situations. Speaking/ writing to professionals including solicitors, social workers, paid advocates on their behalf. and empowering clients to take control of their lives. Supporting them to actively speak up.

Most calls to the advice line were made by the second-generation population, who spoke good English, representing their elders. Below are figures for the following languages we covered:





Evaluation:

We found most people accessing our service as a one off were hesitant to stay on the phone for longer than expected. Some of the service users we spoke with did not have an email address. Discussions within our team agreed a feedback proforma where we devised case studies for our complex cases and additional feedback was collated by our COVID-19 Advisors who selected 10 percent of the service users who engaged with TALK Rona. These are the results of the 25 people contacted;

- 90% found the service useful and discussed with their family and friends.
- 70% of the people contacted told us they are more confident in accessing mainstream services.
- 86% of people feel reassured and able to deal with their mental health and wellbeing following support from TALK Rona.
- 80% felt the information given regarding COVID-19 was appropriate.
- 100% of people told us they would willingly use the TALK Rona service again.

We have also developed our social media platforms and engaged our clients to partake in producing video content to capture the work we have completed throughout the pandemic and raise awareness of mental health within South Asian communities. Our TALK Rona short stories Facebook posting has had 2.1k views in six days. The link can be found here [\(5\) Facebook](#).

We have both managed accounts for Instagram and Facebook which have helped us to raise more awareness of the good work we do and connect with organisations much more closely to receive up to date information and connect others.



Key Recommendations:

The TALK Rona project has evidenced a great need for a community service. Due to the mental health rates increasing from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, community support services are much more visible and now play a vital role in engagement.

Please see our recommendations;

- To continue to raise awareness amongst the South Asian community around the rules and restrictions relating to COVID-19 with the view of expanding it to other areas in Greater Manchester. This can be scaffolded to focus on raising awareness around the new variants, vaccine programs and the safety precautions that can be taken to avoid contracting the virus. To work in partnership with other organisations and encouraging individuals to take the boosters.
- To provide a holistic support service to the South Asian Community with a clear focus on mental health. This support will encourage and improve their lifestyle changes. It will also educate members of the community on how we can support family members or friends struggling with certain aspects of mental health and raise cultural awareness amongst professionals. In addition to this we aim to create opportunities for service users to access a range of courses and training.
- In order to reach out to a wider community it is important to upskill the community with the necessary IT skills to access the online platforms. Empower Consultants CIC to provide online IT workshops such as how to create an email ID, how to access video calls, how to order online groceries and book online appointments. This will reduce the impact that the isolation has had on individual's mental health by maintaining that contact with the outside world.
- To provide a befriending service as part of the TALK Rona support. We have found that many members of the community especially the elderly have felt the pressure of loneliness more so due to COVID-19. This has left people to suffer from mental health and ill health in a vulnerable position. The befriending service will support the individuals to regain their inner confidence, reduce social isolation and gain new skills. We encourage this to be a specialised culturally appropriate befriending service with individuals leading the service to be appointed from South Asian communities.
- To provide a culturally appropriate/sensitive advocacy service to a marginalised community in addressing their mental health needs, the stigma and support related to accepting support. This support will be from a representative professional from their community in reference with the DHSC pilot of culturally appropriate advocacy ([DHSC: CC - MHDD: Culturally Appropriate Advocacy Pilot - Your Tender Team](#)) in light of the changes to the Mental health Act.



Quotes from Participants

Covid really affected me, I was not able to see to my children or get on with my daily duties. The fear of catching COVID-19 isolated me from my family and others. I ended up self-isolating without the need to do so and my relationship with my family was at turmoil. Then, one day my husband spoke to my sister and she told him to ring TALK Rona. I felt so anxious speaking to a stranger and I now realise this was just a feeling. As soon as I heard the voice on the phone addressing me with love, I felt some peace". (Faiza Khan)

"I lost my cousin brother in Pakistan due to COVID-19, his death was a shock to all of us. It was really sad as we could not attend the funeral or even mourn with our loved ones due to the restrictions. Even till now I feel I have no closure. This has affected me massively I just feel a deep sadness". (Shazia Ahmed)

"I am the main breadwinner for my family, and I have my own business. I took a big financial hit due to COVID-19 as my business was closed most of the year. There was no work for me and I felt too old to learn another skill or take up another venture. I felt immense pressure as I had just bought a new house. Without a regular income and with no sight of normality, I did not know how I would finance a my family. I couldn't turn to my family as I was fearful of the torments of not living within my means. I rang TALK Rona for debt advice and this really helped me to work through and look at my options. I am grateful for this support and I have recommended the service to others. (Mohammad Aftab)

Case Study

"I am so grateful for the Talk Rona telephone line. I live in Bradford but my mother lives alone in the Tameside area. During COVID-19 she was unable to get out and get her groceries. I was in isolation due to my husband getting the virus. This was such a difficult time for me as I visited my mother on a weekly basis. A friend of mine passed on the number for TALK Rona, I called them first and explained the situation. I was worried that she needed groceries. The advisor was so polite and understanding.

She called my mother straight away and talked to her and tried to get to know her. She asked questions about her family and my mother was so happy just to have a conversation with someone. Then they spoke about her needs. My mother was out of milk and bread and other essentials. The advisor was aware of a scheme ran by the local authority where they were delivering groceries for the elderly. Through this scheme my mother got delivered the essentials. Since that first phone call she now calls the help line once a week to speak to the advisor. They have spoke about supporting her with accessing video calls so she can connect with us and see us just to be prepared. (Amal)



“I cannot thank the project enough as I was panicking, and I can imagine there are hundreds of families out there that do not have this support. I promoted this service on my Facebook and asked people to spread the word as many people are not aware of the great services that are out there”.



Conclusion

In conclusion it is evident that the global pandemic has had an adverse effect on the South Asian community as a whole. Due to certain barriers and cultural sensitivities they are seen as more vulnerable. The impact of COVID-19 has affected all aspects of life from work, caring responsibilities, education, relationships, to finances, from isolation to loss of income. All these lead to having a negative impact of an individual's mental health. Many people have reached out for support some have out of choice and others had no choice. Empower Consultants CIC continues to provide support within the community and aims to expand its services to other areas. The partnership work continues to grow with the hope of being an established charity that offers a holistic support package when dealing with mental health and advocacy.