



Bridge Strategy

April 2021 - March 2022

acorns

Your local children's hospice



1. Emerging from the Pandemic

When the Covid-19 crisis developed in March 2020, Acorns had one year left on our Making Every Day Count strategy, a three year plan that had been adopted by our Trustees and published in April 2018. Recognising how Covid-19 had changed almost everything, we had no choice but to immediately abandon the remaining year of our strategy.

In its place, we published our Covid-19 Emergency Response Plan at the end of March. Shared with families, staff, volunteers as well as our external partners and stakeholders, we set out how the charity would try and deliver two overarching goals for the crisis:

- Continuing to deliver our children's hospice care service to the best of our ability, given the huge challenges created by the pandemic
- Safeguarding our long term ability to provide care to children and families by steering Acorns the charity through the shock of the pandemic, given massive disruptions to our traditional ways of raising funds from our supporters, events and charity shops

We have updated our Covid-19 Emergency Plan twice as the pandemic has evolved, publishing a Phase 2 in June 2020 and then a Phase 3 in September 2020.

Despite the winter crisis and lockdown, the roll-out of vaccines in early 2021 feels like a genuine turning point in this pandemic. Our assumption is that things will start to feel very much better in the UK and across the West Midlands as the year progresses. However, we recognise a return to normal for the children and families we support will be a gradual process, and a full economic and social recovery may take years.

It is therefore not yet the right time for Acorns to be setting a new long term strategy. Instead, we are introducing a one year 'Bridge Strategy' focused on how our service and our charity will start to emerge from the Covid-19 crisis from April 2021 onwards.

2. Remaining true to our Vision and Mission

Our vision at Acorns remains that every baby, child and young person living in our region who is life limited or life threatened and their families will receive the specialist care and support they need.

Our vision feels more relevant than ever as our communities start to emerge from the worst of this coronavirus pandemic. There will be no better indicator on the quality of the country's recovery than the support given in the years ahead to some of the most vulnerable young members of our communities, and their families.

Our mission at Acorns remains

- To provide essential specialist palliative care services to babies, children, young people and their families across our region
- To deliver these services in partnership with others
- To champion the cause of children's palliative care

We are confident we can continue to deliver these three pillars of our mission, whatever the year ahead holds.

In the Bridge Strategy, we will set out the commitments we want to make to those needing our children's hospice service, while also focusing on the health and wellbeing of our people at Acorns. We will also set expectations for the recovery in the diverse ways in which we traditionally fund our care.

Finally, the Bridge Strategy explains how we will use the year ahead not to stand still, but to build for the future by continuing to carry out key reviews and projects across the charity, and work with a 'continuous improvement' mindset in all we do.

This strategy has emerged in consultation across Acorns – the families we support, the people that work or volunteer with us, and our partners and supporters. We would like to thank everyone for their valuable input.



3. Our promises at Acorns

We have all learned during this pandemic that it is almost impossible to predict the course of events too far in advance. To a lesser extent, this is likely to remain the case with the recovery.

Our overarching approach at Acorns during this next year of re-emerging from the pandemic will therefore continue to be one of flexibility and responsiveness. Our fantastic team has demonstrated these qualities throughout the pandemic, and will continue to do so during the recovery phase.

Therefore, whatever happens, we make these promises about our children's hospice service:

- > We will deliver the most ambitious, impactful and caring children's hospice service that we can over the next year, based on circumstances as they change
- > We will continue to provide end of life care to any child or young person who needs it, as we have done throughout the pandemic
- > We will gradually re-introduce the face-to-face services that are so important to families, but which we had to restrict, adapt or suspend during this crisis. This includes once again offering the full range of residential services from our Birmingham hospice as soon as we are able to do so

- > We will best support children and families by operating ever more closely with the NHS, other health and social care providers, as well as with other children's hospices nationally, who face the same challenges and opportunities that we do
- > We will continue to use what we have learned during this protracted crisis and from our Care Review to do things even better in the future
- > We will continue to use technology and digital platforms to bring more families closer to our care and support, even after our face-to-face services fully resume

And we make these promises about what our people, our partners, our supporters and the customers in our shops can expect from Acorns, and its leadership team:

- > We will continue to care and do all we can to keep you safe
- > We will communicate clearly and transparently
- > We will respect everyone's circumstances and value everyone's contribution
- > We will respond quickly and flexibly when called upon to do so
- > We will ensure careful stewardship of Acorns finances

4. Restoring the full range of our children's hospice care services

Supporting children and families

Families of children who receive a service from Acorns are expected to be among those who will have faced the greatest challenges during the pandemic. The legacy of a full year's anxiety and isolation is likely to have increased the needs of families who have been shielding, isolated, financially impacted and those who have not received their usual levels of support during lockdown.

Our Family Service Teams have been extremely active in supporting families throughout this pandemic, and will remain at the forefront of all we do over the year to come. Acorns will be there to offer practical and emotional advice and support to families as they emerge from shielding, liaising with other agencies such as local authorities, other health providers and schools. This will include bereavement support, and providing support and activities to the brothers and sisters of the children we care for at Acorns.

If the current optimism about the speed, scope and impact of the vaccination roll-out is justified, we would expect to grow the full scope and level of our face-to-face care service steadily over the year covered by the Bridge Strategy. As we have done since the Covid-19 emergency began, we will need to start the year by continuing to prioritise the following children's hospice services.

Residential children's hospice care

End of life care for any child or young person that needs it

We have provided end of life care throughout the pandemic, and this vital service will continue to be our absolute priority.

Emergency short stays for children

These residential overnight stays will continue to be prioritised during the emergence from lockdown, and can be requested by any family who uses our service throughout the year. They will initially be offered at our Walsall and Worcester hospices, and then from Birmingham once it reopens. As always, priority will be given to the most urgent requests.

Planned bookable short stays

We anticipate being able to continue offering bookable short stays for children for most of this one year period, once the anticipated backlog of emergency stay requests has been met. Acorns will be considerate to all requests for short breaks, and ensure a fair and consistent response. Our admissions policy may change in line with changing government guidance and in response to the roll-out and effectiveness of the vaccination programme, and the Test and Trace service. As with emergency short breaks, these will be offered initially only from our Walsall and Worcester hospices, with Birmingham being added once it reopens.

Paid-for beds

At least for the early part of this strategy, we also anticipate continuing to be asked to provide safe, secure and long stays for a small number of children, a key service provided by Acorns throughout the pandemic. This would be for children with a life limiting or life threatening illness or condition, who cannot be looked after at home, or for children with a life limiting or life threatening illness or condition who local NHS hospitals have asked to transfer to our care, thereby maximising their intensive care capability to respond to new Covid-19 patients.

Access to the 'special bedroom' for children who die in the community or hospital

A very important part of our children's hospice service at Acorns is to offer families the opportunity to say goodbye to their child after death, through 'special bedrooms' we have at all our hospices. During Phase 1 of the pandemic, for infection control reasons, we reluctantly had to restrict use of the special bedroom to the families of children who died in the hospice. We recognise how important this service is to families and therefore recommenced offering it as part of our Phase 2 plan. We will continue to offer the use of our 'special bedrooms' to any family who needs them.

Other face-to-face care services to be delivered at or from the hospices

Day care

We know how important day care is to the children and families who are able to use this service. We hope to reintroduce day care quickly as and when the public health situation improves.

Outreach services

After our initial tentative resumption of outreach services, we hope to steadily increase the amount of support we can offer in the home as families regain their confidence. This will be done in a phased approach from all three hospices following individual assessments with each child and family.

Therapies

Therapies include: physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, other complementary therapies and enjoyment of the multisensory therapy rooms at our hospices. We know how important it will be for families to be able to enjoy essential time together in a familiar and safe environment. We expect these services to be a key part of our offer throughout the year.

Using our outdoor spaces

We will provide the opportunity for families to come with their children and enjoy the gardens and outdoor spaces at all three of our hospices (Walsall, Birmingham and Worcester). This is designed to give families still choosing to shield their child at home the confidence to venture to a familiar outdoor space of

calm, without the fear of coming into close contact with others.

Transition to adult services

Several families have spoken to us about the problems of transitioning into adult services during the pandemic and their sense of loss at missing out on their last stays and experiences with Acorns. We will be working closely with the young people in this situation to prioritise their needs as they transition.

Welcoming new referrals to Acorns

The pandemic has obviously proved the worst of times for welcoming new children and families referred to us at Acorns. Restrictions have affected not only families directly, but there have been wider impacts on the health and social care system.

We continue to build our links with local neonatal units and, over the year, will be focusing on introducing families to Acorns in the antenatal period. We will also introduce our services to those families newly discharged with babies with highly complex needs through existing support groups.

We are proud that to date, over the first year of the pandemic, referrals to Acorns fell by less than we would have anticipated. We have been able to include many new children and their families amongst those receiving a service from Acorns, but have necessarily done much of this online. Recognising that the experience of Acorns has been so different for this recent cohort, we will provide welcome events as soon as it is safe and practical to do so.



Strengthening our care with partnerships and collaborations

Acorns vision of every child and family getting the support they need has always been dependent on high levels of partnership and collaboration across the health and social care systems and services accessed by families. We will extend and deepen our existing partnerships with NHS England and local commissioners, whose support is more important than ever to our ability to fully resource and deliver our care service.

After the impact and cost of the pandemic on all providers, there has never been a more important time for charities like Acorns to do everything we can to work collaboratively and cost-effectively with others.

We will ensure that the West Midlands Paediatric Palliative Care network resumes its co-ordination as quickly as possible. We will work in ever closer partnership with our local hospitals, especially the team at Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital. We hope by the mid point of the Bridge Strategy, our joint efforts will be boosted by the arrival of a Paediatric Palliative Consultant in the region working across our two organisations for the benefit of local children, families and health workers.

We will continue our work as a member of both Hospice UK and Together for Short Lives, championing the cause of children's palliative care, and doing all we can to ensure that our services and our organisations are supported to emerge strongly and securely from the worst of the pandemic.

Building the foundations for our future care service

We will also use the year ahead to build the future foundations of our children's hospice service. As the charity behind one of the country's first and largest children's hospice services, Acorns has always tried to be a pioneer in terms of both the care we offer, and how we can best deliver it. We have a strong group of Parent Carer Champions and Young Ambassadors who we will continue to work with to support the planning and development of our services.

During the pandemic, we have conducted a major external review of our care service, very much family-led in terms of the views, feedback and data we have collected from actual and potential users of Acorns in the West Midlands. The review team have situated what they heard from families in the wider context of what they heard about future trends and possibilities from our health and social care partners, and what we know about the UK's wider children's hospice sector. The review team have also sought the views of families who could be accessing Acorns services, but currently are not doing so, to try and understand what we can do to improve access to our children's hospice care.

This review should give us a fantastic opportunity to set our long term course. Over the course of the year covered by the Bridge Strategy, we will therefore use the findings and recommendations of our Care Review to develop and position our care service for the future.





5. Protecting children, families and our people from Covid-19

The past year has shown us that nobody can predict with certainty the shape, speed or sustainability with which the West Midlands and the country as a whole will emerge or recover from Covid-19.

We will therefore plan on continuing to take every precaution to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19 at our hospices, our shops and the other places where Acorns people carry out their work.

We will always aim to provide environments with the highest standards of infection control – this includes temperature checks, hand washing, mandatory PPE, and restrictions, for as long as they are necessary, to the number of people in our buildings.

We will continue to practice regular testing for the children who access our services, and for our own people, and we will only evolve our strict current policies when it is safe and advisable for us to do so.

6. Our people

We are so proud of how everyone at Acorns has contributed to the care we have been able to provide since day one of the pandemic, despite the obvious risks and anxiety entailed. It has been a massive effort by everyone individually, and as a team.

We have all learned to work or to volunteer in new ways, and managed to deliver excellent results and maintain team spirit despite the huge constraints on working or even meeting together.

But the pandemic has obviously taken its toll on each of us, and we need to invest in supporting our people in their roles, but also in their development and their wellbeing. We will need people at all levels in our organisation to be part of creating a culture we can all thrive in. We expect and receive so much from those of our people in positions of responsibility, and we are planning an exciting leadership development programme over the year.

Acorns is a complex organisation, with hundreds of people working and volunteering across three hospices, in the community, in 45 shops and in our central support teams. As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, we need to invest in how we work and communicate with each other. We have identified six key projects over the next year that people from all our teams will be taking forward together. As well as the Care Review, there is the Wellbeing Strategy project, Communications and Engagement, KPIs and Measures, Leadership Culture and the Business Improvement project.

At the start of the year covered by the Bridge Strategy we will also be introducing a new People Strategy, focusing on eight areas that will be key to our success going forward, and to our vision for people working and volunteering at Acorns.



7. Our facilities and IT

We will continue to do everything we can to make our three Acorns Children's Hospices in Birmingham, Walsall and Worcester welcoming, safe and appropriate environments for children, young people, and their families, as well as for our own people working and volunteering in them. Next year will be like any other, with a constant programme of maintenance and improvements, big and small.

When our Birmingham hospice opens its doors again for residential stays, children and their families will see it has been extensively redecorated by volunteers during the pandemic. In Worcester, we expect to complete the construction of a fully funded new car park to the side of the hospice, a project which had to be deferred from this year. This will provide a convenient area for employee and volunteer parking, and make it easier for families to park close to the main entrance of the hospice.

Most excitingly, now that we have secured its long term future with the success of the Save Acorns Black Country Hospice Appeal and the support of our NHS partners, we will be asking some of our supporters to help us upgrade and redecorate all the bedrooms at our Walsall hospice. If we can do this, the new bedrooms will further enhance the experience of children staying with us at Acorns, and their families.

Over the past year, the Acorns central team who support our hospices and shops have proved they can work without a building. Our care workers have shown they can provide support and advice to families where face-to-face contact has not been possible. But we have all learned that we cannot operate effectively without a functioning IT infrastructure and system. Looking forward, we hope that many of our services and internal processes will continue to function remotely, not out of necessity but out of choice.

8. Our Supporter Engagement and Fundraising

It is entirely down to the generosity of our supporters that Acorns has been able to provide our children's hospice care over every day of this pandemic. Thanks to them, we are emerging, fully aware of the challenges we will face, to resume our full range of fundraising activities, but with real optimism for the future and a talented team to take us forward.

We will emphasise in all our communications the difference that this support has made and will continue to make. We will look to take our supporters on a journey, where we show our gratitude to

them with professional stewardship, engagement opportunities and communication. We will look to strengthen our relationship with existing supporters, while continuing to look for ways to attract many more new supporters to Acorns.

The year covered by the Bridge Strategy will again require our fundraising and events teams to show ingenuity and flexibility. We know already that many of the mass participation events held usually in summer will not take place again this year. As and when face-to-face events can resume in the

community, they will be truly joyful. Our plan is to raise income through switching some activity to online and virtual fundraising.

While social distancing remains in place, we will continue to find ways to use digital channels to tell our stories, to host special events, and to inspire and engage those looking to support our children's hospice care with direct donations, or by carrying out individual or team fundraising challenges.

We will underpin our supporter engagement and fundraising activities by continuing to look for ways

to promote our care work through media and social media channels, inspiring a wide audience across the West Midlands. Our communications will be built around the stories of the children, young people and families we support, and particularly those who have agreed to act as Ambassadors for Acorns.

A significant part of our income at Acorns comes from gifts made in the Wills of those who have come to know us over many years, and we will strive to become at the forefront of people's minds when they write their Will.

9. Our charity shops

We have high hopes for our 45 Acorns charity shops for the year of the Bridge Strategy. From the first day we reopen, the people working or volunteering in our shops will be focused on making as much money as possible for our care. We will provide safe and welcoming environments for staff and volunteers to work, for customers to shop, and for our supporters to donate the goods on which we depend.

We now expect to be able to trade for most of the year covered by the strategy. We will continue to develop our 'empowerment model', supporting our Shop Managers to make the choices and take the decisions they need to, in order to create the best customer and volunteering experience. We know this is the right way to maximise the financial contribution from our shops to our children's hospice care.

10. Careful stewardship of our finances

There has never been a more challenging period for charities in the UK than this coronavirus crisis. We have seen so many of the traditional ways we fund our care massively impacted or halted altogether, as shops and schools were closed, and so many fundraising events and activities were cancelled.

Despite this, thanks to the incredible generosity of our supporters in the community, to the different Government support schemes, and to a special programme of support from NHS England, we have managed to continue to deliver our care throughout the pandemic, and kept our finances at Acorns stable.

Over the year covered by the Bridge Strategy, we will continue to be extremely cautious with the speed and rate at which we flex back to delivering our full range and volume of services and activities. We do expect fundraising and charity shop activity and income to recover, but it will be a gradual process. We will need to balance what we expect to be positive trends with first the tapering down and then the transition away from the Government and NHS England support schemes that we have depended upon. This will require exceptionally careful stewardship of our finances by our leadership team and our Trustees.

11. Equality and inclusion

Acorns serves any child or family that needs our support across the West Midlands, one of the most diverse communities in the UK. We are deeply committed to engaging the views, perspectives, and ideas of everyone in the community and of those individuals using our services, or working and volunteering in our charity. We are proud of our achievements over many years to ensure our care service is designed and delivered in an inclusive and

appropriate way, but we recognise there is always more we can do.

Acorns has a cross organisational Equality and Inclusion Steering Group, which proudly reported that we successfully achieved the Equality objectives we set for 2018-21. Through the Bridge Strategy we will be developing new objectives to ensure we continue to drive forward Equality and Inclusion.



12. A word from Rachel, Charlie's mum

Rachel lives in Walsall with her husband Jonathan five-year-old daughter Isobel and Charlie, a cheeky nine-year-old with an infectious laugh.

Charlie has a rare genetic disorder which causes numerous health complications and the family have been using Acorns since Charlie was two.

In many cases the pandemic has intensified the challenges that families like Rachel's face, but whatever happens over the next 12 months and beyond, Acorns will be there - providing the vital support they simply could not live without.

"During the first lockdown, our first reaction was 'panic'. Obviously more so for Charlie's health at the time. Sometimes all you see is the death rate going up and when you see the numbers showing hundreds of people have died today, you're like 'oh gosh'."

"In the beginning Acorns was there for us. When no food delivery slots were available, our Family Team Worker Bimla arranged deliveries of food and essentials directly to our house."

"Bimla would call to check on us and our mental health and see if there was anything that she could do. It was great to be able to speak to someone. She did everything she possibly could to try and help us which was just a massive lifeline."

"We've been 14 months without carers now and that in itself is exhausting. Financially it's become an absolute wreck and my health has been quite a challenge. I was recently put on medication that has completely wiped out my immune system."

"We hit crisis point as a family, but Acorns was there and we were able to book Charlie in for an emergency stay at the hospice."

"It gave us the chance to rest and only have one child to deal with. Before, we were completely wiped out and barely functioning. To be able to get a full night's sleep was just heaven."

"The future is uncertain and there are still lots of challenges. Consultants that we need to speak to for Charlie's health have been diverted to deal with the pandemic, and not being able to see friends and family is hard. It's really worried us the fact that there are new variants out there."

"It's not just us, I know a lot of other families who've hit breaking point and have had to have emergency stays. Without Acorns support through the pandemic we'd have nowhere else to go."

Rachel, Charlie's mum

Our Vision

Every baby, child and young person living in our region who is life limited or life threatened and their families will receive the specialist care and support they need.

www.acorns.org.uk

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