

CancerCare offers a wide variety of services including one-to-one counselling, complementary treatments such as aromatherapy and hypnotherapy and creative and physical therapy groups including yoga and Pilates sessions.

Why was your organisation founded?

The charity was founded in 1983 by Professor Malcolm McIlmurray, a former cancer specialist, who moved to the area to take up a role as a consultant at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and Westmorland General Hospital. His vision was to address a need for increased provision for cancer patients' emotional and mental wellbeing and he began by offering support one night a week from a hired room at Ryelands House in Lancaster. The idea began to grow and CancerCare was formally established by Professor McIlmurray and a group of interested professionals including nurses, GPs and hospital staff in 1983. Following a major fundraising campaign, the charity purchased its current home at Slyndales in 1989.

What services does your organisation offer?

CancerCare has centres in Lancaster, Kendal and Barrow and also provides outreach services in hospitals across the Bay area. We cover a wide geographical patch and welcome clients from as far south as Garstang in Lancashire, up to Ambleside in the Lake District and as far west as Sellafield in West Cumbria.

How have your services changed during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?

During the pandemic, we were unable to carry out face-to-face sessions with clients. Therefore, we launched a raft of new online, telephone and community services to ensure we could continue to support people who were in need of help more than ever due to being isolated from traditional networks of family and friends. These included: a dedicated support helpline open at all centres in Lancaster, Barrow and Kendal daily from 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday; essential medical supplies delivery service for people eligible for CancerCare services who were self-isolating and could not leave their homes; online and telephone therapies including counselling, nutritional advice, reiki, hypnotherapy, pilates, yoga, mindfulness classes and online peer support for young people; free telephone counselling for UHMBT NHS staff and domiciliary workers; free telephone counselling for anyone bereaved for any reason – not just as a result of cancer.

Have you seen an increase of people using your services?

We have seen an increase in people requiring more sessions than their usual allotted allocation - in 2020 35% more clients needed extra sessions compared to 2019. We have also seen a relative increase in the number of bereaved people and carers requiring support. In the immediate months before lockdown, this group constituted 18% of our client base and in the last several months, people seeking help after being bereaved has risen to form 27% of our total clients.

Feedback from a person using one-to-one support:

Dawn McMullen from Ravenglass in Cumbria was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018. Following the pandemic, her daughter Eve continued her sessions with our specialist children's counsellor Helen Tickle via telephone. Dawn said: "Eve really looks forward to her calls and is always in a good mood afterwards which sets her up for the rest of the week. Helen always has a chat with me first to talk about how Eve is doing and then it's just the two of them. It's joyous to see the difference it makes to her. Helen has been an absolute lifeline for our family."

How can people get involved?

We are currently working on a project which aims to use the video game Minecraft as a way of allowing members of our Young People's Peer Support Group to engage with each other, and our youth workers, in a new, creative digital arena. The group usually meets weekly and takes part in games and fun activities including art and baking. All members are going through similar situations in their lives and help each other by sharing their experiences and forming friendships. They were unable to meet the same way during lockdown which made it difficult for our youth workers to engage with them in the same creative. Consequently, we applied for funding from catalyst which will see the building of a unique CancerCare world in which they can do artwork, games and talk to each other without having to necessarily be in the same room, should the lockdown situation occur again in the future. We are also exploring whether it could be used to replicate the sandbox play therapy we use for younger children.