



*Hope,
growth
and work
in North
Wales*

In 2007, a pilot project was launched to tackle entrenched unemployment in some of the UK's most disadvantaged communities. Fifteen years on, **Ali Thomas** tells a story of hope and growth which started in the seaside town of Rhyl and now touches the lives of people and SMEs across Wales



Ali Thomas is the Chief Executive Officer of RCS, which she joined at its establishment in 2007. Ali has over 30 years' experience of working in the voluntary and statutory sectors, designing and leading programmes of work to address social and health inequalities.

We often hear people say that 'RCS is Wales' best-kept secret'. Tucked away in the west end of 'sunny Rhyl' on the North Wales coast, a team of employment and wellbeing practitioners work to support the community and local businesses to get back to work, stay in work and thrive. Rhyl City Strategy (RCS) delivers a range of free-at-the-point-of-access support and therapies, right across Wales, to help people improve their wellbeing for work, and provides fully funded consultancy and training to help small and medium employers (SMEs) create healthy working environments where their staff can flourish. The growth of RCS over the past 15 years has been organic, as it has reached out with its free service offer to employees, businesses and GPs across Wales, assuring them there really is no catch.

I was lucky enough to join RCS at the very start of its journey in 2007, when a group of local stakeholders succeeded in getting Rhyl included in the Department for Work and Pensions' 'Cities Strategy' programme. The two-year pilot scheme was testing an area-based approach to tackling entrenched unemployment in 15 disadvantaged communities in the UK. My role was as programme manager of the Rhyl pilot, heading up a team of four project staff.

Although not a city, the concentration of worklessness was more prevalent within Rhyl than in many towns in Wales, with the decline of its traditional seaside labour market having resulted in decades of economic stagnation. Unemployment was above the Welsh average; data from the 2001 census showed a total of 1,430 people in Rhyl West – 50% of the working age population – were economically inactive or unemployed.¹

The new Rhyl City Strategy partnership focused on community engagement, helping people improve their skills and employability, and on working with employers to remove barriers and create opportunities. It formed a community interest company to take its work forward, and mobilised key stakeholders from the statutory, voluntary, business and community sectors, working collaboratively to map existing provision and needs, and to develop a coordinated joint response,

linking closely with the Welsh Government's area regeneration programme.

As an independent not-for-profit with the backing of a strong multi-agency partnership, RCS was well placed to secure funding for a range of innovative new services and initiatives addressing key priority areas of health and employment, business development and community engagement. The success of the approach led to the partnership gradually extending its reach and replicating its services in additional communities along the North Wales coast, initially delivering projects in the neighbouring county of Conwy, and later expanding into the Welsh-speaking heartlands of Gwynedd and Anglesey.

Creating our base

Today, a staff team of 35 delivers a range of bilingual wellbeing services from office bases in Rhyl and Bangor. RCS took on the Rhyl headquarters as a half-completed building in 2015 and transformed it into a calm, light and welcoming space where clients can access support, therapies and training. It offers a conducive working space, where the staff – a mix of counsellors, case coordinators, employment specialists and wellbeing trainers – can congregate and collaborate; even though hybrid working is now the new normal, staff are keen to realise the social and wellbeing benefits of meeting in person. The team are committed and passionate about their work, driven to make positive change and motivated by feedback from clients, many of whom talk about the support received as 'transformational'.

In Work Support

The focus on integrated health and employment services has always been a feature of RCS's work, and early mapping work identified a particular gap in 'in-work support' for people with work-limiting health conditions. Traditional employment programmes were typically geared towards getting people into work, with support ceasing at the point of job entry. For new entrants to the jobs market, or for people whose health condition was affecting them in work, this lack of support put people at risk



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of falling out of employment. After four weeks or longer of sickness absence, the chances of an employee returning to work reduces rapidly, with one in five not returning at all. In many cases, long-term absence can spiral into long-term incapacity; over 300,000 people a year in the UK fall out of work into health-related benefits.²

The economic costs of ill health at work were explored in Dame Carol Black’s 2008 review of the health of Britain’s working age population, *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow*.³ Among its recommendations was a proposal for a new ‘Fit for Work’ service, aimed at providing early, holistic and person-centred support for people in the early stages of sickness absence. In 2010, RCS led a successful bid in partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and Public Health Wales to become one of 11 UK sites in DWP’s Fit for Work pilot. The service was rapidly extended to other coastal towns, with additional funding from DWP, and by 2013, RCS had secured European funding to continue and further expand the service. Now known as the In Work Support Service, it is supported by European Social Funding through the Welsh Government, and RCS delivers the service across six counties in North and West Wales.

In Work Support offers free, specialist, work-focused support and therapies for employed and self-employed people with mild to moderate health conditions affecting them at work. It is aimed primarily at employees from SMEs, including micro-businesses and the self-employed, who are less likely to have access to occupational health support.

The service is based on the key principles highlighted in the Black report as critical for effective early intervention. A team of case managers conduct initial holistic assessments, taking into account a broad range of factors impacting on personal wellbeing. Working alongside this team, professional therapists,

counsellors, coaches and physiotherapists deliver a range of tailored interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, physiotherapy and workplace adjustments. We also engage with employers where appropriate to explore how a safe and timely return to the workplace might be facilitated – for example, through changes to duties or working hours, or through workplace adjustments.

Initially aimed at absentees, the service quickly started to receive referrals for support for cases of presenteeism, when employees remain at work when unwell. This can be a particular issue in SMEs, where employees are less likely to receive company sick pay than their public sector peers. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development’s (CIPD), *Health and Wellbeing at Work 2021* survey report found that just 16% of respondents had not observed any form of presenteeism in the past year.⁴ This suggests that ‘presenteeism’ remains common, regardless of where people work; the increase in home working arguably makes it easier to ‘hide away’ if feeling unwell – and if unchecked, this can lead to long periods of disengagement. In Work Support provides early, preventative support, which can help stop cases of presenteeism sliding into longer-term absenteeism, through providing people with the tools to manage their own health and wellbeing with confidence.

One such example is Chrissie Diesel from the North Wales market town of Ruthin. Chrissie came to In Work Support as a newly qualified veterinary surgeon, when she was struggling to adjust to the demands of working life. Chrissie had initially worked through the feelings of anxiety that appeared on her first day as a new vet, but as her nausea continued, she started to have ‘nagging doubts’ about whether she was up to the job.

‘I am a good vet and my performance was not suffering, but it was a huge transition,’ Chrissie explained. ‘Part of me was saying “Hey, come on, you have only just started”, but something else was telling me that perhaps I was not good enough.’

Chrissie eventually went to see her GP, who told her about In Work Support. With her therapist, Chrissie was able to identify her anxieties and how she could deal with them. The difference the scheme has made to her working life, Chrissie says, is remarkable.

‘I would have never given up being a vet, but I think I would have become a very unhappy person if I hadn’t had some help. I am the same person I was before, but I can now take a step back from a situation and deal with it non-reactively. When it comes to my job, I really enjoy the challenges that used to freak me out, and I now have a career as a vet that excites me rather than stresses me, which is fantastic.’

When she married in July 2019, Chrissie and her fiancé Huw asked for donations to RCS instead of wedding gifts, to help more people get the support they need to stay in work.

In Work Support consistently receives similarly positive feedback from clients, GPs and employers alike. Survey evidence indicates that the majority of beneficiaries believe the service has supported them to stay in work, or to return to work sooner than if they had not received the support, with many estimating that the time taken to return to work was almost halved. Twelve years on from the original DWP pilot, RCS has now provided in-work support for more than 13,000 Welsh employees.

Working with employers

RCS has been well placed to take advantage of the increased interest and focus from employers on workforce wellbeing as a result of the pandemic. Our specialist support and training offer is currently helping hundreds of Welsh SMEs create a strong wellbeing culture at work, enabling their employees to flourish, regardless of their individual health needs. Our wellbeing consultants use a unique range of tools and training products aimed at helping businesses identify their workforce wellbeing needs and take positive action to improve wellbeing at work. A simple, interactive audit tool guides employers to identify where improvements can be made, and a suite of training courses covers topics ranging from stress management and motivation and resilience through to menopause awareness; managing sickness absence; return to work conversations and wellbeing action plans. It's a sign that we're trusted in the community that over 400 managers and leaders have attended RCS' open wellbeing webinars in the past year, with support provided to over 200 SMEs since 2018.

A good example of this is Cwmni Da, a TV and film production company based in Caernarfon, North Wales, which worked with RCS during 2020 to strengthen its wellbeing support for its team of 56 employees. The leadership team was aware that in the industry, staff can be under tremendous stress, with crews working long hours under pressure. A staff wellbeing survey conducted through RCS provided some important insights, and gave the team a steer on where they needed to focus their

efforts. Senior management attended a range of training webinars on handling stress, and a number of staff accessed free talking and physical therapies. David Parry the General Manager, said, 'For me and our business, RCS has given us a structure on how to approach issues of wellbeing and stress that have become apparent over the last 18 months.'

Wellbeing champions

One popular element of our support has been a dedicated programme to train and support Workplace Wellbeing Champions, which RCS has adapted for the SME context. The stigma around mental health can mean that staff might not be comfortable approaching line managers about their health concerns, but may be happy to speak with peers. The role of the wellbeing champion is not to offer therapeutic support, but rather to maintain up-to-date knowledge of the professional support and resources available and to steer colleagues in the right direction if they express concerns about their wellbeing. Champions can also help to organise regular wellbeing activities in the workplace in order to promote healthy lifestyles. The resulting training course has attracted significant interest, with 127 champions from 80 organisations created to date – many of these come together in quarterly network meetings to share ideas and good practice.

Antur Waunfawr, a leading social enterprise in Gwynedd, with over 100 staff, participated in the programme in 2021 and speaks highly of its impact. Antur Waunfawr provides employment and training opportunities for adults with learning disabilities. Margaret Jones, Quality and Training Officer, said; 'Staff have participated in online webinars with RCS, and have also completed the Wellbeing Champion training. It is beneficial to be part of a group to share ideas and we are considering introducing a 'wellbeing hour' into our employment contracts.

'It is empowering for us to know how to support our staff. We don't know how we would have managed without RCS' support to keep employees in work and to know how to help them.'

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‘This spring, an exciting new chapter begins, when we will see the installation of a living wall on the outside elevation – part of a larger local greening scheme to create a bee corridor through the streets of Rhyl’

I Can Work

Throughout our history, our strategic alliances with key partners have played a vital role in the development and growth of our cornerstone services. In 2019, we expanded our service portfolio through an exciting partnership initiative with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB). This entailed the development and delivery of a new pilot service – I Can Work – which supports people with mental health needs into paid employment.

The new service quickly gained positive ‘buy in’ from key referrers across a range of health settings, and by the end of the initial pilot phase in September 2020, had registered and supported over 600 clients. One of these, Daniel Davies, was helped by the RCS team to secure a job role with the catering team at Glan Clwyd hospital. Daniel a 27-year-old trained chef from Prestatyn, had sought support through I Can Work after bullying in a previous job led to anxiety and low mood from spending five months out of work. His role on the COVID-19 wards started just before lockdown was imposed in March 2020; it wasn’t long before he contracted the infection himself, but he returned to work as soon as he was able because of the purpose it gave him.

‘My confidence and anxiety were shot after receiving a number of knock-backs, and I felt like giving up. But my I Can Work employment specialist was amazing and helped to boost my self-esteem. She was very proactive and understood what type of work would suit me, rather than pushing me towards any old job.’

‘The programme has helped to give me a more positive outlook on life. I’ve joined the gym and started to love and care for myself again. I believe I Can Work can help you, no matter what your issues are.’

Of the clients supported by I Can Work in its first 15 months, nearly 24% entered employment – more than half of these doing so in the seven months following the first UK lockdown. Following an independent evaluation of the I Can Work pilot by Bangor University, BCUHB secured an additional allocation of funding through DWP and the Welsh Government to continue and expand the service in

partnership with RCS and CAIS through to 2023; with the service offering a valuable blueprint for similar developments in other parts of Wales.

Reaching out

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has had a huge impact on RCS’ work. The company quickly brought forward plans to develop our training workshops as on-line webinars, providing immediate help for employers in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their teams.

The shift to on-line delivery has been a powerful enabler for RCS. In October 2020, we secured a contract with the Welsh Government to deliver mental health support and therapies to employees affected by the pandemic in Cardiff and other parts of South East Wales. Within just one year, we succeeded in building relationships from scratch with GPs and mental health services in the area, and had supported over 600 clients referred into the service. This is a considerable achievement given the limitations of ‘virtual’ networking, and serves as testimony to the hard work of our engagement team. It also provides an indication of the need for our services in other parts of the country and has served to broaden our horizons to consider more ambitious business development goals.

Closing thoughts

While the company’s horizons continue to expand, its heart and its home remains in Rhyl, the town where we sprang into life 15 years ago. RCS continues to invest in the town, and despite the shift to home-working as a result of the pandemic, we are still investing in our offices as inspiring places for colleagues to meet, collaborate and socialise. This spring, an exciting new chapter begins, when we will see the installation of a living wall on the outside elevation – part of a larger local greening scheme to create a bee corridor through the streets of Rhyl.

This special link to place, people and history remains important for RCS. While the people of Rhyl may still say that RCS is its best-kept secret, I hope by writing this article, our story may become better known, more widely shared and inspire other not-for-profit companies to take their place in their community and workplaces as a force for good. ●

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