

Reset, Two/Zero, Go!

Smile Mediation’s Two/Zero journey

Burnley-based Smile Mediation is a social enterprise which provides specialist training, coaching and mediation services across the North West. CEO Karen Ainsworth applied to take part in the Two/Zero programme which originally focussed on scaling social enterprises – then Covid hit...

Selnet adapted the programme to focus instead on supporting the Resilience and Sustainability of the group of 11 social enterprises during the pandemic. We asked Karen about the difference the Two/Zero programme has made for Smile Mediation.

/Where was Smile Mediation before the pandemic?

Communication has been our business for over 20 years; anything from handling difficult conversations, conflict resolution within the home, tackling antisocial behaviour, coaching for professionals inhibited by stress or anxiety, managing performance in the workplace, to providing leaders with the skills they need to get the best out of their people.

As a business we were at a tipping point. We were all working at – and sometimes over – capacity, and we couldn’t realistically sustain that. Something needed to change. As our coach says, ‘to be busy without profit is to invite bankruptcy’!

The Two/Zero project with its specific focus on Social Enterprise came just at the right time for us to pursue scaling the business.

/How did Two Zero help your business navigate Covid-19?

The pandemic stopped ‘business as usual’ for everyone. As the CEO of a small business trying to get through the pandemic, the challenges and the opportunities, managing the day to day felt really isolating and sometimes overwhelming.

No matter how experienced leaders are, we can all learn from each other. The value of programmes like this is the space, time and support to take stock and reflect with like-minded people.

I felt like I’d been lurching between providing mediation support, handling admin, applying for funding, remotely managing volunteers and my team, recruiting new mediators, overseeing operations... Just being part of a peer group gave me that reassurance that we’re all in similar positions and we’re actually doing better than we worried we were.



From never having time to pursue new ideas or future aspirations, we've paused, reset and used our skills to help people through a really difficult time.

Talking through ideas out loud with a professional advisor, and the actions needed to progress them, it's really helped set the wheels in motion on ideas I've had for a long time. The one-to-one coaching has been really valuable; from never having time to pursue new ideas or future aspirations, we've paused, reset and used our skills to help people through a really difficult time.

Programmes like Two/Zero are essential for 'invisible' businesses like ours. The peer support and the coaching have taken me off the daily hamster wheel to feeling reassured and energised.

/What were your biggest challenges?

The biggest challenge for me, and for so many others, was managing financially; the pandemic put pressure on the business to 'stay put' and try and ride it out without touching reserves...

It felt like being pulled in different directions; managing risk and ringfencing reserves during such an unusual and challenging time, but then our service had never been more needed. The government's business grants, and the community grants for frontline initiatives meant we could deliver new services.

Although it felt stifling to begin with, actually, what we've been able to achieve has been wonderful.

Talking through challenges with my coach, I felt clearer about what to apply for funding for, to secure funding and progress new initiatives that would make a real difference to people struggling during the pandemic.

/What did you do differently?

We secured funding from the Community Foundation for Lancashire, and from CAF and **delivered 2 new services** – our **Listening Service** has supported an additional 65 people through over 200 calls, helping them manage anxiety and conflicts.

Our intensive **One-to-One Coaching** has helped a real range of people, from professionals suffering panic attacks, to vulnerable people struggling with mental health issues.

Our referrals for people needing more intensive support have tripled. After the warnings and statistics and stress caused by the lockdown, we're helping 70 people cope with their fear of 're-joining' the world. First and foremost, we listen, to people who are frightened, vulnerable and isolated. We offer encouragement and coping strategies to help them feel more in control.

We help people to draw on what they can do, not what they can't do, to develop skills to help themselves and give them a sense of control back.

We had established relationships with housing associations and Local Authorities, but lockdown brought more partners to us who were overwhelmed but issues like anti-social behaviour and residential disputes.

/Have any of your approaches changed?

Delivering mediation support and training online has been a revelation! I had resisted it in the past. I felt strongly that mediation should be a face to face service, it's personal.

We secured a grant from the Lottery to deliver training to new mediators online, and it's been so successful. Although 'face to face' is still the gold standard, this is another tool we have to be able to deliver our services.

It's been a motivator too. It brings things into perspective and reminds me why I am so passionate about Smile's work.

Programmes like Two/Zero are essential for 'invisible' businesses like ours.

/What is next for Smile Mediation?

Ultimately, there is a real need for Smile's services and it needs to continue but in a more sustainable and resilient manner. Something needs to change and now is the time.

The programme we applied for was to help us scale; despite Covid-19 that's still absolutely on the cards. We have refocussed on opportunities to collaborate, from partnering to deliver contracts up to acquisitions and mergers. I feel really excited about what the future could hold now.

I'd like to encourage potential partners to take a calculated risk; working with Smile Mediation will complement and add real value to your business's offer.

Editors notes

Selnet – The Social Enterprise Lancashire Network

Selnet is the recognised lead for social enterprise in Lancashire.

We believe that social enterprise can transform lives and change the world. If you are trading for a social or environmental purpose, we can support you to start up, develop, connect and grow.



We help Lancashire's social entrepreneurs achieve their ambitions, respond to challenges, tackle inequalities and empower local communities. We are a social enterprise, run by our members to meet the needs of our members. We represent Lancashire's social business interests at national, regional and local levels through our wide network of stakeholders and partners.

As a member of Selnet, organisations will join like-minded business people to share ideas, network, grow and develop, find local connections and help open your business up to new markets. Through our communications channels, they receive up to date sector news, funding information, events and training updates and have a platform to promote social businesses.

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Smile Mediation

[Smile Mediation](#) is a social enterprise which provides specialist training, coaching and mediation services across the North West. Communication has been our business for over 20 years; anything from difficult conversations, negotiation and managing performance in the workplace to providing leaders with the skills they need to get the best out of their people.



The company was established following a Government initiative researching conflict in neighbourhoods and communities. Our approach is to bring about transformation through conversation and negotiation using a structured process and at the same time up-skilling individuals to embed new skills more widely.

Smile Mediation has an excellent reputation for high quality services offering a range of packages to enable as many people as possible to 'borrow' techniques and strategies employed by a mediator.

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