

reflections

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Wellbeing Coordinators, Torbay, 2020

Reflections

In March 2020 the UK went into lockdown due to the COVID–19 pandemic.

We emerged from full lockdown months later and continued to work within a restrictive range of measures— then returned to lockdown again in October 2020.

These are the reflections of Wellbeing Coordinators in Torbay, written October 2020, who continued their work with wellbeing clients over this period and worked as part of the COVID response.

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“Being a Wellbeing Coordinator is an amazing role, especially for someone who loves humanity in all its weird and wonderful forms. I get to hear people’s stories the lovely bits and the difficult bits and then have the privilege of supporting people piece together in what they envisage a new future for them looks like.”

reflections

Staff Member 1:

Age UK Torbay has employed me as a Wellbeing Coordinator for a year and half and during this time, I have learned a fantastic amount of knowledge regarding the aging process and the impact this has on people from a completely holistic spectrum. I must admit that before I joined Age UK Torbay, I perhaps was blind to the fact that getting older for some people is an extremely challenging experience. The impact of declining physical health and losses along the way that affect identity such as no longer having a role within a family structure or having a job within society that gives a person status and meaning.

What I have learned is that for some people getting older is about redefining who they are and for some they need a little help with that. Being a Wellbeing Coordinator is an amazing role, especially for someone who loves humanity in all its weird and wonderful forms. I get to hear people's stories the lovely bits and the difficult bits and then have the privilege of supporting people piece together in what they envisage a new future for them looks like.

Since lockdown in March 2020 due to COVID -19, my role very much changed as it became Age UK Torbay's policy to not put staff or clients at risk by allowing people to meet. The Wellbeing Coordinator's role then became more of a phone support to clients.

While this was very important to maintain contact with our clients, I found it very challenging to only be able to have

contact with my clients who were really struggling with their mental ill health. On one occasion, I did get to meet one client who had just been discharged from hospital due to attempted suicide by overdose. I met him in his garden, socially distancing for a conversation. It highlighted for me the difficulties of social isolation and the impact of how visitation restrictions had a severe detriment on people who had no one else. I also have had two of my clients die during this period. I did not know about either death as they both lived alone. I found out from contact with Adult Social Care. I found that this was upsetting and challenging for me as I never got the opportunity to say goodbye and prepare myself emotionally for their loss.

I also do not think that I was fully prepared for the duration of the COVID -19 Restrictions and how much the change in my role would affect my own identity and sense of self-worth. I found that I got an enormous amount of fulfilment listening to people's stories, problem solving and enjoying peoples company. To have this reduced to phone calls I found very difficult.

My hope is that when all the restrictions in our communities are lifted and society can back to a sense of normality, people who have had to self-isolate or have had challenges with their mental ill health will take up all the opportunities on offer and facilities. Groups that get back up and running will have a new sense of vitality and vigour as people will so much want to get together with others and feel a sense of belonging again.

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Staff Member 2:

I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we, as a country, went into shock when we went into lockdown. Even though we knew it was coming, we didn't know how much it was going to affect everyone's lives.

At the start Brixham Does Care (a befriending charity that began in 1978, with whom I work) collaborated with other charities and organisations to find a way in which we could help. They all came together and set up the Torbay Community Coronavirus Helpline.

The Brixham Town Hall, where I was working, closed its doors to the public, we gathered up all the things that we needed and luckily for us had the use of the friends centre in the grounds of Brixham Hospital. The Friends centre is a day care centre for elderly people of Brixham to go and have a meal, socialise and do activities. This benefited carers of loved ones who needed a break, people that had dementia and people that lived on their own with no family around them. Unfortunately, due to lockdown and COVID this service had to stop. There was enough room at the friends centre for us to social distance and all the risk assessments and safety precautions were in place.

My job role changed completely from being able to go out, visit people, and help introduce them to groups and socialise, to, helping man the helpline. I went through all the list of people, I had been helping and that I had helped in the past and phoned everyone to see if they were ok and set up a priority phone call list of my most vulnerable clients. I then put them into daily, weekly and monthly call list.

In the first few months, the phone lines were extremely busy especially at the start. A lot of elderly people just not understanding that they had to stay in and isolate, then there were people that needed food and couldn't get a food delivery, that needed prescriptions delivered, not

being able to get an appointment at their doctors' surgery, worried about getting money out of the post office etc. Brixham Does care and other organisations in the Torbay community development Trust gave out phone numbers of home delivery services, set up a collection and delivery service for people's prescriptions and a drop off and delivery service of food parcels to the most vulnerable and delivering food to the food bank.

What I have found to be most endearing is the sense of community in Torbay and the coming together of charities and organisations to help in times of need.

My job over the past over the last 8 months has changed dramatically, one of the hardest things is having to come to terms with is not being able to visit people face to face and doing most of my work over the phone.

I have had clients that have passed away, that have been bereaved and not been able to go to the funeral, not been able to visit their loved ones in care homes or hospital, that have had breakups.

The world is certainly a different place now and who knows what the future is going to hold? Especially with the second wave starting, it's the uncertainty of what the future holds? Including unemployment, homelessness, isolation, mental health.

Things that have worked well – There is a better sense of community and people working together.

Things that haven't worked so well – Isolation of clients and not being able to visit. Mental health.

I am grateful to be in a job that I love and try and help people the best way I can, even if it's just a phone call, BUT, that phone call could make all the difference to someone's life.

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“I look into my crystal ball many times and wish that this horrible pandemic will finally end and I can go back to doing what I do best which is supporting people and making a difference. I think at the end of all this we should have one massive party for all our clients. I cannot wait to give out hugs once again!”

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Staff member 3:

In 2016, I found what I would describe as my dream job. In the July of that year, I was lucky enough to get this job. I feel very proud to have been appointed as one of the first Wellbeing Coordinators in Torbay. Most of my previous work had been working in the community but to actually have a job that addressed peoples non-medical needs and to be able to use a holistic approach meant so much to me.

One of the first things I remember saying to someone was “it’s what matters to you”. That in itself gave me my first taste of job satisfaction, one of many that I was to experience in my job role. Summoning it up from my heart – I would say I finally had a job I loved and gave me the opportunity to make a real difference to people’s lives and spend quality time with them.

After supporting so many people, in March this year, there was a huge change to our job roles due to lockdown because of COVID19. This change had a huge impact on

the majority of my clients because suddenly I was not able to see them face to face or take them to any social activities or events as they were all closed down. Although I telephoned my clients, I felt I was not able to deliver the support that I had been used to giving them for the past 3½ years because we weren’t able to achieve the outcomes they wanted. There were times I actually felt like a telephone befriender but I knew how important these calls were to my clients.

The calls I made were to people who were experiencing a number of emotions, which included being anxious, scared, confused and worried. Suddenly people didn’t know how they were going to cope with not being able to go out and get food and prescriptions. A lot of them no longer had people to talk to face-to-face. The Community Helpline was set up to support people mainly with shopping and getting prescriptions. It was at this time I was overwhelmed by the amount of people who volunteered to help in a crisis. I was happy to volunteer to staff the helpline and help people out.

The months during lockdown, I found extremely difficult.

My clients were experiencing complex mental health problems. Some of them had never had mental health problems but lockdown caused them to become anxious and depressed. I had some people who were suicidal and others who were experiencing domestic abuse. There were many times where I just wanted to go and see my clients because the telephone support just was not enough. Throughout lockdown I also supported people who were struggling financially and needed food parcels. I also helped clients with grants for white goods such as washing machines or cookers etc. I also helped one client who needed beds and a wardrobe for him and his children. I managed to get these free by sourcing through a local Help Hub and once again it proved how good people are in difficult times. There was a really good local partnership, who for a period of time, supported people by supplying free hot meals to those who needed them. This support made a huge difference to my clients. There were many housing issues for people during lockdown.

Thankfully I had the support from colleagues who were able to assist my clients. One of the happiest moments for me during lockdown was finding a new home for a client who had experienced domestic abuse.

Over the past few months I have had to deliver face masks and letters to my clients and on two occasions I saw a lady sitting in her garden and a gentlemen who looked out of his top window. I found these occasions emotional as it was so nice to see someone even though I kept to social distancing rules, but I felt I wanted to run over to the lady in her garden and give her a hug.

My colleagues and I have, through this difficult time, managed to stay in touch daily and be there for each other. Without the support from them and the managers, things would have been even harder. I also found it incredible that when ringing, some of my clients they would start the conversation with “how are you Shaun”. Some even telephoned especially to ask me how I was doing.

I look into my crystal ball many times and wish that this horrible pandemic will finally end and I can go back to doing what I do best which is supporting people and making a difference. I think at the end of all this we should have one massive party for all our clients. I cannot wait to give out hugs once again!

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“I have learnt a lot over the past 7 months, I have learnt how to be kind to myself, work full time with a house full of adults and animals plus my 6-month-old granddaughter. It has been difficult for so many people, I have learnt to lean on my colleagues, we are a fantastic team we have all had difficulties, no one has ever judged and having the support from them has been something I will cherish forever.”

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Staff member 4

I have gone from supporting my clients in a face to face way to not seeing any of my clients for over 7 months... this has been so hard, I am a people person, I like people, I like to see people face to face but due to COVID-19 life has changed in a way I could never imagine. At times I have struggled to motivate myself...with my own mental health, working from home has been a huge challenge for me due to my personal circumstances.

I have learnt a lot over the past 7 months, I have learnt how to be kind to myself, work full time with a house full of adults and animals plus my 6-month-old granddaughter. It has been difficult for so many people, I have learnt to lean on my colleagues, we are a fantastic team we have all had difficulties, no one has ever judged and having the support from them has been something I will cherish forever.

We have picked each other up and made each other laugh, having zoom meetings and often not really knowing what to say especially when you are feeling a bit low yourself it's hard. I am also so very grateful for the understanding and fantastic support from our managers. You are both so understanding, you have had an incredibly difficult job over the past few months and have still managed to support the team and for that I thank you J I am not sure what the future will bring but the past few months have certainly been a rollercoaster ride!!

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Staff member 5:

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Changing to more of a befriending role for part of the lockdown where the housing situation was stagnant was really difficult and not something I felt equipped to do, but I only realised that in hindsight, at the time we were all just doing whatever we could. It was very difficult to speak to client's week in week out with no light at the end of the tunnel so to speak and little conversation (I do not have much at the best of times!).

The support I got from Mandie and Helen was fantastic. Mandie very quickly swooped in and put in place things that would make the job easier, and involved other members of the team to help. Both Mandie and Helen have always made me feel like I am their equal and I know I can be truly honest with them about any struggles with work. That has not really been my experience in past jobs so I am very appreciative we have them.

I have relied a lot on I&A before and during lockdown; they are always very willing to share their knowledge and advice and I have put through lots of FAIR referrals to them- they have always got in touch with the clients so quickly, they provide a brilliant service.

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“Many of my clients were terminally ill and I had been working with them for many months and sadly I was unable to see some of them again before they passed away, even though I could offer telephone support this was incredibly difficult as we had been on this journey together, some had put so much trust in me especially clients who didn’t have family or friends.”

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Staff member 6

Before lockdown I was able to visit my clients and their families, take clients to groups, lunches and coffee mornings but sadly during COVID19 lockdown this has all changed.

Clients who had previously greatly benefited from this social inclusion were now becoming isolated again. This began to impact on their mental health along with the fear around COVID19.

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Other clients had been recently bereaved and were now alone for the first time in many years, they were now totally isolated without their loved one beside them. This was

heart breaking for everyone involved and not being able to visit to offer comfort and support in person was heart breaking too. I know that telephone support was some comfort and very much needed contact although not the same.

Being able to arrange hot meal deliveries , shopping and prescription collection was uplifting as I felt that I could help in practical ways and this also helped to take away clients fears of being without basic essentials. Calling clients on an ' as needs ' basis was also very much needed and appreciated.

Most of us had some very difficult days during this time with our own COVID19 fears, the changes to our Wellbeing roles and our own sense of isolation but we have wonderful supportive managers and a close, caring supportive team and we continue to help each other through a period of time that has been unimaginably difficult. I am so looking forward to some normality and being able to work with each other and our clients in person again and hopefully this won't be too far away.

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“We will take each day as it comes as a team and look forward to next year and spring when we hopefully will be able to get to the new normal everyone is talking about.”

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Staff member 7

I joined AUKT as the Senior Wellbeing Coordinator at the beginning of the project. We built this service from scratch. In the 3.5 years before lockdown, it was a very social and community focused job. I will go so much to say my dream job. I have worked in care for many years and worked in care homes and the community. We used to focus on peoples practical and medical needs. It was very disheartening, we were always restricted, by time and red tape. When I saw this job advertised it was everything I wanted. The amount of times I would visit someone in his or her own home for 30 minutes walk away, and not come back until 12 hours later. Knowing I was the only person, they would see and speak to on many occasions. Having a job that focused on what matters to someone and not about what someone basic right is. The biggest learning curve for me was listening to the person and respecting there decision. Some people will from the outside sound and look lonely but they are happy with their own life and company. We are not all social creatures or people who needs others around us. We never forced ourselves on someone and gave him or her the right to decide if our support was something they needed.

I think I was very naive when I joined AUKT, I thought we would be supporting the older generation to go to coffee mornings, lunches and sit and listen to amazing stories of people lives and spend quality time with people having fun.

The reality of this hit us very quickly in this job. It became very clear from the beginning this was not the case. There are many lonely and isolated people out there in their 50's onwards who just have lost touch with others, have had a life changing moment, which they don't know how to cope with. The stories over the last 3.5 years have been

distressing, sad and most of all a very good reminder that we all at some point could hit crisis or a life changing moment that can change our lives forever. Until we hit this moment we don't know if we will sink or swim.

Before COVID-19 the support my whole team have given to people, with many challenges to their physical and mental health has been inspirational. We are a small team but we have always been close. We have linked in with most community groups and Ageing Well Community Builders, which has meant we could support people to whole range of social activities and exercise groups etc. To be able to support people on their first activities to give them the confidence was an amazing part of our job. Linking people together so they can naturally makes friends and become more confident was one of the best part of our roles. Our team has grown from having generic WBC's to now having an amazing team of specialised WBC's. We have Housing support, Dementia, End of Life and Mental Health support.

This has made our team much stronger and more able to support the range of referrals that have come through. Then LOCKDOWN and hit us like a train. The moment we had to work from home, start thinking about all our clients that would now be even more isolated.

We very quickly went through our whole caseload, phoned every single wellbeing client, and checked they were okay. If they needed support, we did it. We went out and did shopping for people, collected prescriptions, and anything that they needed in those first few weeks. The Helpline was set up in Torbay, which I was a part of from the beginning. I think within the first 10 weeks, my feet did not touch the ground,

I got no day off. I was making sure our clients were all contacted, if not by phone we did welfare checks and wrote letters to reach everyone. I then joined the helpline team and became a call handler at the weekend. I did this until the helpline had a big enough team of call handlers to step back. I became one of the people Jess could phone if she had any concerns or worries. Between Helen Harman and myself we were there for the serious cases coming through, possible safeguarding's and anything the helpline felt they needed to talk through. AUKT trustees and managers made us as a team feel safe, we were listened to and if we did not feel safe going out we did not have to.

The first three months we got on with it, we watched the rules change, the cases grow and we listened to some awful sad stories from our clients who were struggling through this. I think what this piece is about is us. We know our clients would struggle we knew their mental health would dip. Was I ready for the emotional impact on my team and myself? I do not think I was. We had all overnight, gone from social butterflies in the community to stuck at home on the phone and occasional meetings virtually on ZOOM. Don't get me wrong the ZOOM team meetings were fab, it was great to see and hear people. A couple of the meetings were much lighter hearted and we did a quiz, which I enjoyed.

Being at home started to become difficult for me. My mental health and motivation was hard to keep up some days. I felt a massive weight to support my team as well as myself. I was also shielding my husband, which made things tough when I needed to go out for clients, and

shopping. His anxiety would then become something I had to manage though my day. Work became hard very quickly. I then moved my office into a separate room upstairs once I realised this was going to be a permanent thing working from home. This has reduced my anxiety and I am now able to work in peace and quiet.

The power of meeting people face to face was lost. I think we were all very good at hiding our feelings in a 1 hour ZOOM meeting. Then we came into the 4th month, the cracks were showing, others and myself were starting to break and it was becoming clearer to others that the whole team were struggling. So with Helen H and Sarah E support, we started meeting as half a team face to face, I put back in group supervision virtually, we put a buddy system in so people had someone they could call when needed. This has helped me and I am sure it has helped the team. We need interaction with others. We have also with risk assessments been able to visit on doorsteps, in homes when people are at serious risk to themselves.

We are now planning for the winter months and the possible spike and Christmas so much more to come and we know we will be working from home for the near future. I think I am now used to this, it is challenging but I also have to think to myself we are lucky, we have jobs, we have a home and we have family. We will take each day as it comes as a team and look forward to next year and spring when we hopefully will be able to get to the new normal everyone is talking about.

reflections



“So phone calls it was, many phone calls and many many tears , people were lonely and they were scared ,and to try and help reassure people that all would be well was difficult, especially when you are sharing their fears, mental health went through the roof, theirs and mine, but talking to people on the phone was the only form of communication left , maybe a few doorstep / window visits for the odd bit of shopping that had been left off the list ,or maybe just to take a smile and a laugh to someone who was struggling...”

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Staff member 8

Being a Wellbeing Coordinator is a really satisfying job, to be able to go out and about helping people to move forward with their lives. It is something I threw myself into, all the different coffee morning ,lunches and outings ... seeing lonely people coming together and making friends is amazing.

And then COVID came and changed our world massively. No more meeting friends and work colleagues. No more face-to-face fun. We were left stranded in our homes, most of the older generation on their own. This as a Wellbeing Coordinator was hard for me, although I joined the Coronavirus Helpline as Rapid Response there was still no contact allowed, as a Rapid Response I was out and about collecting prescriptions and shopping for people that were either self-isolating or shielding. For me my time on Rapid Response was fulfilling, to be able to help people that could not get out to do their day to day living.

And to see so many people come together to help each other was fabulous.

BUT, not being able to go and visit or go to a club/lunch was devastating, not just for myself but my clients and

work colleagues, lots of my clients have no family, or their family were up country so could not visit...

So phone calls it was, many phone calls and many many tears , people were lonely and they were scared ,and to try and help reassure people that all would be well was difficult, especially when you are sharing their fears, mental health went through the roof, theirs and mine, but talking to people on the phone was the only form of communication left , maybe a few doorstep / window visits for the odd bit of shopping that had been left off the list ,or maybe just to take a smile and a laugh to someone who was struggling...

I myself have gone through COVID busy as a key worker, sometimes I have been really scared to go out, what if I caught COVID and passed it onto the people I live with? but I have had to put those thoughts to the back of my mind and take responsibility for my own safety whilst I am out and about.

I hope one day life will get back to normal, I like normal, I like to be in front of people, face to face with a smile and a touch, us humans need to feel loved and cared about, hopefully that time won't be too long in coming back.

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