Wellbeing - Online Focus Group

January 2021

Introduction

On Monday 18th January 2021, we ran an online focus group for members of the public on the topic of Wellbeing. We decided to cover this topic on this date as the third Monday in January, is often designated 'Blue Monday', said to be the most depressing day of the year, or the day on which people feel at their lowest ebb, after the holiday period has ended and while the days in our hemisphere are short and dark. Financial worries and family tensions can often be an issue at this time of year, but following 10 months of the Covid-19 pandemic and varying degrees of lockdown over the past few months; and with isolation and general anxiety about personal health, and the health of loved-ones being issues faced by many more of us than usual, it seemed a useful opportunity to talk to people about how they were coping; and an opportunity to provide some stress-relieving activities.

The focus group was attended by 17 people. This total included members of the public, Healthwatch Liverpool volunteers, and Healthwatch Liverpool staff. The focus group took place on Zoom, a video conferencing application. 15 participants joined the group on a laptop, tablet, smartphone or other device, and2 people telephoned in. The group was split into 2 breakout rooms (one of 9 people and the other of 8 people) for the discussion, with members of staff facilitating the discussions in each room, and other staff and volunteers taking notes of the conversation. These notes were used to produce this report.

Before the focus groups began there was a brief mindfulness meditation, led by Lauren Bailey-Rhodes from Transform Lives, who also led a longer guided meditation session at the end of the meeting. Thanks to her for providing participants with these moments of respite and relaxation.

As well as sharing their personal experiences and wellbeing tips, attendees were also offered an opportunity to provide information about groups that they were part of, and how well these groups had been coping with providing support and activities for their members over the past year.

We would like to thank everyone who spoke to us for their time, their openness, and their honesty.

Summary of findings

Healthwatch Liverpool has conducted online surveys throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and has used these as a way of gathering information about how the changed circumstances have impacted on people's physical and mental wellbeing. One of the most significant responses has been the negative impact of the lack of contact with other people, and the isolation that this leads to.

Our focus group aimed to help us understand in more depth what people have done to cope with isolation, and life more generally, during the pandemic; how they've adapted, what coping mechanisms they've used or developed and how it's helped, as well as what the barriers have been and how easy/difficult it has been to access social activities and support. A summary of the findings can be found at the end of this report.

The main findings fell under the following headings:

Staying Active

Some participants told us that prior to the pandemic, they had been very active and that there were many things they've had to stop doing, which has had a negative impact on their wellbeing. However, whilst some activities have ceased, other opportunities have arisen.

> *"I was part of a choir that's had to stop. I've increased the volunteering during the pandemic. From the physical point of view, I was always pretty active. I've taken up running again. I was into indoor swimming now I'm doing more outdoor swimming around Albert Dock. I'm also doing Pilates classes online. A lot of things have dropped off but I've replaced them with other things. I've always been a social person and I've found that's helped me get through this."*

> *"For exercise, I've been able to go walking near Sefton Park, where I live. That's helped a lot with mental wellbeing too. One of the things I've done is get an exercise bike. I can't really do outdoor cycling anymore due to my vision but it's good to cycle indoors because you can watch TV and listen to music. I'd definitely recommend it!"*

> *"I miss the interaction with others. The volunteering has helped with my confidence."*

Digital Access and Online Activities

Although some outdoor activities had started up or resumed when lockdown eased over the summer, people's main source of support during lockdown had been online – provided they had access to digital devices:

> *"My mum and dad didn't really have the whole zoom thing, but they've started getting up to speed with it."*

Several participants spoke of how impressive it is that we've learned to adapt in many ways, whether through use of technology, or learning other new skills. Working or studying online had also taken some adaptation:

> *"The internet has been a life saver."*

> *"I had to adapt to online learning for my last year of Uni. I had to do my practicals online, which was very difficult."*

> *"I have never been one for being online but I have adapted."*

A positive aspect of participation via video conferencing platforms has been that people who weren't able to access groups previously, perhaps because they have a disability or long-term health condition, are caring for others, or don't have access to transport, can now join groups – again, provided they have access to suitable equipment.

Participants noted that some organisations were providing courses over the phone as well as via video platforms, so that even more people could access courses and support around e.g. resilience, yoga, music clubs, walking groups, writing CVs or finding jobs.

One participant explained how their organisation had responded to the situation:

"A lot of our work has been reactionary. It has been dealing with people on furlough, people with issues with gas meters, people sheltering. It has been stop/start. What has been picking up is our 1-2-1 sessions with people we may not have been engaged with in the past. Our digital team have been helping out with people who couldn't use them before. We're looking at engaging children over the February half term, providing activity packs, food packs/ parcels."

Others agreed that digital/online engagement was something they would like to see continue even after the pandemic, to maximize the ways in which people can get involved.

Although digital technology was widely welcomed, several people mentioned the down side of spending too long looking at a screen, in terms of concentration, eye health, headaches and maintaining a work/life balance at home.

Transport

Public transport could be an issue for those without access to their own transport. Not only was it not easy for everyone to access but there were concerns about its safety.

"Public transport is the biggest issue for me. I don't drive. My partner has asthma so I've restricted my going out. So when I've had opportunities to see family, we had barriers to that. For example, we hired a car to go out."

Maintaining Structure

Several participants spoke of the need for structuring their time – particularly in relation to family life and providing reassurance to children.

"I found having a structured day has helped. I always loved reading, as part of my work and even in my spare time. I've found I've got more into cooking, learning new things, planning the food, going out to the supermarket (which has become more of an event these days!), yoga on YouTube, that sort of thing."

"I've found I needed more of a structure. I was answering emails at home at 10pm at night and on Saturday mornings. It was affecting my day to day. Now, when the laptop closes, it stays closed! I've started making more of an effort round the house, getting back into the routine, getting myself back into the mindset."

"It's mainly the structure that's changed. I've structured my time better, doing more volunteer work. I've managed to build more structure again. There's been positives but also a lot of negatives."

(Lack of) Contact with Family and Friends

Whilst coping with the demands of work and family/housemates was stressful for those who were living with children, partners or parents; those who were separated from family members and loved ones had found the lack of proximity to people very challenging, sometimes experiencing guilt about their inability to 'be there' for loved ones.

"My dad's been really ill and has been in and out of hospital, which has been really difficult to deal with not seeing family."

"The biggest barrier for me is that my family live a bit away from me. I've done a lot of phone calls, keeping in touch like that keeping my spirits up. I would get in touch with Mum and we'd watch a program together virtually, things like that. That's helped me."

"The negative is that my mum is in a care home and I've not really been able to see her."

"The hardest thing is not seeing my parents they are in their 60s and I wasn't comfortable seeing them (for safety reasons). That was the toughest thing. The frequent change of rules hasn't helped."

Changes to working circumstances

Some participants said that whilst social and voluntary activities had decreased, work had taken an increasingly central place in their lives, and that this was welcome.

"While most social things stopped, work has increased for which I am grateful. Instead of working a couple of days a month I now work two days a week. This has kept me busy and active as this is work that cannot be done from home so there is a good deal of social interaction and it gives structure to the day which helps."

For employed people who were able to work from home, the adjustment had generally been difficult, in terms of e.g. achieving an acceptable work/life balance, juggling home-schooling and work demands, and taking time for self-care.

"I went from sitting in an office and only occasionally working from home to working from home all the time. It has made me put more structure in my day I make sure I log off and am very careful with my time. Before this I would check emails at the weekend, log on in the evening etc. I am also very slovenly in what I wear, so I need to make more of an effort. I am really missing my parents and the kids their grandparents. It's been so difficult, certainly at the beginning."

For employed people who were not able to work from home, there were pros and cons. Work was a distraction and a source of structure

"In terms of work it's pretty much the same, I still see the team. I always cycle into work anyway so that has given me the excuse for exercise. One thing we used to do is spare shifts, so if someone calls in sick we can be called in at short notice, now if we are not needed we stay at home. This will carry on I think."

One positive aspect for some people who were able to work from home was the lack of a commute, which could 'free up' time for other activities, e.g. for cooking healthier meals. Others mentioned the importance of using the 'commute time' as a buffer between personal time and work time, perhaps by going for a walk or other form of exercise.

Where people had sensory impairments or disabilities, working from home also presented both benefits and challenges. One participant felt that people without disabilities were, perhaps, getting a taste of some of the challenges faced by their disabled peers.

"With my vision, it's been pretty helpful working at home, not that I'd want it to fully continue, but I think it's raised more awareness of it and issues for others."

Staying Motivated

Almost all participants found that it had been harder to stay motivated the longer the pandemic had continued, with no fixed end in sight. The winter months had also been much more difficult for several people, including those who had children.

"I found it a lot easier at the start. I had all this free time which I thought was a good thing. Now, I'm really struggling to get the motivation."

"It's been quite difficult, especially during the winter when it's colder and darker but I do try to go for a walk with a friend when we can. Winter is difficult as the weather is bad. I really am not coping."

Self-care

One important thing that many had learnt was the importance of self-care and of not giving ourselves a hard time when we have a bad day or don't achieve as much as we'd planned to.

"I'm sure there've been those days when we just wanted to stay in all day and eat chocolate!"

"I've found during the pandemic that I've had to come to terms with the knowledge that how productive you are doesn't necessarily define you as a person. I've had to accept that these are exceptional circumstances."

"I was working at burn-out levels. The pandemic kind of forced me to slow down which is one positive."

"When I'm working from home, I've tried to make my environment nicer, such as pictures of family and happier times. I've also took up reading more about things I enjoy and learning new things."

Chat room Information and useful contacts

During the session, people used the Chat Room facility to post information about useful contacts. These included:

+ Transform Lives: www.transform-lives.org @transformliveco, Lauren@transform-lives.org, - Give Get Go and TLC Yoga

+ Katumba: www.katumba.co.uk - drumming classes and workshops

+ Milap: For those interested in Indian art, music and culture, free concerts on the last Saturday of the month www.milap.com

+ The Reader: Reading Groups michellebarrett@thereader.org.uk or marycrotty@thereader.org. uk Current phone number/covid hotline: 0151 729 2250. Email at coronavirus@thereader.org. uk. Other information www.thereader.org.uk

+ British Psychological Society information on 'Working From Home' www.bps.org.uk/sites/www. bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Working%20from%20home.pdf

+ Marjorie H Morgan – creative writing workshops: www.marjoriemorgan.com/bookings

Participants were also informed about the online Wellbeing Liverpool Directory www.wellbeingliverpool.co.uk which provides up-to-date information about projects, activities and courses. The Wellbeing Liverpool Instagram feed @livewelllpool also provides visual information about projects, locations, course leaders etc which can help reduce anxiety and allow people to see what to expect before getting involved in an activity for the first time.

Summary

Barriers to wellbeing

A number of frequently mentioned factors which prevented wellbeing and participation included:

+ Not having own transport/ having to use public transport when living with people at higher risk/not being able to use public transport

+ Not being able to do usual work/ activities

+ Not being able to see relatives/friends/ work colleagues or to have proper social interaction with them; family living far away (nearly everyone mentioned this)

+ Not being able to engage with others makes it harder to get motivated

+ Working from home and being 'linked in to work' at all times/no differentiation between living and working spaces

+ Differences in experiences for those working from home compared to working out of the home (often households included people in both of these situations)

+ The frequent changes of rules - e.g. when deciding whether to see relatives or not

Positives

Despite the many challenges of life in a pandemic/lockdown, participants did identify some more positive aspects of life over the past few months. These included:

+ Being forced to work at a slower pace compared to before lockdown when many were working at a burnout level

+ Where people were able to work at home it was especially beneficial to those with additional needs that weren't always catered for in the workplace

+ Learning that how productive you are doesn't define you

Things that helped wellbeing

When asked what had helped their feelings of wellbeing, participants mentioned:

+ Replacing existing hobbies with other things, e.g. "Swimming in the Mersey instead of in a pool"

+ Joining online groups or moving existing groups online, e.g. Pilates, book clubs, film clubs, choirs

+ Exercise – walking in the park, cycling to the shops instead of taking a bus, getting an exercise bike

+ Getting out in nature

+ More phone or online calls with relatives/friends

+ Watching something on telly with someone else and discussing it afterwards

+ Having a structured day – and closing the work laptop during non-work hours.

+ Increased number of days in work (not at home) – added structure

+ Reading for pleasure

+ Volunteering

+ Learning new skills, e.g. foraging, gardening, new exercises

Where we use your feedback

We use the feedback we receive from the public to inform how the health and social care sector is responding to the pandemic both locally and nationally. Locally, we will pass this feedback on to Liverpool City Council and the local Public Health team who organise and co-ordinate local testing sites. We'll also pass this information on to other local decision makers, including Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group. We will also use the feedback we have received in another piece of work we are currently undertaking around the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of people living in Liverpool. Nationally, we will pass this information on to Healthwatch England. They use the information they get from local Healthwatch across England to build a picture of what is happening nationally. They feed into national reports, research, and Parliamentary enquiries.

If you have any feedback about your wellbeing during the pandemic, or your experiences of health and social care services more generally, you can contact us at engagement@healthwatchliverpool.co.uk, or complete our online survey about the local impact of Coronavirus/COVID-19 at https://healthwatchliverpool.co.uk/covid-survey