

Mental Wellbeing and Support in Argyll and Bute during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A summary report of engagement activity with people in Argyll and Bute investigating the impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing.

Contributors:

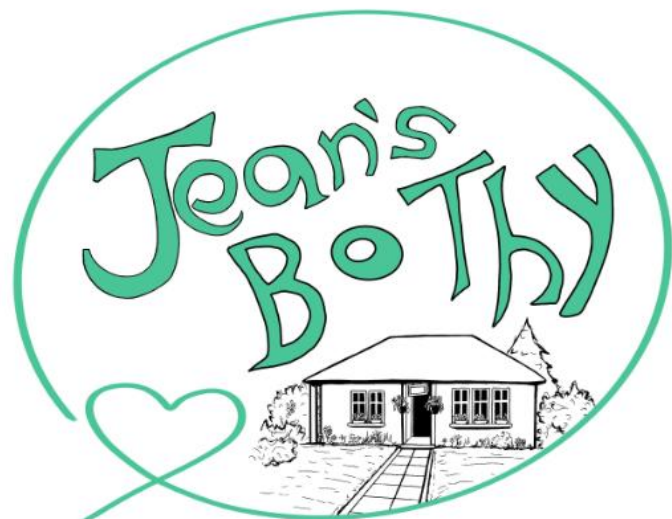
Ros Halley – Support in Mind Scotland

Rory Munro – NHS Highland

Katrina Sayer – Jean's Bothy

George Waddell – ACUMEN

Contact: nsh.abhealthimprovement@nhs.scot



support
in mind
scotland

action for people affected by mental illness



Table of Contents

Summary:	3
Introduction:.....	5
Method and Outputs:.....	6
Key Findings:	6
ACUMEN:	7
Support in Mind Scotland – Voices Seldom Heard:.....	7
Jean’s Bothy:.....	8
Recommendations:.....	10
References:.....	11

Summary:

The Caring for People response delivered from March to September 2020 to support people affected by COVID-19 identified likely adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing. A range of local pathways for support were developed to connect people with support via the national support phone line. The level of demand was very low which led the Health Improvement Team to consider wider community engagement. Working with ACUMEN in September 2020, an online survey of residents of Argyll and Bute was conducted. This led to further engagement work regarding mental wellbeing and access to support carried out in partnership with local providers carried out during 2021.

Three organisations, ACUMEN, Support in Mind Scotland (SiMS) and Jean's Bothy, were awarded grants to conduct engagement activity between March and September 2021. Engagement was targeted at specific groups of people including: people with known mental ill health, carers, island communities, members of existing groups (Jean's Bothy) and members of the LGBT+ community.

The aims of the engagement work included:

- Carrying out engagement activities and hearing the views of:
 - People with mental health conditions to learn about their experience of accessing community support, peer support and support groups.
 - People accessing statutory mental health services to learn about their experience of accessing these services.
 - People with mental health conditions to establish how the pandemic affected them.
- Engaging with HSCP staff to explore what could be done to improve access to mental health and wellbeing support for our population.
- Scoping community empowerment for wellbeing, what this means and how it can be further developed.

Each organisation focussed on different populations within Argyll and Bute and used varying engagement methods. ACUMEN engaged with people known to services and their carers; SiMS engaged with a small cohort of people from; island communities, men's groups and LGBT+ groups and Jean's Bothy engaged their members. All organisations reported that the pandemic had mainly impacted negatively on respondents' mental wellbeing; however, a small number of people indicated there had been positive aspects such as enjoying places being less busy.

Important key themes emerged when the findings of the three activities were reviewed, these include:

- Digital connectivity was identified as being invaluable during lockdowns, both for peer support and support from third sector and statutory services. There were people unable to engage with digital methods suggesting this is an area for development.
- The importance of the role of community in mental wellbeing was recognised; island communities reported faring better during the pandemic than their mainland counterparts. There is an opportunity to explore what island communities do well and whether this can be emulated in our communities across Argyll and Bute.
- Accessible support within local communities was valued by respondents. Support provided by Jean's Bothy was described as "lifesaving", this phrase was also used in relation to one respondent's link club. There is potential to upscale local good practice to provide universal community-based support.
- Some people expressed frustration at the rapid pace of change in statutory mental health support. Respondents acknowledged the need for change but felt communication about changes could have been more effective. There is opportunity to work in a co-productive way i.e., with services, communities, the third sector and people with mental health problems to grow joined up support in the right place at the right time.

Recommendations arising from the engagement activity include sharing findings with relevant groups and professionals from Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP). A steering group may be formed with a remit to implement the Scottish Government's Strategy for Mental Health at a local level. Scoping work will also take place to map community assets and explore where support may be required. Aspiring for equity of provision of community-based support, recognising this will be different across local communities. The HSCP should also continue engaging with stakeholders and community members in accordance with the HSCP's engagement framework. Finally, there should be a review of equality and diversity responsibilities, specifically considering how to create a more supportive environment for the LGBT+ community.

Introduction:

In September 2020, ACUMEN and Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership carried out an emotional wellbeing survey to gather views on the wellbeing of people during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. 30% of respondents reported being very stressed or anxious and many reported this was due to the pandemic. 37% of respondents reported feeling supported by their community; however, 21% felt they required access to self-care and resilience training and support. In addition, the HSCP Evidence Review of the Impact of COVID-19 identified that the pandemic would likely have negative impacts on mental health, including deterioration for those with mental health conditions. It also identified that substance misuse may also increase. This prior learning allowed the new methodology to focus on access to support during the pandemic.

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- Scoping community empowerment for wellbeing, what this means and how it can be further developed.

Each organisation focussed on different populations within Argyll and Bute and used varying engagement methods. ACUMEN engaged with people known to services and their carers; SiMS engaged with a small cohort of people from; island communities, men's groups and LGBT+ groups and Jean's Bothy engaged their members. Data gathered by these organisations will help inform what improvements may be necessary within both statutory and third sector Mental Health services in Argyll and Bute.

Method and Outputs:

Based in the Helensburgh area, Jean's Bothy is a community hub that acts as a resource for the community to help improve mental health and wellbeing. Over the course of the project, they engaged with 49 individuals who took part in focus groups. These were a mixture of online focus groups and in person groups where COVID-19 restrictions allowed. They also sent a survey to all of their members and had a 10% return rate – 18 responses received. The central aim of the Jean's Bothy research was to explore members' experiences accessing mental wellbeing support during the pandemic. The output from this engagement activity was in the form of a report including a graphic illustration created to capture live themes emerging during one of the focus groups.

SiMS titled their project, "Voices Seldom Heard" and aimed to work with people from three groups in Argyll and Bute including LGBTQ+, people living on islands and men's groups. They aimed to identify how the pandemic had affected people's health, their experience of accessing community support, the role of community in keeping people well and how individuals or communities may be changed by the pandemic. Engagement was in the form of online survey and one to one interviews with 17 individuals, some of which were filmed. This research output is in the form of a report of the survey and a short documentary film featuring some of the one-to-one interviews that took place. Voices Seldom Heard is available on Vimeo at: <https://vimeo.com/726720153>.

ACUMEN engaged with individuals through a survey, available online or in print, one-to-one interviews using the same questions were also conducted. ACUMEN aimed to build on previous engagement work in September 2020 that explored people's mental wellbeing during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their target participants were people with lived experience and carers of individuals with mental health conditions, a total of 121 people responded to this survey.

This report compiles the findings from all three reports as well as views documented within the documentary produced by SiMS. It should be noted that due to the differing methodologies the data cannot be directly compared, this report is intended to give an overview of the findings and provide recommendations that can be inferred from the qualitative data gathered.

Key Findings:

All organisations posed similar questions regarding how mental health and wellbeing had been impacted by the pandemic, including how respondents had been feeling in general, what had supported their mental wellbeing and about their access to support. Differing methodologies across the organisations makes a direct comparison of findings difficult, however many of the key findings were mirrored throughout each project.

ACUMEN:

The ACUMEN report highlighted the profound impact the pandemic has had on some people's mental health. It also highlighted the increase of loneliness and the subsequent impact this has had on mental health. Key findings from ACUMEN include:

- Responses to open text questions suggest an increase in anxiety, isolation and loneliness in those who identified as being service users.
- 70% of respondents indicated their mental health/wellbeing had deteriorated due to the pandemic.
- 25% of respondents indicated they have felt generally okay during the pandemic.
- A third of respondents responded they had been feeling stressed or anxious in the previous few months.
- Where respondents received practical support and reported who had provided this, answers included: Jean's Bothy, Oban link club, family and friends and community group support.
- Responses regarding NHS services were generally negative, whilst there was acknowledgement services required changes due to the pandemic, responses suggest communication could have been better.

Support in Mind Scotland – Voices Seldom Heard:

Of the 17 participants, 16 also completed a detailed online survey. This survey provided detailed insight into the experiences of individuals throughout the pandemic which can be compared against national indicators. Some of the key findings include:

- When compared against the ONS mean score for Scotland for life being "worthwhile" and "life satisfaction", respondents from this project were lower rated.
 - The island group rated higher than the men's group and LGBT+ group to both these. This compared to interviews suggests island groups fared better during the pandemic.
- LGBT+ groups scored lower against other groups and the national indicators. They indicated they were less connected to their geographical community but reliant on their own LGBT+ community, including online groups set up during the pandemic.
 - LGBT+ group also more likely to express thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
- The Men's support group benefit from the mutual support that the group has to offer.

- All participants felt that COVID-19 had negatively impacted on their mental health though most participants were aware of how to seek support. They tended to seek support from their local community rather than seeking self-help online.

The role of community undoubtedly impacted how people fared through the pandemic, thoughts expressed by participants identifies the relationship between people's mental wellbeing and the environment in which they live. Areas already suffering inequalities appear to have the greatest challenges whereas areas with resilient community, such as islands, appeared to fare better.

Jean's Bothy:

Findings from Jean's Bothy were in the form of ten focus groups and a survey of their members. The survey asked general questions around mental wellbeing and support – there were 18 responses to the survey. The focus groups had specific themes including; digital connections, professional support, community support, connections with others and general experiences during the pandemic. Some of the key findings from both include:

- Findings from the survey include:
 - 22% of respondents rated their mental health as extremely poor over the last 18 months;
 - 61% of respondents were either very or extremely interested in accessing support groups in their area;
 - 45% of people were not confident, or not at all confident in accessing support groups in their area;
 - 44% of people felt somewhat connected with 17% of respondents feeling well connected to their community.
- There were five in person focus groups and five were held online. Findings from each of the themes were:
- Digital Connections:
 - barriers acknowledged included access to devices, poor Wi-Fi connections, confidence in using and privacy issues at home.
 - There was acknowledgement of the benefits of being able to stay in touch with people during lockdowns.
 - Overall, the groups reported the benefits of digital methods of communicating, however most agreed a mixture of both is preferable as online connections cannot replace in person communication.
- Statutory Support: People discussing statutory support had mixed experiences and this led to sensitive and emotional contributions from participants. Some people felt they could have been better supported and reported feeling left to their own devices. Some contributions acknowledged

- the need to change services at pace but felt that communication around changes could have been more effective.
- **Community Support:** participants generally felt that community support was essential and that the community came together during the pandemic. Communication was again highlighted as an issue. One comment was that community support was a lifeline when there was no one else.
- **Connections with Others:** there was general agreement that connection, be that in person or online, is important and reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- **General Experiences during the Pandemic:** the discussion around general experiences reflected that individual circumstances influenced how they experienced the pandemic. Pressures included employment issues, how to home school and how to look after mental wellbeing. Benefits included the removal of pressure to socialise and the slower lifestyle enforced by the pandemic.



Figure 1: Graphic Illustration captured live during a Jean’s Bothy focus group

The graphic illustration from Jean’s Bothy encapsulated many of the issues faced and experiences of people during the pandemic. All three organisations found many of the same issues and benefits arose for people regardless of their location. The findings demonstrate the role of community and peer support in maintaining mental wellbeing.

Recommendations:

The findings of this engagement activity have identified potential to improve support for people with mental health problems. These improvements could take place both within services and within wider community-based support, or in some cases, creating better links between statutory and community support. Respondents highlighted the valuable assets that exist throughout communities in Argyll and Bute. Jean's Bothy, island communities, online LGBT+ communities were highlighted as beneficial to mental wellbeing, one respondent referred to Jean's Bothy as a "lifeline". Whilst it should be acknowledged that what works well for one area will not necessarily work well in others, this should not deter investigating what assets each area holds and whether this can be replicated in, or expanded to other areas. Examples already exist for this approach with the Living Well Networks and Community Link Working.

The ground is fertile for progressing mental health improvement in Argyll and Bute with the publication of the [Joint Strategic Commissioning Strategy](#) and [Joint Strategic Plan](#) in 2022. These documents set out the benefits of preventing problems before they arise and the benefits of working in a co-productive way with communities to provide early intervention and support.

Argyll and Bute has the natural assets for maintaining and improving mental wellbeing in the people who live here. It also has many willing organisations and groups committed to improving the wellbeing of others in their community. For those reasons the recommendations below should be considered to further improve access to mental wellbeing support in Argyll and Bute:

1. Share findings and recommendations from this report with relevant groups such as HSCP colleagues (heads of service, team leads, staff and professional leads), Area Community Planning structures, the Living Well Steering Group and the Prevention Programme of the HSCP's Transformational Board.
2. Form a steering group including community representatives, third sector organisations and HSCP members with a remit to develop a strategic approach to implementing the next steps. This should align with the [Scottish Government's strategy for mental health](#). The next steps should also take advantage of other national activity such as the Communities Mental Health Fund and the Mental Health in Primary Care programme.
3. Identify what the community does to improve mental wellbeing – including asset mapping services and organisations with a remit for mental wellbeing in Argyll and Bute. This is being progressed via the HSCP's Prevention Programme with support from the Public Health Team.

4. Aspire for equity of provision of community-based support, but recognise this may be different across local communities e.g., would the Jean's Bothy model work elsewhere, and what support would be required. This aligns with the co-production and capacity building intentions of the HSCP's Joint Strategic Plan.
5. Continue engaging with stakeholders and community members in a planned way in accordance with the HSCP's Engagement Framework. This should include clear methods of communication.
6. Review equality and diversity responsibilities, for example conduct an Equality Impact Assessment. Specifically consider how to create a more supportive environment for the LGBT+ community.

References:

All reports referenced are available on request – please email roly.munro@nhs.scot to request individual documents.

ACUMEN 2021, Argyll and Bute Services Study, Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Argyll and Bute residents.

Support in Mind Scotland 2021, VOICES SELDOM HEARD, Local Engagement Activity on Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Jeans Bothy 2021, Mental Health Support during the pandemic.

Griffin, S 2020, Evidence review for the impact of COVID-19