

Barnet Depression Alliance: 15th Annual General Meeting

Monday 23RD November 2020 @ 8 pm online via Zoom

Our 23rd Year 1997-2020

Group Report for Oct 2019- Oct 2020

This time last year we reported that we had had a “challenging year” with the disruption of having to move from our venue in North Finchley to the new venue in High Barnet -- a move which sadly saw us lose some of our members. Little did we know what was in store for us in 2020. We had just eight face-to-face meetings (November 2019 to March 2020) before the coronavirus lockdown. Our last face-to-face meeting was on March 9th and we are still in lockdown at the time of writing this. This report is therefore in two parts and illustrates how we have had to adapt to a new way of meeting and supporting members.

FACE TO FACE MEETINGS: NOVEMBER 2019 – MARCH 2020

The beginning of the year seems an age away now. We had one speaker – **Elsie Lyons founder of Barnet Voice for Mental Health** – who visited our group in February and shared her life story: her struggles with bipolar disorder, how she came to found Barnet Voice – and what she is doing now in her retirement. She described learning and teaching about Emotional Freedom Techniques including tapping therapy which is used to treat anxiety. She gave us a practical demonstration of this and has offered to do a session on it in the future.

We had two themed meetings: In January we had another of our popular *Desert Island Discs* evenings where we played and shared music we loved. In March members brought along books they enjoyed to share with each other. Sharing music and books is a great way for members to get to know each other better as well as helping to widen our appreciation of both. We planned to have an art appreciation meeting in the summer but this has had to be put on hold due to the lockdown.

We also enjoyed one social – our New Year meal which this year was at San Giorgio’s restaurant in North Finchley. Twelve of us enjoyed a wonderful Italian meal together and were pleased to welcome back some past members.

ONLINE MEETINGS MARCH 2020 TO CURRENT DATE

The enforced isolation of lockdown, coupled with the grim daily news of mounting infections and deaths, has had a devastating effect on the mental wellbeing of many of our members all of whom are vulnerable to depression. Levels of anxiety, including health anxiety have been heightened. Members, especially those living alone, have found their depression returning with a vengeance. Many have suffered being cut off from family and friends who live far away or abroad. Some of our members who tried to get help found it very difficult to get appointments with GPs and many have found mental health services even more inaccessible than normal. Adult mental health services in Barnet effectively closed for four months, although older adults’ mental health services continued to engage with patients remotely. We also tried to support a member to access social care support only to find that social workers had stopped doing home visits during the lockdown. It was therefore extremely important for us to find a way to support people during this time. It was a steep learning curve as few of us were familiar with online meeting platforms. However, we managed to meet online as a committee regularly during this period and trialled Zoom, drawing up guidelines for how meetings would be run. We had our first online Zoom meeting on March 30th. From the end of March to the end of July we met weekly with an attendance varying between 9 and 11 people. With the relaxation of the lockdown in August we moved to meeting fortnightly.

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We have now had (by end October) 25 online meetings with a total attendance over the period of 218. This is far in excess of the number of meetings we would normally have in a year, but these Zoom meetings were considerably smaller (face to face meetings normally having double the attendance). We were also acutely aware that we could not support all members online, and that online meetings are no substitute for face-to-face support.

FORMAT OF ONLINE MEETINGS

Our online meetings at first followed the format of face-to-face meetings and we alternated themed meetings with “check-in” meetings. We had three themed meetings in which members shared ways they were coping with lockdown; shared creative past times which they were following – we had members who enjoyed pottery, painting and writing, for example share their work; we also shared new skills we had learned, and books and films which had inspired us. It was then decided mutually by group consensus that meetings going forward would be “check in” meetings only, giving people more time to share how they are coping, and we would review the need for a change in format in the future.

OUTDOOR MEET UPS



We have also had two very enjoyable outdoor meet-ups during the lockdown. Our first was in August where we met outdoors in a member’s garden in lieu of our annual bring and share supper party – eight members attended. The second was in September where seven of us enjoyed a late summer walk over Totteridge fields, and stopped to enjoy tea outdoors at Finchley nurseries. See photo opposite.

After over 4 months of not seeing each other it was lovely to meet face to face. Seeing each other made us realise how much we had lost, and how online contact can never replace the immediacy of real human presence. We were sad that we could not do it more often, and that a number of members who had wanted to attend were not able to make it.

THE DRAWBACKS OF ONLINE MEETINGS

Most support services, both statutory and voluntary, have either discontinued or moved to delivering services online or by phone. We do think that there is insufficient attention paid to the draw backs of online support. First of all, eye contact is not possible in a room of online participants. It can be difficult to judge when to speak as there are not the normal non-verbal cues. Seeing your own face staring back at you is also disconcerting and difficult for those who are self-conscious. Some people are shy about sharing the background of their home with others although for the technically savvy the system does allow virtual backgrounds. It is also very difficult to have conversations in small groups or one-to-one as in a normal meeting. In an online group everything you say is seen and heard by everyone. Even when we do choose to divide into groups when the main meeting is too full, the decision of who to put with who rests with the group facilitator where normally people would choose who they want to sit with. You also do not get that sense of real human presence which you get when meeting face-to-face. Online meetings also need to be more heavily moderated than face-to-face ones as it is easy for one or two people to dominate and others to be left out. As a result of these difficulties, online meetings are more stressful, especially for newcomers. We have tried to keep meetings shorter – maximum 90 minutes --- half the length of our face-to-face ones. We always have a comfort break after 45 minutes. There are

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also the inevitable technical problems – slow internet, occasionally losing connection, and a poorer viewing/audio experience for those who are using phones and tablets and have unstable WiFi.

BARRIERS TO RESTARTING FACE TO FACE MEETINGS

We therefore made huge efforts to re-start face-to-face meetings in August when lockdown was eased and Covid regulations allowed support groups to meet, exempting them from the rule of six. Our own internal survey revealed that we had enough members interested to make it worthwhile restarting meetings. We also recognised the need for support, especially for members who had not been able to join online meetings. Our normal venue reopened but we realised we would not be able to comply with their new Covid regulations which included limiting meeting size to seven people. We did not want to ask people to book ahead to attend meetings recognising that for many with depression planning ahead is difficult. We did not want to have to turn people away either. We found two venues which would accept us but unfortunately one was far too expensive and the other imposed so many restrictions on what we were allowed to do that we felt meetings there would feel uncomfortable.

We therefore decided to try some café meet ups and had booked a date for a trial run only to be overtaken by London going into tier 2 restrictions which meant that we could not meet up socially in a cafe as this would be in breach of the “rule of six”.

SUPPORTING MEMBERS NOT ABLE TO ATTEND ONLINE MEETINGS

We have tried to keep in touch with members who are not able to attend online meetings and have managed to do this in a variety of ways including visits to those who are particularly vulnerable, telephone calls, emails and on WhatsApp. Nevertheless, we remain acutely aware that there are several members who are extremely socially isolated and struggling to cope with the restrictions which are getting more difficult as the weather moves towards winter and meeting outdoors becomes more problematic.

COMMITTEE UPDATE

The committee has been meeting remotely via Zoom. We have met more often online than we would do normally as there was so much we needed to discuss and plan in relation to the new online meeting format. While there are currently five of us on the committee, we do need to recruit one or two more committee members. We are also still keen to find a co-facilitator for the group which we have not had since 2014.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Membership numbers have dropped slightly since we moved to High Barnet as quite a few members were unable to make the new location which is less central. We have also had fewer referrals largely due to the coronavirus lockdown. We did close to new members for the period late March to August in order to concentrate on supporting our current members. Since August we renewed contact with 12 new referrals but only two felt able to join us online. It is much more daunting for a newcomer to attend an online meeting than to attend in person. Several members and prospective member have indicated that they will attend meetings once face to face meetings are reinstated.

However, the online meetings have enabled some members to attend meetings who were not able to get to face to face meetings. We were even joined by a member who was abroad. We have also had far more meetings online than we would have had face to face as for most of the lockdown we were meeting weekly (it is now fortnightly). As a result, meeting attendance has actually increased compared with a similar period last year. Please see **Appendix I** for current membership figures.

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GROUP SURVEY

The group survey is based on last year's (2019) survey. Members were asked which meeting they enjoyed most and they unanimously voted for Rachel Kelly's presentation on healthy eating. People also enjoyed the music evening. When asked for anything they disliked about meetings, the major complaint was people coming late for meetings especially check-in meetings. We have managed to overcome this problem at our online meetings by locking the meeting room 15 minutes into the meeting – one of the few benefits of the online format! People also missed having two rooms for check-in as we had at Trinity. It can be harder to hear when dividing into groups in one room. As for what people wanted more of – several people mentioned more sessions by people with lived experience, and sessions on anxiety and loneliness were also requested. Feedback on the new venue was mixed but mostly positive – the major complaint was having further to travel. Several members preferred the fact that our new venue is quieter, with better décor though others complained about the hard chairs and rather harsh lighting. We also asked for general feedback on how people found the group had helped them. The results of this question are given in **Appendix 2**.

This year our survey has focussed on how members have been coping during the lockdown, and what they feel about online meetings. We will be able to report more fully on this in next year's AGM report.

COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

We have received many compliments from members and from members' families. We have had no formal complaints this year.

FINANCIAL REPORT

Please see **Appendix 3** for a summary of the accounts from the last financial year 2019/20. As can be seen our subscriptions are down this year largely due to having lost members due to the move to the less central location in High Barnet. We are confident that membership will recover to some extent as we move to publicise meetings in this area more.

However, on a positive note, for some our accessibility has improved due to the move to online meetings. Attendance at these meetings has been good. We are considering continuing with offering some online meetings even when we return to meeting face to face. This will enable people who find it difficult to get to meetings to continue to attend. However, given that online meetings are free of charge and we do have to pay a subscription to Zoom overall this may continue to impact our finances negatively going forward. We will also have to pay the same rent for the room regardless of how many members attend – and with a split between online/face-to-face attendance, subscriptions are likely to reduce to some extent.

We are pleased we continue to receive an annual grant from the London Borough of Barnet which covers approximately half our expenses. This year there is a small deficit due to the reduced subscriptions and the fact that the Waitrose grant we received in 2018 was a one-off. Our administration costs are also slightly increased this year due to the purchase of a projector for use at meetings.

Many thanks to Ian, one of our members who is an accountant, for assisting us with the spreadsheet and with the presentation of the accounts.

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APPENDIX I: MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS

	2017	2018	2019	2020 (to October)
Total referrals	69	56	32	8
Website referrals	52	37	26	6
Answerphone referrals	17	19	6	2
Total membership (Dec each year)	65	51	62	39
New attendees (first meeting)	19	17	9	4
Meeting attendance max and (min)	23(5)	19 (6)	21 (5)	13 (7)
Meeting attendance total excluding socials	255	186	201	275
Meeting attendance total including socials	298	229	247	293
Meeting attendance average (excluding socials)	13	12	11	10
Socials attendance average	11	11	9	9
Meeting attendance average Monday meetings (excl Zoom)	17	15	13	11
Meeting attendance average Thursday meetings (excl Zoom)	8	7	7	8
Total number of Zoom meetings				25
Zoom meeting total attendance				218
Zoom meeting average attendance				9
Meeting number	20	20	20	30
Socials number	4	4	3	3
Committee meetings	3	3	3	7
Total events excluding committee meetings	24	24	20	33
Total events	27	27	23	40

All figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number

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APPENDIX 2: 2019 GROUP SURVEY FEEDBACK

Q7: Please describe how the group has helped you in the past year

- *I am a newcomer to Barnet Depression Alliance and find it comforting, both, in terms of its social and therapeutic endeavours. All the more so, since – due to an ever-growing demand (and in view of my own experience) - the medical, emergency & psychiatric services, are severely failing those they are meant to support!*
- *The group has helped me when I have been unwell both in the past few years back and recently after bereavement. I suffer from anxiety and this group has helped me. The group is welcoming and friendly*
- *Being able to share experiences with other people who have experienced similar issues has helped a lot. The concept of the group is to share and this has been valuable to me*
- *Always good to be with and share with others with the same problems*
- *Being quite isolated due to mobility – chance to socialise and get out and talk about my difficulties*
- *The group helps me feel less socially isolated and gives an opportunity to share feelings etc. It is good to be in a place where I can be myself even when that is not in a good place.*
- *This is a nice group which has helped me with my anxiety. I've made some special friends in the group. When I became ill recently everyone thought of me and got a card and X visited me in Elysian house*
- *Very thankful for a useful group*
- *This is the only group I interact with in terms of depression; it is a good way [to receive] counselling knowing that the NHS mental health has a long way to improve*
- *I always feel better when I come to a meeting. No matter how low I am, my mood lifts when I am with fellow sufferers who understand the experience of depression.*
- *The group has been really helpful in providing a place where I can release some of the emotional burden I am carrying and feel supported, listened to and accepted.*
- *The group has helped me when I struggle with my mental health. It is very supportive and welcoming and is the only safe space I have fully felt able to open up. It acts as a support network and in that regard, it hugely helps to know that one is not suffering alone. I have also made one very close friend through the group and we are in touch almost daily where we check in on each other and offer support as best we can. Such relationships are invaluable.*
- *This group has been critical in helping me understand and address my mental health problems and I cannot overstate the importance it has had in my recovery and helping me manage it on an ongoing basis. I will not hesitate to use it as and when I need to. It is well run, efficient and always welcoming.*

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APPENDIX 3: ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2019/20

Barnet Depression Alliance: Accounts for Year Ending 31st March 2020

<u>Income</u>	2019-20	2018-19	<u>Cashflow Statement</u>	2019-20	2018-19
Subscription from members	£277.79	£307.17	Cash balance at start of Year	£2,058.96	£1,694.08
Grant from London Borough of Barnet	£454.00	£454.00	Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year	(£27.93)	£364.88
Donations	£86.01	£150.00	Cash balance at end of Year	£2,031.03	£2,058.96
Fundraising	£27.95	£80.50			
Waitrose grant	£0.00	£335.28			
Total Income	£845.75	£1,326.95			
			<u>Balance sheet as at 31st March 2020</u>		
			Library books & equipment	£50.00	£50.00
<u>Expenditure</u>			Cash at Bank	£1,970.13	£2,007.33
Meeting room rental	£541.20	£674.40	Cash in hand	£60.90	£51.63
Meeting refreshments	£58.81	£48.96	Total cash	£2,031.03	£2,058.96
Social events	£34.46	£17.10			
Speakers	£40.00	£55.00	Total assets	£2,081.03	£2,108.96
Library	£3.76	£16.13			
Transport	£0.00	£11.00			
			Represented by Accumulated Fund		
Administration (postage, website, phone)	£195.45	£139.48	Balance at start of Year	£2,108.96	£1,744.08
Total Expenditure	£873.68	£962.07	Movement in Year	(£27.93)	£364.88
			Balance at end of Year	£2,081.03	£2,108.96
Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year	(£27.93)	£364.88			