

# Barnet Depression Alliance: 16<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting

Monday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2021 @ 8 pm online via Zoom

**Our 24<sup>th</sup> Year 1997-2021**

## Group Report October 2020 – October 2021

We never thought that the March 2020 Lockdown would result in the group meeting online for quite so long. As of November 2021, we have been unable to meet face to face indoors for 20 months! And apart from one social – a group walk – every time we have tried to meet up something has prevented us: in September 2020 we endeavoured to meet up in a café only to be stopped by London going into Tier 2 restrictions. And our plan to re-open meetings in North Finchley – our new location – were scuppered by Omicron! Additionally, there were members who were keen to meet up face-to-face and others who were very anxious about it and we had to balance these concerns. We are now hoping to re-start face to face meetings in the Spring of 2022.

### ONLINE MEETINGS MARCH 2020 TO CURRENT DATE

We had 29 Zoom meetings in 2020 and 25 in 2021. Attendance was reasonable but we continued to miss the intimacy of smaller groups, so we decided to split the meetings into 2 breakout groups when numbers were 10 or more and this worked well. We worked out that average attendance in 2020 was 9 and average attendance in 2021 was just over 9, so we kept to one group for most meetings. We had only a few themed meetings – one of them being a very successful evening where members shared the creative things they had been doing in lockdown – from baking ventures to painting.

### ONLINE SPEAKER EVENTS

We had two speaker events in 2021 which were very well attended. We welcomed **Elsie Lyons** in April to talk about the use of **Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)** including tapping, to alleviate anxiety. Elsie demonstrated how to do this and got members to practice it. She described how it had helped her. In June we were delighted to welcome back **Rachel Kelly** who delivered a workshop entitled **The new normal - how to sing in the rain: building a tool box of wellbeing strategies**. This was an excellent thought-provoking presentation, and as ever Rachel shared her own personal experience of coping with depression and sharing ways we can build resilience in coping with the social isolation and anxiety brought about by the pandemic and by the restrictions we have all been living under for so long.

### OUTDOOR MEET UPS

Unfortunately, this year we were only able to have one social – our annual walk through Totteridge Fields in July. Just five people attended but we did have a lovely time including a delicious tea break at the Finchley nurseries' delightful tea rooms. It was great to be in the open air on a warm summer afternoon and re-connect in person. We realised how good it is to meet each other face-to-face and how much we lose when we only engage online through a screen. We lose eye contact, the ability to smile at each other and the opportunity to engage one-to-one or in small groups.

### COMMITTEE UPDATE

We continue with a committee of six but not all members of the committee are able to contribute to the running of the group currently and we are actively looking for new committee members. We are also open to offers of support from members who would be able to give support at

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meetings (e.g supporting with the check-in groups) even if they don't want the commitment of being on the committee. We ask for anyone interested in joining to let us know.

## MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Memberships has been badly affected by the pandemic and the lockdowns. First of all, we lost all members who were unable to connect online. We also lost some who did come online initially but did not like this new format. We also lost members who struggled so much with depression and anxiety that they found it impossible to engage with the group. We have kept in touch with some of these by phone and by visits. As a result, we have lost at least a third of our members.

We also failed to attract many new members. For the initial eight months of the lockdown in 2020 we closed the group to new members and focussed on supporting the current membership. Then from November 2020 we opened the group back up to new members. However, we got very few referrals coming through and those that did understandably wanted to meet face-to-face. We now have a small group of people who are waiting to attend their first meeting face to face when we restart hopefully in the spring of 2022.

However, despite the falling off of numbers there was an upside to our meetings online. We were able to accommodate members who would otherwise have not been able to attend. One member, for example was stuck in Spain but still able to Zoom in. We also welcomed back an old member who had moved out of Barnet and was pleased to be able to reconnect online. Several members who struggle to get to meetings because of ill health were able to attend the group. We therefore found that there is a need for both types of meeting – online and face-to-face.

You will also notice that despite the reduction in membership numbers and new members, the actual number of members attending meetings increased. This is because we increased the number of meetings during the lockdown period – we held 38 events in 2020 which is nearly double that of the previous year (20 events).

## NEW MEETING VENUE PLANS

The committee decided that when we restart meetings we should consider a move back to a more central location. We also found that the Covid restrictions placed by our High Barnet Venue, Wesley Hall, were unduly onerous. We were not allowed to serve refreshments for example, and meeting numbers were strictly limited. They also decided to bring forward the time for the meeting closure to 9:30 pm which would have been difficult for us. As a result, we looked around for a new venue hoping that we would find somewhere more central particularly because lockdown has decimated many community groups and so hopefully there would be more choice. We have been lucky and have now found a venue in North Finchley. As always we keep the venue details confidential to protect members' confidentiality.

## GROUP SURVEY 2020, COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

As our last 2 AGMs were held via Zoom we were not able to conduct as wide ranging a group survey as we did the previous year. Nevertheless, we did collect member views at the meeting and we sent out a survey via email. Please see Appendix 2 for member feedback. As can be seen by the survey, most people did find the meetings helpful and we have had a reasonable attendance throughout the lockdown period. Many have pointed out the limitations of the technology which we could not do very much about. We did follow one suggestion, however, and began dividing into two smaller groups to enable people to have more time to talk and feel more comfortable sharing in a smaller group. This worked well.

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We had one complaint this year regarding the issue of confidentiality which has been addressed. We continue to remind members at every meeting of our confidentiality agreement.

We have had some good feedback following the group walks and following the online speaker events, in particular, Rachel Kelly's talk which was much appreciated. Other positive feedback can be seen in the group survey results in Appendix 2.

## COPING WITH COVID IN BARNET

We have been very aware of the extent of harm done to many people due to the restrictions and social isolation of lockdown. The group facilitator contacted the local MP three times to express concerns over the neglect of mental health by statutory services during this period as well as the devastating effects of lockdown on mental health. There was no response to the first three communications and the fourth one elicited just a standardised response. Please see Appendix 3 for more details of these and a copy of one of the letters.

## FINANCIAL REPORT

Financially the group is in a good position as we have only had to pay the costs of the annual Zoom subscription and telephone and website costs. And when we resume meetings, although our new venue is more expensive, we will only be meeting there once a month, at least to begin with. However, we are in the process of having to change our bank account as the account we have held with HSBC since 1997 has now decided to charge all business customers (including charities and small voluntary groups like ours) a monthly charge for using the account and for every transaction. We are therefore in the process of moving the account which has also necessitated updating our constitution. We are also still in need of a treasurer – as our treasurer Pat stood down in 2019 due to ill health.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: RESTARTING MEETINGS

We discussed the barriers to restarting meetings which were considerable. We needed to find a new venue, we needed to accommodate everyone including those who were anxious about meeting again due to fears of Covid infection. We were also aware that we had lost a lot of members over the past two years and of those who remained, many were suffering from worse mental health due to lockdown. We tentatively agreed to look for a new venue and contacted Wesley Hall to terminate our contract and collect our belongings. In the meantime, we contacted and viewed some 13 venues before we found one in North Finchley that we could afford and which could accommodate our needs. We hope to restart meetings sometime between December 2021 at the earliest and March 2022 at the latest. We realised it would be very easy to just continue with Zoom meetings but at the same time were aware of its limitations and the numbers of people who could not or would not use Zoom, especially new members. As one member of our committee put it, "it is vital to go back to face-to-face meetings otherwise the group will die." We thought that initially we would offer both online and face to face meetings going forward so as to accommodate everyone. Hopefully we will be able to report on the success of these changes in our next report at the end of 2022.

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## APPENDIX I: MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total referrals	56	32	10	9
Website referrals	37	26	8	9
Answerphone referrals	19	6	2	0
Total membership (Dec each year)	51	62	39	28
New attendees (first meeting)	17	9	5	4
Meeting attendance max and (min)	19 (6)	21 (5)	13 (7)	13(5)
Meeting attendance total excluding socials	186	201	302	232
Meeting attendance total including socials	229	247	329	237
Meeting attendance average (excluding socials)	12	11	10	9
Socials attendance average	11	9	9	5
Meeting attendance average Monday meetings (excl Zoom)	15	13	11	N/A
Meeting attendance average Thursday meetings (excl Zoom)	7	7	8	N/A
Total number of Zoom meetings			29	25
Zoom meeting total attendance			254	232
Zoom meeting average attendance			9	9
Meeting number	20	20	35	25
Socials number	4	3	3	1
Committee meetings	3	3	7	2
Total events excluding committee meetings	24	20	38	26
Total events	27	23	45	28

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

*Figures for 2021 have now been updated to the end of the year due to late publication of the AGM report.*

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## APPENDIX 2: 2020 GROUP SURVEY FEEDBACK

We asked members about the support they received during lockdown meetings via Zoom. Some responses have been edited to preserve members' anonymity.

### How has lockdown affected you?

- It has affected me a lot - feelings of not coping, scared of going out and withdrawing into myself, frightened of meeting other people (not because of Covid but because of heightened self-consciousness). My anxiety has become much worse and also my depression particularly in the morning - every task takes a lot longer and life is a real struggle.
- The lockdown has not had any impact on my mental health. I have adapted to it surprisingly well.
- Lockdown did not seem to adversely affect my mood.
- Isolation, limited activity, both anxiety and depression worse.
- I live on my own with my cat and this Covid situation and the fact that my cat has been unwell has made me very anxious. I am also worried about Brexit and all that entails. I often have very troubled sleep because of this. I do not feel much support from my family or friends in fact I have a few friends who are unwell that I have to provide emotional support to. The BDA keeps my ship afloat!
- I found it particularly difficult during lockdown, not being able to connect with my friends in the flesh, was very cruel. I totally understood why it had to happen, but felt a little trapped with mum, my anxiety for her health was very high.
- I think my depression has actually got better on the whole over the lockdown period, although it's hard to know if that has anything to do with lockdown itself, especially as there has been a lot going on in my life unrelated to lockdown. ... I felt that I coped very well in the early days of the lockdown, much better than many other people, perhaps because I don't want/need as much social interaction and activities outside the home as other people. I do feel that I want the lockdown to end and to return to some kind normality now, though, partly because I feel that even I want to have more of an external life than this and also because I now have a new relationship that has been made very difficult to pursue with lockdown.

### Have you found online meetings helpful and how?

- It is wonderful to meet with such nice people and listen to the sensible way that they discuss their situation. I have only recently joined and I find the group extremely well run and that I am listened to and can express myself easily.
- Yes [they have been helpful] as people have shown empathy and come up with suggestions. Also good to know others have had similar feelings to me.
- I have really appreciated the online meetings as they have helped me to carry on when I have felt so low. Good to have encouragement from others and that possible to get better.
- Yes the online meetings have been helpful. As I am computer literate and can use Zoom well, this has clearly helped. Initially having the online meetings weekly was good but it was right to revert to bi-weekly meetings at the time we did. As the online meetings usually had the same attendees, I got to know some people much better than I had known them before.
- Online meetings have been good for me. Being able to see fellow members and hearing how they are all doing, makes me feel connected to the group. Less isolated.

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- The meeting gives a feeling of connection.
- For me, it's being with people who have been on similar journeys as I have, they are truly empathetic and sympathetic, and they know that just being there with you can often be enough.
- Yes [they have been helpful]. It's been good to have somewhere to speak and be heard, and to have some wider social contact beyond my parents and occasional socially distanced interactions with my sister and brother-in-law...

## **Any draw backs of online meetings vs face to face?**

*Please note, we were not able to survey any members who were unable to attend online meetings or who preferred not to attend.*

- I have not found online meetings difficult but ... I can see how things would be much improved in a face-to-face meeting. It's good that we have a little break in the Zoom proceedings as well and our comments are followed up well with intelligent questions from the group organiser.  
*From a new member who has never attended a face-to-face meeting*
- They can be difficult as very limited time to speak and can't see people's expressions very well. Not very easy to talk to another person individually. Can be hard keeping focussed and tiring.
- Online meetings on Zoom can feel more tiring than face to face group meetings. Talking over each other can be off putting. Lack of eye contact does mean that empathy is more difficult. Sometimes people butt in, and it can be awkward to stop them taking over from the member who is speaking.
- The nature of the new zoom technology was difficult, eye contact and just adjusting. This should improve with experience.
- They can be even more draining than regular meetings, and I find it hard to focus on people for long periods. I also feel self-conscious with the camera on in a way that I don't in in-person meetings. I also find it hard sometimes to deal with the blurred boundary between the communal zone of the group and the private zone of my house - things can feel intrusive sometimes, but it's more that I struggle to get in the appropriate mindset. There can also be technical issues.

## **Any suggestions for improvements?**

Would like opportunity to talk for longer but prefer not to split into separate groups.

*Note we implemented this from March 2021 for larger meetings*

No. They are as effective as possible within the scope of the technology.

## **Ideas for future meetings?**

- Speaker on anxiety and coping with panic attacks.
- Invite other organisations within Barnet to talk about their services, to build a community of support.

## **Other comments**

Barnet Council needs to proactively commit to its mental health care strategy. Providing more funding and outreach services.

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## APPENDIX 3: MP LETTER CONCERNING THE EFFECT OF LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS ON MEMBERS' MENTAL HEALTH

*Copy of one of the four letters sent to Chipping Barnet MP the Hon Theresa Villiers on the detrimental effects of lockdown on mental health. We received no reply to the first 3 letters but we did receive a response to this one acknowledging receipt though none of the points raised were addressed.*

*Sent on 21 February 2021 by Email*

Dear Ms Villiers,

I am writing to you for the fourth time having had no reply to any of my previous three emails – one sent from this address and two from my personal email address.

I would like to draw your attention again to the huge damage lockdown is causing to the mental health of large numbers of your constituents in Barnet – these are people who are voiceless – obediently staying at home, following all the rules, terrified to go out and increasingly full of despair as their lives have been devastated by the lack of social contact, structure and meaning. Many of these people are single and live on their own so the social isolation has become unbearable. But we have noticed that lockdown is also putting a huge strain on marriages and families too because it is unnatural to be spending so much time indoors with just one or two people, and to have nothing to go out to do except food shopping and one local walk per day for months on end.

It appears that you and other MPs and members of the government do not have contact with this large voiceless, powerless group of people. You have good incomes, you are gainfully employed, you live comfortably in homes with gardens, and most of you do not live alone. No doubt most of you have not been struggling with mental health problems and if you have you probably can afford to pay for private care and are not relying on Barnet Enfield and Haringey adult mental health services which, like GPs are still extremely inaccessible, are following a policy of discharging patients who are still unwell, and are still not engaging with patients face to face.

I have been running Barnet Depression Alliance for 24 years – since 1997. For almost a year (since March 30 last year) I have been running it as an online group although sadly not everyone is able to access the group online. It has been soul destroying seeing the gradual deterioration in our members' mental health. People who were getting better are now suffering worse mentally than when they first came to us. And people who had recovered have had to come back to us. And with the refusal to map out an end to current restrictions people are now losing hope altogether. This is a crisis but it is a silent one and no one is seeing it or paying attention.

Here are just a few direct quotes from about 15 of our members at recent meetings, and from recent email and phone communications to me – I have been jotting them down because over the months more and more members of my group have been going downhill. I am hoping that their actual words will speak for themselves that this is a very serious situation that must be addressed:

*"I feel locked in my own misery"*

*"I am going through the motions of just trying to live"*

*"I don't feel I can get through this"*

*"I feel I'm not worth knowing"*

*"I have nothing to look forward to"*

*"I'm just dragging myself around"*

*"I'm afraid to go out"*

*"I'm becoming more and more useless"*

*"I'm just going through the motions"*

*"I find it particularly difficult during lockdown, not being able to connect with my friends in the flesh is very cruel"*

*"I am finding everything very difficult at present as my anxiety is so great and I have to check everything."*

*"[Lockdown] has affected me a lot - feelings of not coping, scared of going out and withdrawing into myself, frightened of meeting other people (not because of Covid but because of heightened self-consciousness). My anxiety has become much worse and also my depression particularly in the morning - every task takes a lot longer and life is a real struggle."*

*"I am in a very dark place at present and am constantly troubled by destructive thoughts"*

*"I still feel at a loss with no classes and not seeing anyone."*

*"I feel really bad and useless and really worried about my health."*

*"I am too full of anxiety and just feel hopeless and this is dragging me to depression and despair"*

*"The isolation here is unbelievable ... too much time on my own"*

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I could say more – I think you would be shocked at some of the stories I could tell you of lives being ruined, of severe mental suffering.

It has affected me deeply. It is becoming harder to encourage people and try to help people hold on and carry on. Some people have become so depressed that they can no longer engage with us online and have dropped out. Zoom is a very poor substitute for real human presence and human contact.

It is vital and urgent that lockdown and associated restrictions on people meeting up and supporting each other are lifted completely. As I think I said to you in my last email, although government regulations do technically allow support groups of up to 15 to meet in a community location (i.e. not at a private address or outdoors), in practice this is of no use to us as our meeting venue is still closed and despite our best efforts we can find no other church or community location in Barnet that is open and which would be willing to accommodate us – they are all too fearful of breaking the rules.

It is very clear to me that the damage caused by lockdown on mental health alone, let alone in many other areas, can no longer be justified – if indeed it ever was justified. With the vaccination programme going well, people urgently need to know that these restrictions will be ending soon – and by soon, I mean in a matter of weeks, not months. I do hope I won't have to be writing to you again with news that we have lost any of our members to suicide, but it is a very real possibility.

Please do all you can to put forward our cause in parliament and with the government. Lockdown needs to end as soon as possible due to the severe damage it is causing to people's mental health.

Kind regards

**Group Organiser, Barnet Depression Alliance**

**Tel: 0754 118 7907**

[www.barnetdepressionalliance.org](http://www.barnetdepressionalliance.org)

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## APPENDIX 3: ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2020/2021

### Barnet Depression Alliance: Accounts for Year Ending 31st March 2021

<u>Income</u>	2020-21	2019-20
Subscription from members	£0.00	£277.79
Grant from London Borough of Barnet	£454.00	£454.00
Donations	£0.00	£86.01
Fundraising	£0.00	£27.95
Waitrose grant	£0.00	£0.00
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>£454.00</b>	<b>£845.75</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>		
Meeting room rental /Zoom charges	£156.42	£541.20
Meeting refreshments	£0.00	£58.81
Social events	£0.00	£34.46
Speakers	£0.00	£40.00
Library	£0.00	£3.76
Transport	£0.00	£0.00
Administration (postage, website, phone)	£15.00	£195.45
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>£171.42</b>	<b>£873.68</b>
<b>Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year</b>	<b>£282.58</b>	<b>(£27.93)</b>

<u>Cashflow Statement</u>	2020-21	2019-20
Cash balance at start of Year	£2,031.03	£2,058.96
Surplus / (Deficit) for the Year	£282.58	(£27.93)
<b>Cash balance at end of Year</b>	<b>£2,313.61</b>	<b>£2,031.03</b>

### Balance sheet as at 31st March 2021

Library books & equipment	£50.00	£50.00
Cash at Bank	£2,252.71	£1,970.13
Cash in hand	£60.90	£60.90
<b>Total cash</b>	<b>£2,313.61</b>	<b>£2,031.03</b>
<b>Total assets</b>	<b>£2,363.61</b>	<b>£2,081.03</b>

### Represented by Accumulated Fund

Balance at start of Year	£2,081.03	£2,108.96
Movement in Year	£282.58	(£27.93)
<b>Balance at end of Year</b>	<b>£2,363.61</b>	<b>£2,081.03</b>