



## Supporting Mental Health in our Big Local communities:

Notes from Big Local workshops on 9<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020

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### 1. Introduction:

The sessions held on 9<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> October offered Big Local members a chance to explore what mental health means to them, what supports good mental health, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in our communities. It also created space for discussion about how Big Local areas are responding to local mental health needs both at present and looking to the future. This report summarises the discussion points, shared learning and useful links or resources that came up during both sessions, and accompanies the slides from the workshops and useful resources/links that have already been circulated by e-mail.

### 2. Icebreaker: What supports us and makes us feel good?

We broke into small breakout groups to discuss what helps us feel good day to day. In the feedback to the group we heard some of the activities and things that make a positive difference including:

- Being outdoors: in green spaces; by the coast; in the garden
- Listening to music
- Being active and taking care of the environment e.g. gardening in shared spaces
- Conversation with neighbours
- Being with family
- Caring for a pet – and going for walks with a dog.
- Reading a good book
- Having head space – taking time out from stressful situations.
- Creative activities – painting, drawing, writing

### 3. Understanding mental health and the impact of COVID-19 on mental health:

Laura provided some insights into what is meant by mental health and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted peoples' mental health, across communities and generations. Key points which accompanied the slides were

- We **all** have physical health, we **all** have mental health, it may be good, poor, or somewhere in between at any point in our lives and can change throughout our lives.
- Good mental health does not necessarily mean not having a diagnosed mental illness.
- Having **good mental health** is often thought to mean being able to cope well with day-to-day life and stresses and being able to live the lives we want, work, socialise and have hobbies or interests.

- **Mental health** may be affected by stress, income, physical health or social relationships. Everyone has times of difficulty in life and it is normal to experience stress, sadness or anger.
- Most of the time, we are able to 'bounce back', but sometimes we are not, and this may lead to a period of poor mental health. **Metaphor of a teapot** with stress going in the top and out of the spout – this represents coping. When there is too much stress for the spout it overflows or bursts the teapot – this represents not coping and suffering from poor mental health. There are a number of strategies we can take to avoid this situation – some of which came out of the ice-breaker activity.

**Wellbeing** is a broader idea than mental health. Wellbeing is more about general 'happiness', which might be easier to understand for people from a variety of different cultures, lifestyles and backgrounds. This might be important to remember when working with people and groups in your areas, as some communities don't relate to the words 'mental health'. Stigma in talking about mental health may also have a negative impact – some people may find it difficult to talk about which adds to the problem.

- Wellbeing is about mental health and physical health, relationships, being able to enjoy nature, living in a community we like living in, how we feel about ourselves and whether we have a sense of purpose in life.

### **The impact of COVID-19 on mental health**

- During lockdown many people reported that they felt their mental health had got worse, due to things like: loneliness, grief (having lost loved ones), having extra caring responsibilities (e.g. for vulnerable relatives, or children) or a loss of routine/sense of purpose.
- When restrictions eased, there were different impacts e.g. anxiety around further lockdowns/local restrictions, concern about job losses, impact on children and young people as they attend school and university in uncertain, changed times.
- As restrictions change, people affected and impacts are likely to change: important to think about impact over the next six months, learn from what has already happened and anticipate these impacts.

The effects of the pandemic will be felt harder by some groups more than others. The British Medical Association (BMA) reported that the pandemic's impact on population mental health could also widen existing inequalities in our society if sufficient attention is not given to the specific vulnerabilities of certain groups and demographics.

The BMA also recognise that - prior to COVID-19 - mental health services were often unable to provide all patients with the level of care they required because of a lack of resources. They are concerned that the anticipated increase in demand on services could make that provision worse

still. (Source: BMA Report ['The impact of COVID-19 on mental health in England; supporting services to go beyond parity of esteem'](#))

**The following notes summarise themes from discussion and the Zoom chat after Laura's input:**

- The phrase 'mental health' may present a block for some people discussion it (stigma as noted above), although increasingly the importance of good mental health is communicated widely in the media and via health professionals
- To overcome stigma one participant said that she prefers the term '**mind health**'.
- Different terms will be comfortable and uncomfortable for different people. Openness to explore what works is crucial.
- A person may have a diagnosis – e.g. schizophrenia – but not be mentally unwell. You can have depression but be coping. So, **a diagnosis does not equal mental ill health**.
- The language of the services people get help from sometimes use very medicalised terminology (the 'medical model'). There are some really good recovery focussed groups that are trying to change the medicalised language of support services. "One group I follow on Twitter are called '[recovery in the bin](#)'.
- Feeling from participants on the chat that there are more adults with issues at the moment than the stats say. *'A lot won't admit it. Younger people are more likely to say they have mental health issue.'*

#### **4. COVID-19 and mental health in our Big Local communities**

Discussion in the facilitated break out groups that followed focused on what is happening in response to the pandemic in Big Local areas. Prior to the sessions the following priorities had been identified by participants, and these themes were picked up in the groups:

- a. The impact on children and young people's anxiety
- b. Isolation and older people
- c. Widening inequalities - including financial insecurity
- d. Anxiety about 'what next?'
- e. Financial Insecurity
- f. Widening Inequalities

The groups identified the following priorities and responses within their Big Local areas

- The importance of **community consultation**. Working to find out what they need, what would work and how to support them.
- **Creative projects** – taking activities almost door to door – to get people out and active. Doing something positive for their wellbeing.
- **Activity based projects:**
  - Warsop Big Local – yoga-based project in primary schools that reduced anger and improved exam grades.
  - Cars Area Big Local – home based activity packs using table tennis.

- Physical activity is very important. Sport England have supported and been very focussed on getting people active. Exercise is the best ‘drug’.
- **Making contact** and identifying where support is needed, especially during lockdown.
- **Tackling digital exclusion:** making sure communities have equipment and knowledge. Using Facebook groups to reach out. Digital inclusion is a real issue. Sometimes even building a phone relationship is hard. Need to build trust. Newsletters can help.  
For those who stayed at home – the divide was digital. Some may rely on free WiFi when they are out and about – they have none at home. Digital exclusion also an issue for school age kids – had to rely on printouts from school.
- **Practical support:** many areas responded with food delivery/support, moving on to calling people up/buddying approach. Some areas are now continuing with those relationships.
- **Reviewing Big Local plans** in light of the needs resulting from COVID-19
- **Partnership working (in relation to supporting older people):** tackling the idea that older people can’t get online; making sure processes and projects are inclusive of people with mental health issues; reflecting on how priorities might have changed.
- Considerations of winter weather and isolation.
- Make sure the **networking** is there. One area looking to Age UK for support and information.
- Make sure the **community know the support is there** – from Big Local and also from other agencies.
- People **need physical contact** – not digital. “We all just need a hug at some point”.
- **Widening inequalities:** People still having to work.
- **People have been very open:** It’s opened a lot of conversations. The need to carry on the work – despite restrictions – is important. A positive legacy has been **reaching people not reached before**.
- Some areas have good access to services. We are all anxious and worried – just trying to help each other.
- **Planning for the future:** a sense that we are in ‘the calm before the storm’ – such as job losses next year. We need to be prepared in our areas for that.
- **Tackling isolation:** finding those people who are on their own. One project – over 55’s in an organised group. **Uncovering hidden suffering:** Pregnant women; those with young children. The difference between those who can pay for private care and those who can’t.
- **Big Local workers under pressure** – ‘to get yourself out there in these times’; and in some areas being central to food delivery; community support etc.

#### From the Zoom chat we heard:

- Some GPs (if you can get to see them) do now prescribe exercise and offer free or discounted gym membership. Worth looking into if you think your area would benefit from that.

- Patient participant groups (PPGs) are 'social prescribing' in our local authority signposting residents to our projects such as 'Spare Thyme' (allotment project) & chair-based exercise (CBE)

## 5. What does this mean for you? What might your Big Locals do to support better mental health in your area now and in the future?

After the break and some input from Helen we worked in groups again to discuss what Big Local areas might do to support better mental health now and in future. The themes from these groups' discussions and input from Helen on examples from Big Local areas are summarised below.

**Brinnington Big Local** - A report published last year revealed that Brinnington (a BL area) has the highest prevalence of depression in the country – 23.6%, compared with an average of 9.8%. They highlighted the need to 'destigmatise' the issue – they talk about it. The Big Local is now working on a domestic abuse project and thinking about how to help people who are having to isolate with their partners.

**Heston West Big Local** set up a befriending service aimed at people who they feel are most vulnerable or at risk on the back of data that revealed that one in four children and young people with mental health issues in the UK cannot access the support they need as a result of the pandemic. *"There is also an assumption that young people spend all their time on their phones or on social media but actually what we're finding is they are the ones who are missing social interaction the most. We've seen a lot of relationships break up. And communities are built on relationships."* The worker from Heston is delivering a podcast, and training as a befriender.

**SO18 Big Local:** SO18 have been getting active through their [creative mosaic project](#) – on signs, walls, and street furniture around the patch. It was funded through People's Health Trust – to tackle isolation and encourage friendship, through people working with a local community artist. As a result of the lockdown SO18 Big Local put together packs so the participants could do their tiles at home and set up a WhatsApp group. There are now over 60 tiles which form a walking trail with an accompanying map. It was used by local schools as a homework task during lockdown.

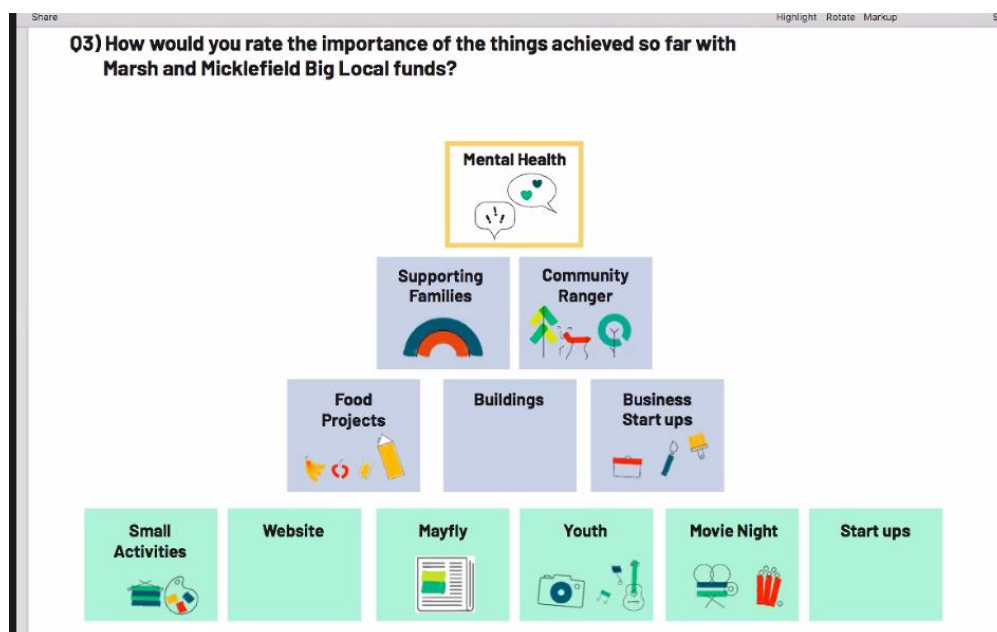
SO18 [IT support project](#) involved support and work with the Clinical Commissioning Group – with the aim of tackling loneliness and isolation by getting people digitally connected. They have run a pilot which is intended to roll out across Southampton, using refurbished IT equipment and 4G dongles for connectivity. The project is open to anyone who would benefit from being connected to increased digital access – whether it's to connect with family and friends; make medical appointments; access schoolwork. Volunteer recruitment has been very successful. Persuading people to take up the offer – explaining what the benefits are - has taken longer.

**Jarrow Big Local** had a focus on mental health prior to the pandemic with '[Listening Ear Jarrow](#)'. This project was based in the café of a local church with volunteer support based there but has now moved online. Along with that they deliver a community focussed version of [Mental Health First Aid](#)

(MHFA) training. They are identifying where they can help people. Delivering 3 to 4 times a year. Moving that online next month. *“It’s about adapting and continuing what we were doing pre-Covid.”*

**Marsh and Micklefield Big Local** described 3 activities that have helped them respond to local need in relation to mental health:

- The Big Local planned a community consultation before lockdown which had to be adapted for online delivery. One surprising finding was the importance/ priority that residents placed on Mental Health. Mental health support was ‘head and shoulders’ above everything else and related to all the other issues identified (shown in the image below):



- **Supporting young families** through
  - The [Calm family project](#) working with families to identify neurological development in their children and the [Schemas](#) learning technique (understanding what's behind a child's play and helping them learn by observing their patterns of behaviour or 'schemas').
  - Making sure people are able to stay active, to get out and access support with a baby carrier loan project (300 baby carriers) and access to environmentally friendly nappies.
  - Tackling loneliness in pregnancy and birth. *“Families need us to back them.”*
- Wycombe Wanderers (funded by Marsh and Micklefield Big Local) have run [‘Keep Moving Forward’](#) sessions on Zoom as well as calls and contact with local people.

**Welsh House Farm Big Local** are working with and training nurses on person-centred care: teaching new nurses about what it’s like as a patient on a psychiatric ward. With this emphasis on person-centred care there is a focus on understanding what’s behind what may be seen as ‘difficult’ behaviour and not taking it personally.

**Stoke North Big Local** described a focus on mental health first aid: *“you are more likely to encounter a mental health first aid need than a medical one.”* MHFA is aimed at embedding MHFA to enable people to offer support at a time of practice. It’s about first responder skills around mental health. There is potential to access grant funding to become a MHFA trainer and more information at <https://mhfaengland.org/>

#### **From the Zoom chat:**

- Like ‘calm’ approach’ - you could have calmer community, calmer business etc.
- Relevance of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html> i.e need to meet basic needs as a foundation for further wellbeing
- We have to remember to look after those people who are supporting others.
- Big thanks to those who shared their lived journeys with mental health.

**Summary of key points from the breakout group discussions on what Big Local areas have tried or would like to support good mental health in their communities.** We have included examples that expand on the earlier ideas and points in section 4.

- Exercise on the street – get the endorphins going and signpost people to services, reduce the stigma of mental health. Music and costumes involved! Adding humour and fun is important.
- Keep Well packs, working with the food bank including a list of services into homes.
- At Christmas: Songs in the Streets; ‘Village in lights’
- When restrictions permit: children meeting with older residents. Trying to get carers to use IT in order to re-start these relationships.
- ‘Talking benches’ being installed in one area.
- Local library service – getting devices and data to people.
- Teaching active listening skills.
- Tree planting. Each tree has a plaque on e.g. where the tree came from.
- How areas are **understanding the need?** Survey – being out and about – getting to know people through food bank deliveries.
- **Not duplicating service delivery.** Make sure the needs are being met elsewhere and adding value as the Big Local.
- Creating the **space to have conversations.** Young people – via sport. To encourage them to share what is meaningful.
- Looking internally at how the **Big Local partnership was working:** asking how the partnership be more inclusive re: mental health; looking at the local priorities and re-visiting these in response to needs.
- MHFA really struck a chord. Grange already looking at that and how it helps people help each other in the community
- Encouraging cooking and healthy eating: e.g. distributing slow cookers and recipes. Getting more confident around cooking, and budgeting for food.

- Digital poverty and how to counter that. Important for partnerships to have the ability to engage online. Use this as a starting point for community roll out.
- Not everyone 'looks like' they have mental health issues. *"I have been told - 'You don't look sick' and 'You always look happy'. I have even been denied medication. If someone says they're broken then they are broken. Having to fight your corner on top of that is exhausting."*

**Back in the full group we heard from participants on what they got out of the group discussion and the workshop as a whole:**

- We are privileged – this has given me fire in my belly. Helping our communities. We will carry on being there.
- When we first went into lockdown – and Local Trust set up these Zoom session – it has helped us gain the confidence to move this forward.
- It [this type of event] helps us see the bigger picture. A lot of people feeling the same frustration – the same pain. Here (today) we see a lot of people are feeling the same. *"Keep fighting – keep going."*
- Being part of this gives you a great opportunity to find that twist on things that is unique to your area. We're a big family. Doing the same things in different ways. We are creating lasting change.
- Hearing what other areas is doing is genuinely inspiring. Not focussing on what we can't do – focussing on what we **can** do.
- Please keep being brave and doing what you are doing. Thanks for being inspiring, you're all incredibly dedicated people! Keep fighting!
- Excellent session with some really great and inspiring ideas. Thank you everyone.
- Great morning. Thank you for sharing your lived experience. I have learnt a lot. I will follow up re MHFA and the Good Things Foundation Organisation - thanks for sharing. We'll incorporate into our plan.
- One message we should remember is that recovery is possible and happens. Recovery is not about being symptom free but is about reaching a stage where a person feels okay and can live a fulfilling and rewarding life.
- Brilliant session, thank you all. Keep safe everyone and take care.

Further links and resources mentioned during the session and in the Zoom chat

- Sale West: mindful resilience and capacity building for schools, families, workplaces, and communities called Take 5 and is run by <https://www.eachamazingbreath.org/>
- 'Outside sitting rooms!' <https://www.camerados.org>
- We Can Talk training - course is free and takes about half an hour. It is aimed at health workers, however some of the insights go into youth work: <https://wecantalk.online/fundamentals/>
- [Five ways to wellbeing](#) – Keep learning, Take Notice, Be Active, Connect, Give



- <https://emergingminds.com.au//training/online-training> – Australian organisation, supporting mental health with children and young people
- Another useful training was the [Zero Suicide Alliance online](#)
- [Good Things Foundation](#) – support for digital inclusion work

### **Big Local Mental Health Learning Cluster**

Adam introduced the Big Local Mental Health Learning Cluster which will begin with an ice breaking session in November. It aims to support Big Local areas to understand and engage with the topic of mental health in their communities. The cluster will consist of a series of online events including sessions run by mental health experts and facilitated by Just Ideas. Find out more here and sign up:

<https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/learning-clusters/mental-health/>

Thank you to all participants for such active, enthusiastic and inspiring engagement in these sessions.

Helen, Laura, Richard and Mary - Just Ideas