



Bridging the Gap

Peer research on people with mental health issues accessing community activities and groups | Bath and NE Somerset

Research and report prepared by peer researchers, Helen Bilton and Robyn Williams
Executive Summary | November 2012

This report examines what helps and what hinders people affected by mental health issues when accessing groups and support which would improve their overall wellbeing. The research was carried out in Bath and NE Somerset by peer researchers who are clients and carers affected by mental health issues themselves and trained by St Mungo's Bridges to Wellbeing project to do the research. These researchers were particularly keen to research access to peer support groups and statutory mental health services.

However the findings and recommendations can be applied to any form of group or service.

Five New Hope peer researchers conducted 42 interviews for this project and we used the data from the interviews to come up with suggested solutions based around six 'gaps' where there was clear room for improvement and we could recommend bridges to better wellbeing.



1. Improving wellbeing in general

Peer researchers came up with a definition of wellbeing, which has been used throughout this research:

Someone who has good wellbeing has a clear mind and feels safe, self-confident and happy. They have a sense of purpose and positive connections with other people and the community around them.

The research showed that the wellbeing of the people interviewed fluctuated over time, and that different components of the definition changed for them, especially 'confidence' and connections with people in the community. We found that good wellbeing is possible to achieve for those living with mental health issues, however it is important to provide flexibility and continuity within groups and services in order to meet the needs of those with variable mental health.

Recommendations for bridging the wellbeing 'gap'

- Build your service on a base assumption that improving wellbeing for people living with mental health issues and their supporters is both possible and worthwhile
- Flexibility and continuity are the key to meeting the needs and aspirations of people who have variable mental health. This is particularly important for people rejecting support because of their low mental health (see 'Motivation').

2. Connections between people

People *need* connections. Our research shows that loneliness, isolation and disconnection exacerbate (even cause) mental health problems and impede wellbeing. We found that the people in our study highly valued their social networks and most had good support from either family or friends. The top answer to 'What helps the most' was basically 'connections with other people'.

Groups and activities providing a sense of purpose, encouraging positive connections, and encouraging service user involvement have many benefits both for the success of the group and individual wellbeing. Groups which allow people with similar mental health experiences to spend time together were considered valuable. Additionally, group members need to be in a friendly welcoming environment for a group to be successful.



Recommendations on how to build connections between people

- Create accessible group and activity opportunities for people that provide a sense of purpose, build confidence and reduce isolation
- Develop opportunities for people with similar health or caring issues to spend meaningful time together and create peer support opportunities
- Maximise client involvement, including in service design, review and implementation
- Train staff and volunteers to model friendly, welcoming behaviour from the top-down. Even the tiniest of gestures can make a big difference to someone struggling with low wellbeing.

3. Statutory services

We looked at the support received from professionals because this was seen by our peer researchers and interviewees as a key factor in underpinning improved wellbeing. Respondents showed that if statutory services are not providing appropriate support, people feel 'stuck' and unable to improve their wellbeing. Our respondents said they needed the bedrock of professional mental health support to rely on and reported that they often found it was not as reliable as they would like. Our respondents were keen to get involved with influencing the development of statutory services.

People's support networks consist of a mix of statutory and informal support networks (family and friends). It is important for statutory services and other support networks to work together to optimise support for the individual.

Discharge was highlighted as a particularly crucial point, as was crisis support. We suggest that there is further research to be done in investigating the issues around how much and what type of support people need compared to what they may perceive themselves to need.

Recommendations for statutory services

- Develop closer working relationships between statutory mental health services and community organisations
- People's individual support networks consist of a mix of statutory and informal. Statutory services need to work as closely as possible with the individual's friends and family as they will be there when statutory services are not
- Statutory services need to request and utilise feedback from current and former services users via voluntary organisations
- Discharge is a particularly critical point where support is needed and statutory services need to ensure people don't feel 'abandoned'. Peer support could be especially valuable here
- Promote positive stories/outcomes you've had.

For all services, (especially) including informal groups

- Pay attention to exit strategies and don't allow people to end up feeling abandoned. Understanding and information will go a long way.

4. Motivation

There is a known link between mental health issues and low motivation. There is also a body of evidence to lead us to the key conclusion that 'doing' is important and motivation can be raised as a *result* of 'doing' rather than the other way around. Therefore making services and groups attractive and simple to access will help to improve motivation.

Groups and services should be flexible and consistent, allowing for fluctuating wellbeing and should offer a sense of purpose that complements people's interests. Respondents reported a desire to 'give something back' so offering voluntary opportunities and chances to get involved which are mindful of members' needs could help to improve the success of a group or service as well as helping to improve the wellbeing of the person involved.



Recommendations to do with motivation, for service providers

- Flexible services, as recommended under the 'wellbeing' heading will accommodate people's fluctuating motivation
- Design services to overcome low motivation – attractive, based around people's aspirations, easy to use. People will be attracted above all by the 'purpose' of the group but may be put off by barriers – use the recommendations of the next two sections to ensure your services are easy to use and known about
- Develop involvement and volunteering opportunities for and with people affected by mental health issues. People want to get involved, so ensure your offer is as good as it can be.

5. Accessing services

People interviewed were interested in a wide range of groups and activities, and most had some kind of activity that they wanted to do more of but felt that there were things stopping them. What is interesting here is that the top factors are not psychological but highly practical – cost and transport. However, confidence is also a key barrier and we discovered that the number one piece of support that people needed to attend a new group was someone to go with them.

Recommendations for service providers on breaking down the barriers to their services

- **Cost.** Think about ways you can reduce, offset or subsidise the cost of your activities to make it more manageable for people on low incomes. Look for any grants that may be available or offer income-based charging scales. Consider ways in which you could get people to connect with each other and share the costs, or let people pay 'in kind', by contributing in some other way
- **Transport.** Consider how people will get to your group or activity, ensure there is access to good public transport, look into transport schemes in your area¹ or organise lift sharing, this has the added benefit of putting people in contact with each other
- **Someone to go with.** Half of our respondents said they'd like someone to accompany them the first time they attend a group. Where appropriate, allow people to bring a friend to the first session, or support them to find someone who can accompany them. Befriending schemes are useful in matching up people in need of support with someone who can help
- **Be welcoming.** Train your staff and volunteers to be welcoming, friendly and non-judgemental and encourage them to explain the group clearly to newcomers.

¹ For example <http://www.bathnes.gov.uk/healthandsocial/communitytransport/Pages/MiniBusSchemes.aspx>

6. Finding out about services

People found out about groups and activities in a number of different ways, with quite a large number of people who said they wouldn't know where to look at all. Only a quarter of people used the Internet to find groups, and most people relied on getting information through word of mouth (from professional, groups, friends and family).

Ensuring that information is available in a variety of different ways and places is important to increase the likelihood of it being found. Be aware that people with mental health issues may not proactively seek information, and be sure to include carers and professionals when promoting group/activity information.

Recommendations for informing people about services

- People find out about groups and activities from other people. Ensure that information about your service is available. Encourage word of mouth, perhaps by encouraging existing members to talk about their experiences at different places
- Do not rely exclusively on any one format, and particularly not the internet. Leaflets, noticeboards and local press are definitely useful but limited in their reach
- People very frequently find out about groups and activities at the places they already attend, and from professionals involved in their support – target these
- Remember that people with mental health issues may not proactively seek out information at all, they may only react to information provided to them. Don't always expect people to look for information about your service/group, get out there and deliver it to them
- Make sure your information reaches carers too.

St Mungo's Bridges to Wellbeing works with people affected by mental health issues in Bath & NE Somerset. It enables people to have more independent and fulfilling lives by developing peer support networks and groups with volunteers. It also supports and collaborates with: – **New Hope** a forum for those who have been affected by mental health issues (inclusive of clients, carers and supporters) who are involved in improving and setting up local groups and services, and reducing stigma surrounding mental health.



Conclusion

We organised our findings into six 'gaps' and suggested ways to build bridges. But what we also found is that the gaps are all intertwined with each other. In particular, a strong theme which came out of the data is that overarching everything is the need to improve connections between people. There are many, many things we can and should be doing towards improving wellbeing for those affected by mental health issues in B&NES but building social relationships, networks and ties underpins anything else we might do.

We found that people are motivated by interest, by enjoying something and by getting something out of it (including a very strong desire to 'put something back' into society). Offering opportunities for people to do things they are interested in, and building ways for as many people as possible to access them, is working towards improving wellbeing.

In conclusion, we say that our study found sub-optimum wellbeing amongst our study population and identified many areas where changes could be made to achieve better wellbeing. We found that there is no magic silver bullet which will instantly transform people's lives; instead a wide and deep ranging approach is needed, reaching across 'service' boundaries and being prepared to delve into profound topics such as loneliness, friendships, community, motivation, client involvement, what really works and what wellbeing actually means. Our evidence suggests that the benefits of making these changes and building the bridges to wellbeing would be immense.

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