



Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Phase 2 understanding from experience

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What has continued to help keep a focus on what matters for people during the pandemic?

One of the key things that has helped us to keep the focus on what matters to people is the feedback we have been getting from the people we support. Thistle supports people in a variety of ways, depending on what matters to them, this includes:

- Supported living – enabling people to live independently in their own homes and communities
- Health and Wellbeing – this includes Lifestyle Management Courses as well as 1:1 support.

In relation to Supported Living each person has a team around them. These teams have continued to go above and beyond, to make sure that people are safe, and also that they are able to keep connected and active. These teams are so committed to the people they support and making sure they live their best lives, despite the restrictions. This has meant we've heard lots of stories of people not just surviving but thriving in lockdown. Sharing stories of how they support people to live according to what matters to them is also a powerful way of reinforcing our values and our practice. However it has still been incredibly hard for so many people, and so the values and commitment of the team are more important than ever.

In terms of the Health and Wellbeing team they have moved their support online (e.g. virtual Lifestyle Management Courses) and on to the phone. We've heard back from lots of people that this has been a lifeline for them, supporting them to cope and manage in these challenging times, as well as being an important connection with the outside world.

Communication has also continued to be crucial and Mark, our CEO, continues to send out regular updates and stories. We also had our information and consultation sessions. These are held regularly as a way of people getting together throughout the organisation. It was really touching how pleased people were to see each other across the zoom screen. Lots of waving and smiles. We heard so many stories of how people are supporting each other but also the emotional toll it is taking. As one person said 'we feel like we're just trying to gulp for air before going back under the next wave'. The sessions really were moving and emotional, with Mark acknowledging that everyone has been affected by the pandemic, both personally and professionally. It is important to keep acknowledging that, and allowing people to talk about it.

It is about walking the talk, if we want practitioners to focus on what matters to the people they support, then we need to focus on what matters to them. So allowing staff time to connect, talk and be heard is fundamental to keeping a focus on what matters.

Are there changes that seem to be lasting longer term and are there things that have slid back to old ways of doing things?

As an organisation we have been building on the changes we started during lockdown, including:

- Virtual training – we've now got a regular programme of dates for internal training, and people have valued the chance to connect and keep developing.
- Self-organised teams – we've continued to make progress despite the pandemic and there are good signs that the change is enduring even in these challenging times. Also the move to tablets for employees has made it easier for people to communicate.
- Online Lifestyle Management Courses
- Support by phone
- Regular meetings on MS Teams
- Virtual information and consultation sessions – this is open to staff and volunteers across the organisation.
- Regular updates from CEO – including updates from our Strategic Leaders Group so that there is a more open flow of communication about what is happening, which also shows how the feedback from teams shapes decision making.

We try to keep paying attention to what is working and building on it. In terms of sliding back to old ways the main thing I would say is continuing to be on the hamster wheel. By that I mean being busy and so not always being able to step back and at times say 'no, we can't do that because we're doing this'. When you get busy it can be hard to prioritise – so we keep trying to challenge ourselves and each other about this.

What difference has this made to people?

I think it has meant that people have continued to show great humanity, understanding and support. Everyone has times when they struggle but there is a real effort to provide mutual support, and time and space to talk and acknowledge how hard it is and will continue to be. For example, we did a survey of people who use Thistle, including people who use the gym, to get their thoughts about what they wanted us to prioritise as part of a gradual reopening. The key message from people was that they absolutely wanted to be able to come back, but that they understood the restrictions and they trusted Thistle to make the right decisions. It was just a really heartening and warm response, and so supportive given that people have been missing something that they greatly value. Our hope is that we can reopen the gym towards mid-November.

Offering online/telephone support has meant that people, who might have been very isolated, have been able to connect and continue to receive support.

Being open in our communication with staff about the challenges we're facing, has resulted in positive feedback. Even though at times we've acknowledged we don't have all the answers but are working things through. This helps to build and keep trust, which is so important in times of great uncertainty.

How did this make you feel?

I continue to be really proud of the people I work with, and it's hard to put into words how moving it is to see people, day in and day out, do their very best, despite their weariness and own struggles, to support others, not just to be safe but to focus on what matters to them. One of the Personal Assistants from Supported Living, Chelsea Diane, sent the following poem, after a very reflective and emotional conversation with their team lead, inspired by the stories from the information and consultation sessions. I think it sums it up in a powerful way.

And then the whole world
walked inside and shut their
doors and said we would stop it
all. Everything. To protect our
weaker ones and our sicker ones.
Our older ones. And nothing.
Nothing in the history of
humankind ever felt more
like love than this

Reflecting on your experiences what have you learned?

It continues to reinforce for me the importance of living our values and being very clear on our purpose. Last time I said that this helps us to navigate the complexity of the situation, and that is still true, but it's also become clearer to me that it is fundamental to supporting us to keep going, find ways of coping and supporting each other. We've all had days when we have felt overwhelmed, but it is knowing that what we do makes a real difference that keeps us turning up.

What difference has it made to you to tell your story as part of this project?

It is always helpful to stop and reflect, and having to write this down has helped me to do that. In doing this story 6 months on from the last one I have reflected on how we are just beginning to engage with the emotional impact of the pandemic. In the first story the focus was on action, and responding quickly and effectively. In the last 6 weeks or so I've noticed how we are talking more about the emotional impact, and not just talking about it but sharing tears and real struggles. This is very hard but absolutely crucial – it is part of us living our values.