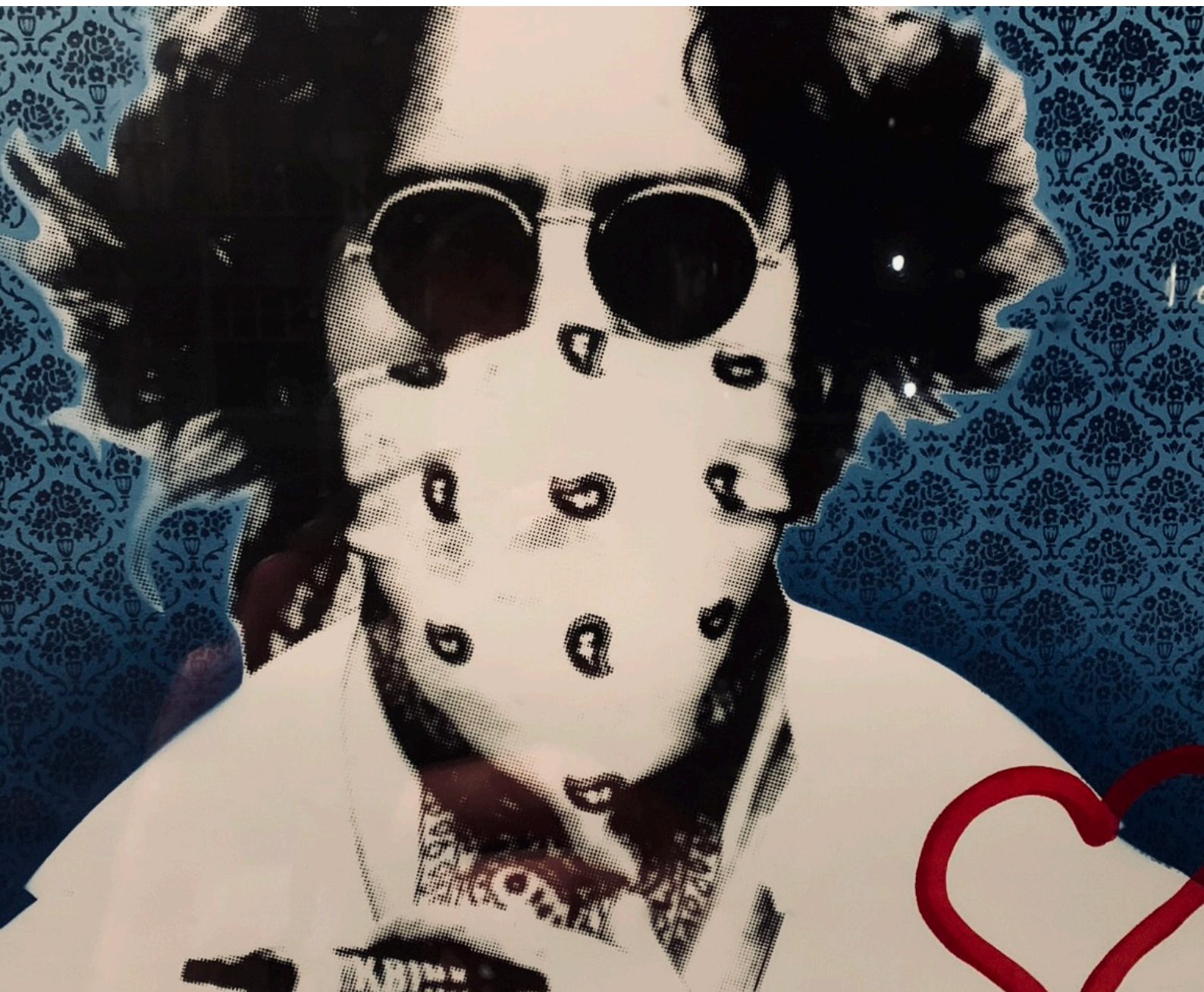




Minding Covid Stories:

**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID ON
THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF
RESIDENTS IN THE LONDON BOROUGH
OF BEXLEY**



Introduction

In March 2020 the government introduced the first UK national lockdown to help prevent the spread of the Coronavirus and to protect the NHS from becoming overwhelmed. While such measures were deemed crucial, from the start of the pandemic there has been no denying the potential negative effect that various lockdowns and social distancing would have on mental health (Banks and Xiaowei, 2020).

People were instructed to stay at home and only allowed to leave home to shop for basic necessities as infrequently as possible; for one form of exercise a day either alone or with members of their household; for any medical need or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and to travel to and from work, but only where this was absolutely necessary and could not be done from home.

To ensure compliance with the Government's instruction to stay at home, all shops selling non-essential goods and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship were immediately closed. Gatherings of more than two people in public – excluding people you lived with were banned and all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals were stopped.

The impacts of these changes on people and their day-to-day life were sudden and dramatic. The percentage of people reporting at least one severe mental health problem increased drastically, from 10.6% in 2017-2019 to more than double in April 2020, at 23.7% (Banks and Xiaowei, 2020). The ONS Annual Population Survey (2021) revealed similar patterns in terms on deterioration of mental health in line with lockdown, with higher levels of anxiety in April 2020, compared to previous years.

Research alludes to average anxiety levels somewhat improved in the third quarter of 2020, perhaps due to the easing of the first lockdown restrictions, although average anxiety levels still remained higher than rates before the pandemic (The ONS Annual Population Survey, 2021). That said, throughout the pandemic, restrictions were eased and reintroduced at various levels and the UK experienced two further national lockdowns to date (31st October 2020 & 6th January 2021).

None were quite as severe or as dramatic as the first lockdown but the impact of these unprecedented changes to the way we lived have been far-reaching and profound, resulting in serious consequences for many people across the UK.

More data reveals an increase in adults reporting symptoms of depression too, increasing from 10% in July 2019 to 21% in the period of January to March 2021 (The ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, 2021), really echoing the importance of support from services for individuals throughout the pandemic and beyond.

Mind in Bexley is a local Mind mental health charity offering an extensive range of support, advice, and information to communities in Bexley. The purpose and objects of the charity is 'to promote the preservation and the safeguarding of mental health and the relief of persons suffering from mental disorder'. We promote well-being and work to reduce poor mental health and the stigma associated with it. We support people in their recovery and champion better services for everyone.

During Covid we delivered support to individuals through more than 40 different community-based projects including some new innovative projects developed during the pandemic. Much of our work comprises delivering contractual services for NHS and local authority commissioning organisations and deliver many services in partnership.





We currently have several funded partnerships in place. During the pandemic, we have developed a number of innovative initiatives due to the Covid pandemic including a wellbeing support line, an IT Access HUB for those who are digitally excluded and a Community Pantry, which complement and enhance existing provision, and allow us to support more people with impaired mental health.

We also invested in our digital offerings and provided additional support to those digitally excluded clients.

Covid and Mind response

When a global pandemic was recorded in March 2020 it created a mental health emergency. We acted quickly to do all we could to make sure everyone with a mental health problem got support and maintained their health and wellbeing.

The success of our response meant that we not only managed to exceed our Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), but we also saw a 30% increase in demand for some of our services. The number of residents accessing our Talking Therapies services dropped significantly in the early weeks after the March 2020 lockdown was announced which gradually recovered to a 25% reduction by June. Despite a reduction in access, the impact on appointments appeared limited with service provision shifting to remote delivery of care.

We began to explore innovative new ways of working and new partnerships that would help us further enhance how we connect and engage with our clients and the communities we served. From this, we successfully evolved our services during the year to grow our peer-led and co-produced programmes, increase our support for bereavement and tailor our advice and resources to help our clients with their employment challenges.

Our world has changed, but our commitment to do everything we can to support better mental health has never been stronger. We want to further develop and expand our offer for digital platforms and we have had to re-think the way that we deliver many of our service going forward. The use of digital will be a primary part of this and we will continue to work with our trustees, staff and volunteers to ensure that no one should face a mental health problem on their own.

Purpose of the project

The aim of this project was to explore the impact of the Covid pandemic on participant's mental health and wellbeing. The project was interested in exploring how participants coped during the pandemic and what support they received.

How did participants manage isolation? Which activities were most successful or beneficial in helping them to remain well?

The project was interested in the role that community support played for participants, including the role of digital community. Which activities did participants access online?

The project also explored what Mind activities participants accessed, their impact and what Mind could have done better?

The project was interested in issues of resilience, peer support, revival and coping mechanisms.

Outputs of project

The project will result in an audio-visual digital online 'exhibition' using extracts from interviews together with the images that have been provided by participants. It is planned for a physical exhibition to take place at Hall Place Bexley in late autumn. An information sheet or booklet will be created to accompany both the online and physical exhibition.



Recruitment and engagement

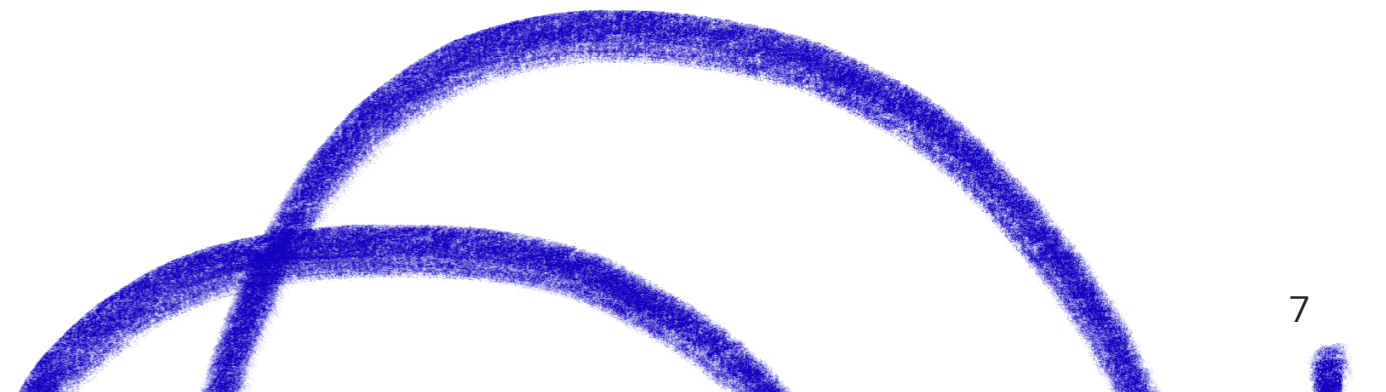
Interviewees were primarily recruited to the project following a presentation at one of Mind in Bexley's online Zoom groups or courses, which constitute part of the Recovery College. (In one instance a staff member referred a participant (with permission) whom they thought might be interested in taking part). There was no uptake from social media or from Mind's website.

In total twenty interviews were conducted. Interviews consisted of sixteen questions. In general interviews lasted between approximately thirty minutes to just over an hour. Interviews were conducted over the phone and were recorded with consent. Interviews were conducted from 11th March 2021 (a year after the first lockdown) to the 1st of July 2021 and reflect the evolving nature of the pandemic and associated restrictions.

(Please refer to the timeline of the Institute for Government Timeline of UK Coronavirus Lockdowns March 2020-March 2021 for further information.) Please note this does not completely cover the period when interviews were conducted.

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf

Eighteen monitoring forms were returned. The majority of participants (15) were female with the remainder being male. The majority of participants (14) identified their ethnic group to be White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British). Other ethnicities of participants were White (any other) (1), Mixed (White and Black Caribbean) (1) and Mixed (Any other) (2). In terms of the age of participants there was an even spread across all age ranges (age categories ranged from 18-24 to over 75) with a slight increased number of participants (4) in the 55-64 age range.



Images

Participants were also requested to supply images of something that had been meaningful to them for the exhibition. Fifteen participants sent images, some of whom supplied captions. One participant sent an original piece of music, another wrote a poem and another provided a written account of their experiences.

The images people chose to contribute reflect the topics discussed during the interviews. Participants sent images of arts and crafts that had kept them occupied and focused, engagement with which provided structure and purpose and helped to pass the time. There are images of bead work, quilting, knitted blankets, painting, collage, handicrafts, beautifully decorated cakes - to name but a few - all testament to the talent and creativity of participants and their ability to turn to these pursuits to help support them through this challenging time.

Other images are of nature and the outside world reflecting how during the pandemic and its various lockdowns people found value in connecting with these. There are images of flowers, birds, bees, a squirrel poking his head out of a garden pot, images of daffodils and blossom capturing the changing seasons and the beauty of the natural world. There are images of trees, lakes and local scenes possibly taken on the limited opportunities for walks in the local environment. Walking provided an important form of exercise for people and the benefits of this and other forms of exercise such as dance, Pilates and Thai Chi were discussed during interviews.

Other images are more abstract and the significance is not always readily apparent.

An image of a packed lunch box made daily for a dependent represents a simple routine that was purposeful for the maker. An image of local newspapers hand delivered weekly by a participant to local less able residents again provided routine and structure and was no doubt well received. This image and one of knitted blankets touches on the community support offered and also received by participants.

An image of a pet rat staring into the camera signified for one participant the easing of isolation, providing them with company and amusement.

A simple image of a hand wearing a wedding ring however is easily understood testifying to the paramount importance of good relationships during this unprecedented time.





Range of mental health conditions

Participants spoke of a range of mental health conditions including depression and anxiety (including social anxiety & Postnatal depression), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Agoraphobia, Bipolar Disorder and Schizoaffective Disorder. Others spoke of general issues with well being and being on the periphery of mental health services. Some physical health conditions discussed were COPD, asthma, heart failure, fits and IBS. Autism and dyslexia were also issues raised by some participants.

Relationship with Mind

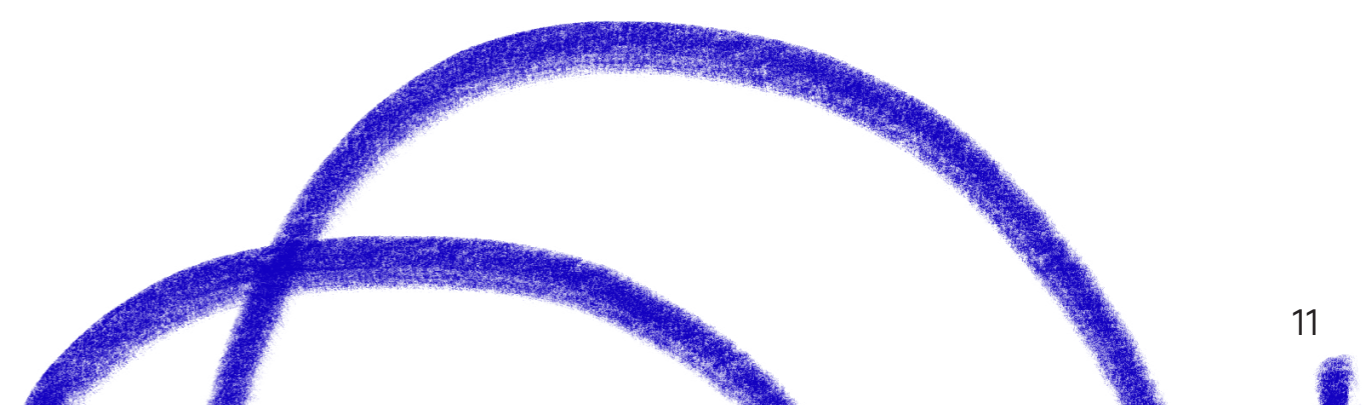
Three participants had long-term relationships with Mind and had been accessing its services for a number of years. Five participants had used Mind's services in the past and were returning to Mind during the pandemic. One participant had only just began working with Mind not long before the pandemic started. Eight participants were totally new to Mind's service and this was their first experience of using Mind. For the remaining participants the length of their relationship with Mind was unclear.

Some of those new to Mind commented,

'...honestly this service I've been looking for for years and haven't managed to get as far as I am now, that's why I find it invaluable and I wouldn't want to miss it, it's like gold dust...'

'Although I'd heard of Mind before I didn't know what it did ...I can't remember who recommended it...but anyway I self referred...'

'...It was just when Covid began and I had a really hard time I decided to self refer...'



Information and Consent

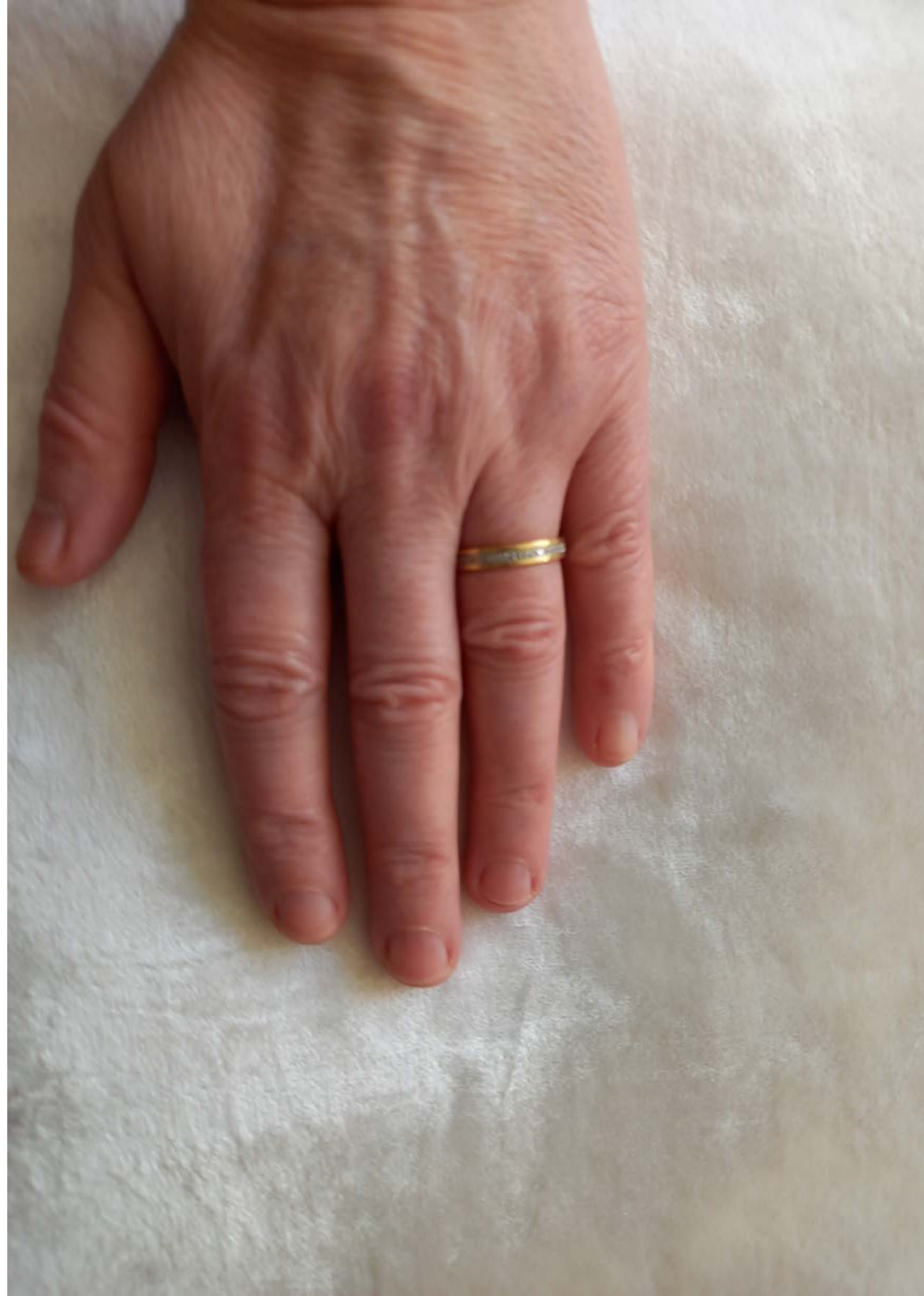
All participants were sent a 'Participant Information Sheet' prior to the interview and everyone was given the opportunity to discuss this at the beginning of the interview. Participants were sent links to a consent form and monitoring form (one person was sent a paper copy which was scanned and returned). Eighteen consent forms have been returned. One person requested to see the exhibition before they would sign the consent form. One consent form has not been returned and information from this interview will not be used.

Participants will remain anonymous in both the online and physical exhibitions.

All interviews were undertaken digitally and followed a conversation approach where individuals were encouraged to freely discuss issues they felt were important to them. The interviewer (AMB) took care to be sensitive to topics initiated by the narrators and to allow the interview to proceed in as naturalistic manner as possible. The research team considered key ethical issues and dilemmas including the complex issues of insider and outsider status, lack of familiarity with the research process, issues of informed consent and safeguarding anonymity; these issues were addressed in the invitation to participate, design of the interviews and process of data collection. . No interviews were conducted with a family member/ carer present or responding on behalf of a care recipient.

Limitations of the study

For this study, non-probability sampling was undertaken which refers to situations where the research cannot or does not sample the whole population and therefore cannot claim representativeness (Jeffri, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As a result, such sampling techniques severely limit the potential to generalise from the findings of the sample to the wider population. It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study and it could be contended that the information gained from such a small sample cannot be generalised to the wider population (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003). However, analysing the specificity of different individuals is seen as significant, especially for participants involved, and the views and opinions will allow for some level of exploration of the impact of the pandemic on mental health for the wider Bexley population.



Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the 'Framework' approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) a content analysis technique widely used in qualitative research. Thematic categories were applied to each transcript and then 'charted', a process by which key points of each data were summarised and documented on a spreadsheet matrix. Thus, a set of categories were obtained which described the main themes arising from the interviews. with individual 'voices' narrating stories, expressing opinion, and therefore contributing to the on-going discourse within the field of Covid-19 and mental health in general.

Impact of Covid on mental health?

There is no doubt that the Covid pandemic has had a huge impact on participants and how they lived their life. For the majority of participants the Covid pandemic has made difficult situations worse, despite incredibly inspiring and positive stories of resilience and determination.

At the beginning of the pandemic some participants experienced a range of reactions. They talked of being frightened, distressed, depressed, overwhelmed,

'...Covid (was) like a forced depression... I got to a really dark place just in a couple of weeks...'

'...Right at the very beginning it was awful, it was so bad. I was in tears almost every single day. I was panicking every single day even though I wasn't going outside.'

'...I just got back from a holiday...and we were in lockdown and things became very difficult because I was so active before. I couldn't find a direction. I was just sort of swamped by everything. I was very agitated...'

Others talked of the impact of the pandemic beginning just as they were starting to receive help or just as they were getting their lives back on track,

'...I was gradually pulling round and then this Covid came and that knocked everything for six...'

'...I was just starting to get help from Mind...I was starting to feel a sense of belonging, that I had a place to go to where people understood what was going on and then when the lockdown happened ...it just made everything worse...'

Another participant with caring responsibilities describes how the pandemic affected them. Prior to Covid one of their coping mechanisms had been to spend as much time away from the home situation as possible, focusing on their work and other commitments as well as seeing friends. When Covid happened, they were restricted to being at home more than they were used to and this significantly impacted them,

'...it had a significant impact because I had to start afresh I guess on how I coped with my mental health, how I dealt with what life was throwing at me, because everything I was used to I couldn't actually do anymore...'

and another describes the enforced monotony of daily life,

'...It's soul destroying and what's the point of getting up? What you going to do? Nothing!...'

One participant with additional physical health problems explains how,

'...Sometimes I have just stayed in bed and prayed because I expected to die...'

Some appear to have coped well,

A key worker participant explains,

'...I suppose it hasn't been that bad really...not personally as although I endured the lockdown, in some ways I haven't, because I had reason for going out for working purposes...'

one participant considers whether the experience of having mental health problems has made him and his wife stronger,

'... I think the mental health problems that we've had and the other people that I know, are probably quite likely to be stronger...'

However, for a significant number of participants despite acknowledging the challenges that Covid has had on their mental health describe how a more traumatic event, experience or incident relating to family, work, past history, health issues or living situation has been the dominant overriding issue during this period.

This participant sums this up,

“...the pandemic has been on the forefront of everyone’s mind and I’ve just been living a whole other story separate from that...”

For one participant the Covid pandemic and resulting restrictions have mainly had a positive effect,

‘...My day to day life is awesome. I’ve made a whole load of new friends and got something to do every single day – all from Mind. I feel guilty expressing it to other people. Covid has been brilliant for me...’

and others have acknowledged the ‘silver linings’ that have occurred,

‘...(it’s) not all doom and gloom, there has been a silver lining to it and I think if everybody looked hard enough they’d find their own silver lining, but you have to look...’

This participant explained how the pandemic had made their marriage closer,

‘...We’ve got a good marriage, it made it slightly better in a way...’

Such varying quotes highlight the different and unique experiences had by residents of Bexley, while at most Coronavirus had a negative impact general mental health, others seemed to reflect on the positive impact it brought. Jin et al. (2021) corroborates this, through their meta-analysis explaining how COVID-19 had varying impact on people’s mental health, in turn affecting individual anxiety, depression and psychological stress differently, which is clearly evident here.

One quote from our participant stating that their relationship got closer with their wife, aligns with research conducted by Biddle and Gray (2021), who found that a higher percentage of people found their relationships got ‘closer/stronger’ than ‘difficult/strainer’ at 27.9% and 17.5% respectively, at the beginning of the pandemic.

Working through the pandemic

Some participants worked through the pandemic, one even began their own on line business. For one participant working through the pandemic despite its challenges around socially distancing proved to be beneficial and gave them a sense of purpose and pride and a reason to leave the house.

One participant working in retail originally thought,

‘ I’m not a key worker, I’m not something like a paramedic or police or fire (person) but yeah of course I am. There’s a realization that you are a key worker – important, and that’s a good feeling...’

They go on to explain,

‘...so many people perhaps haven’t been able to work or perhaps lost their jobs. So at least I haven’t had that to worry about.

Another talks of the challenges involved in transferring to working from home and communicating via the phone as opposed to in person,

‘...it was a different way of working definitely and for most people that’s been on the phone and of course that’s created its own problems...’

Another talks of issues around work life balance and the difficulty of separating from work when working from home,

‘...obviously you don’t just switch off when you have finished your job, but at least it’s a different actual physical place...’

Only one participant discussed the challenges of home education,

‘...my son didn’t go to school for half a year. I was teaching him from home.... And that was not too easy for me...’

With Covid generating the new normal regarding working from home and hybrid working, above quotes highlight various detrimental consequences of this for so many during a time of lockdown. In contrast, such findings conflict to recent research from Kitagawa et al. (2021) who denote that the mental health of those who work from home is significantly better than those who are not able to work from home. Whilst this will vary for individual, to individual, for these residents of Bexley reflecting on home working, lockdown for them saw a decline in mental health. Here, they did not have the choice but to be working from home, with all the struggles that came with this. Perhaps now, in a post-lockdown world, hybrid working, with a combination of in person and remote working alludes to positive effect on mental health that Kitagawa et al. (2020) sheds light on. Albeit, such experience of isolation that was so prevalent for many during lockdown, may only have been exacerbated by working from home.

Experience of isolation

For many participants the experience of isolation was very difficult

‘...when you live on your own there is no-one to give you a hug and to say you’ll be alright. That’s what I find the most difficult...’

‘...I would say you feel lonely, you really feel lonely and you almost feel you are the only one it is happening to but you know you’re not and the days seem so long in the winter...’

‘...I think that’s what the Covid’s done, it’s made a lonely kind of existence...’

‘...I’m not used to being on my own to be honest. I haven’t lived on my own in my entire life...I’ve always had an open house...in my previous house I didn’t even have a lock on the front door and people came in and out when they wanted to and to just all of a sudden be on my own...’

‘...I felt very, very isolated. I’m very fortunate to have lived with my mum and my brother and they’ve been amazing....but also there is a point when you do feel alone and quite isolated especially when you’re right at the start of figuring out your own mental health..’



Many residents of Bexley struggled during this time with their mental health as a result of isolation, yet some found it comforting and one participant reflected on digital platforms like that of Zoom, which helped combat their feelings of isolation. Through engaging with social networks by video-chats like Zoom, relationships can be improved through assisting with building social bonds, elevating self-esteem and overall general psychological well-being (Kanekar and Sharma, 2020). This is something many found beneficial during lockdown, providing more human interaction. Zoom proved invaluable to us here at Mind, ensuring support was still available to those in need when face to face sessions were not possible.

‘...I felt isolated normally and with the pandemic it was much worse because like I said I’d just found a support group with people that I was going to and could relate a little and it was all taken away. I rang the Samaritans a couple of times. I wasn’t planning on doing anything. I just wanted someone to talk to...’

‘...so in the first lockdown when it was just new to us all I really did feel isolated. I couldn’t see obviously my friends and family which were the biggest part in me coping with what was going on for me and as much as we have face time and that it just wasn’t the same...’

‘... I went to Pets at Home in desperation because I was so lonely because I was totally on my own and I bought 2 rats because that’s all they had...’

Some were left struggling with physical health problems alone,

‘...basically, it’s been horrendous to be left on your own with limited guidance from what you can get over the phone...’

Some participants have not experienced isolation and for some it has in fact been welcomed,

‘So I’m quite an isolated individual anyway so Covid in itself hasn’t impacted on me greatly and in some ways it’s done me a favour, and it feels terrible to say it because other people have suffered because of it, but I haven’t felt the pressure to go back to work...’

‘Should I want to go out, I know we are not allowed to go out and in a way that kind of suits me. I’m in my own little bubble... I know in my heart I shouldn’t be embracing it in that way as I am going to have to go out and face the world at some point ...I’m somewhat fearful of the day lockdown is over...’

One participant found that their isolation ended because of the opportunity to connect with people virtually via Zoom.

‘...I was isolated because I wouldn’t go out and see people. Anytime that I did have to, it was such a struggle with all the anxiety but now that I can sit in my safe spot in my house and still interact with people via zoom so they can’t hurt me....It’s broken isolation for me...’

The theme of isolation is reflected through these quotes. Experience of isolation has very strong links to worsening mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety and cognitive decline (Novotney, 2019). Again, above quotes shed light on the varying positive and negative experiences had by residents of Bexley.



Strategies for managing mental health

Participants have used a number of strategies to help manage their mental health. Participants spoke of doing arts and crafts, taking exercise, being more in touch with nature, gardening, practicing mindfulness or Pilates, downloading wellbeing apps, connecting with friends and family and supporting others.

For some participants this was a rekindling of an earlier interest or past-time and for others it was an entirely new enterprise. Some activities were initiated from joining a Mind group, whereas others were practiced separately or independently.

All participants in this project had attended Mind Zoom groups or workshops (one participant mainly received support via What's App.)

A small number of participants had also sought support from Mind's wellbeing line, Crisis Cafe and a number of participants spoke of the incredible support they had received from individual staff members and volunteers. For some this had been the most important support.

A number of participants were receiving counselling not necessarily from Mind.

Some Art & craft and creative activities

Participants reflect here on the benefit of their creative pursuits,

'...I have found my creative side through this pandemic. I've been creative before but I never connected with it the way that I connected with it this time round. So that's been really helpful...'

'...I really got into photography again after taking a break from it for awhile and I got loads of photos from my garden...'

'...Getting back into music... I can't read it or write it but I play it from my head...I'm good at covering because I can hear the notes and basically figure out where they're meant to go. It helped a lot especially when my words weren't going right and I couldn't say how I felt but I could play how I felt...'

'...I've been doing a lot of crocheting and knitting. I do my jobs indoors... I'm always fixing things...'





‘...My whole house is full of craft that it (Make, Mend and Motivate) has encouraged me to do...’

One participant spoke of the ‘steading’ impact of her creative activities with bead art,

‘...(it’s) been a steadying sort of thing and it takes a couple of hours away in a day when you think you’ve got the whole day with nothing to do...they look quite nice as well and I’ve framed a couple of them...’

Nature

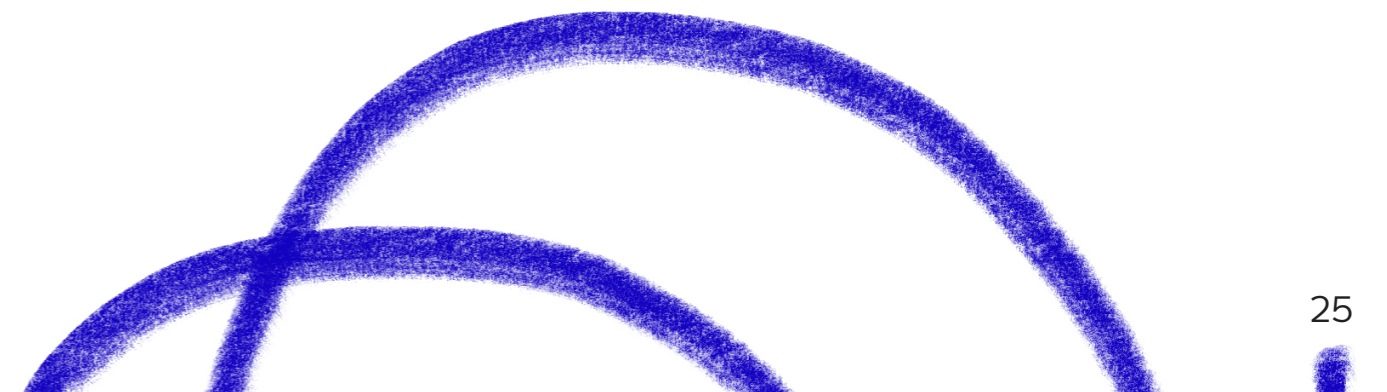
Participants also spoke of the role the natural world played in supporting them,

‘I’ve actually really got into gardening. I find being outdoors in my garden, doing things with my hands and focussing on something else really relaxing...and I’ve really taken up mindfulness as well. So I try and practice mindfulness whilst I’m gardening...Last year I grew loads of vegetables... I grew loads of sunflowers as they’re one of my favourite flowers and they made me happy...’

‘...I found great solace in nature...Nature took me to a place where I was allowed to cry, it was very safe...The beauty of nature brought something to my world which I wasn’t able to access any other way...’

Another participant talked about the need to wait the pandemic out and drawing on their experience of clinical depression,

‘...It’s a bit like a clinical depression... I’ve learnt over the years...if you hang on in there it does pass in the end...’



Exercise

Participants also spoke about the benefit of exercise,,

‘...I’ve had my dancing... (and) my dance classes and that’s been quite a big support for me... it stopped physically but I did it on zoom...’

‘...I walk through the park which is a great place to be. So that really helps. Walking is something I’ve always done. I always intend to do it... walking is my big thing...’

‘...I started walking once a week with a friend and built up a walking regime...’

‘...You could only go out for a walk which I did every day with my husband and whilst we were going round we were taking notes of everybody who was doing some work, to give us interest in the walks...it kept us out, it occupied our minds.’

‘...We have a walk round the block now and again. We go to the park. We’re making the most of the good weather when we have it...’

Structure

Participants discussed the importance of structure and how attending regular Mind groups gave order and a sense of purpose to their day.

Here two participants describes the impact of the lack of structure,

‘...My life up until then was quite well organised and I knew what I was doing from day to day and then all of a sudden Covid came and it just shattered... I just couldn’t get my head round it really. And it was very difficult to try and put order back because you couldn’t do an awful lot...’

‘...My routine has gone completely out of the window. My routine is very important to me, it’s like there’s a clock inside my head and every second I’m late for something feels like an hour to me and I get very distressed when my schedule is interrupted...’

And others on how attending Mind’s groups and activities provided them with structure,

‘It’s just having a structure for the day. Some of the stuff that Mind has done has been part of making that structure because I’m used to working and have at least a bit of routine to my life so I’ve just managed to incorporate that into it...’

‘...And also it gives me something, to go ‘Right. It’s that day, I’ve got my class...right you’ve got to get up, get in the shower, get dressed, pay attention, use your brain, engage and not be lonely, isolated...’

Another on how setting small goals has helped,

‘...Slowly bit-by-bit I face every issue in my house. I just do my daily tasks and give myself really small goals, there not even goals...’

Experience of Mind’s support in general

Overwhelmingly the majority of participants were positive about the support they received from Mind. Some people were totally new to the service and others had established relationships with Mind.

‘...I was just amazed how quickly they followed through and the fact they didn’t forget me. I wasn’t left at the bottom of the pile. It was ‘we’ve got this to offer, that to offer’...I’m just surprised and obviously pleased...’

...The Recovery College at Mind has been amazing. That has really changed everything for the better, that has been brilliant, because everyone is so like minded and kind and if you are having a bad day, they are all there to support you; to go ‘what’s wrong? It’s OK to feel like this, it’s fine, what can we do to help you?...’

‘...Really if I had a chance I’d just say thank you to Mind for everything they did. They taught me that what my brain was telling me wasn’t always true and that actually I was in control of my thoughts and my thoughts didn’t control me and that’s just been a huge, huge change...’

‘...I’ve been quite happy with the service and how helpful they have been. It’s good because you walk into the building and there’s someone there to greet you and help you...’

‘...They’ve actually been amazing...they’ve always been there. I couldn’t really fault them to be honest...’

‘...I’m just glad Mind are there and still are. I’ve changed my mind about Mind completely now and I can see the value of Mind. I had the opinion that they were state run if you like, and that doesn’t come into it who they’re owned by. And I think that’s the only place really available now. There isn’t anything else around...’

‘Mind is a valuable service for so many people. It really is. I don’t know what we’d do without it. I think that one of the things that is so significant about Mind is that resources available to people within the mental health system...is very very limited and people feel cut off and so to have (names four staff members) at the end of the phone is invaluable. It’s just a valuable, valuable thing. It’s incredible.’

‘ (Going to Mind) ...was the best thing I ever did. I’ve met people there who really are banging their heads against the wall...but as you know if you all talk together you really do learn things, realise you’re not the only one in the world and it just really helps...’

‘...That’s a fantastic contribution that Mind has made to my mental health and the others I’m sure that (attend the same) session ...’

‘...the wellbeing line thoroughly supported me. When I’ve had concerns about people Mind does get on it. They do call them and make sure they feel supported...’

One participant describes how beneficial it was that their parent who was supporting them was also able to receive help from Mind. They explain how the fact that they were also able to get support

‘...was really good for both of us’.

Such strategies that helped residents of Bexley cope during the pandemic cover a range of activities, from being creative to engaging with physical exercise. Positive mental health can be generated through positive life experiences, like pursuing hobbies (Kanekar and Sharma, 2020), which many residents of Bexley clearly engaged in. Creative activities have been known to allude to positive mental health (Kanekar and Sharma, 2020), which was reflected in support made available during the Covid period here at Mind. Participants reflected on the peer support aspect of groups available at Mind, which is invaluable before and beyond Covid in the mental health space, yet proved so crucial within this time for residents of Bexley. People were able to engage in creative activities, whilst engaging with peers who may have been experiencing similar struggles. Both of which are known to improve mental health (Kanekar and Sharma, 2020; Miyamoto and Sono, 2012)



"I CAN GET
get through
anything,
I just take my
Butterflies
with me



-G. Love is blind

Positive feedback on groups

Make, Mend and Motivate,

'...Make, Mend and Motivate – lady who runs that is so good, so positive. Everyone got different issues, some more so than others, doesn't treat anyone differently...'

'...Make, Mend and Motivate is absolutely brilliant, encouraging us to do stuff in our house...'

'...I mainly do Make, Mend and Motivate...and that has just been brilliant. It's been just so much fun and also if you go on there and you are having a bit of a bad or sad day. Right at the end of it I'm like 'what was I sad about, this was amazing' because they always cheer you up no matter what mood you are in...'

Again on the impact of Make, Mend and Motivate,

'...I like being arty crafty and sharing ideas with others. You really do escape from reality for a couple of hours. You start off feeling really rubbish and then through this group with people talking and sharing stuff you start to feel better in those two hours...'

'...I do Make Mend and Motivate which is crafty stuff which I'm not good at but basically you have a chin wag while you are doing your stuff and it's just nice to hear another voice...'

Creative Writing Group

'...The one thing that kept me going quite a lot is the Creative Writing because that takes you out of where you are at...'

'...reason why I've ended up in the writing group as opposed to the others is probably because not only is it just an outlet it's a fun thing... I wasn't feeling too well this week. I hadn't slept the night before and I was thinking of swerving it, missing it but when it came (to the time) I really wanted to do it so I got on there despite the fact that I felt horrible.'

‘..... I’ve never tried creative writing so I joined that. Really liked the host – he’s brilliant. It was really interesting. Obviously we were all given the same sentences and how people interpret it so, so differently and the stories that came out were really interesting, really good...’

Other groups that were discussed

‘...Peer Support ‘Let it Out’, again it’s a really helpful group because you get somewhere where you can say what’s going on for you and you know, it’s called Peer Support - peers supporting each other...’

Replying to the question of the most useful group for this participant,

‘...It’s definitely been the Carers support group session just making sure you’re not alone. You’re not the only person that has these responsibilities on their shoulders and there are other people who are in similar situations...’

‘The wellbeing group...that’s been brilliant...’

‘...I do three sessions of mindfulness...it gives you the space to think outside the box. You are not thinking of what causes the problem. You are thinking not to think...’

‘...I absolutely love the Thai Chi. I feel like a Samuri Warrior...’

‘...I find the Pilates very good because it’s helping with my leg...’
(This participant suffered an injury during the pandemic.)

General feedback on groups and workshops

‘...I think the timetable is excellent. It really covers a broad spectrum of what you’re looking for...’

‘In the Recovery College you could do almost all day...quite an itinerary ... you get a download of what’s happening every month. Whatever group you want to join, you can join...’

‘...I think there’s quite a good range for all different types of age groups and what you want and what they need...’

‘...(the Recovery College)... is very useful, can talk about your problems and what you are feeling and people seem to know and give you good advice, that’s very good...’

‘...I have really managed to take those tips and tricks (from the workshops) and use them...’

‘...I’ve engaged with different activities that Mind has put on like the wellbeing thing they did and really learnt as much as ever when things are going on it’s really important that you take a step back even if for just a few minutes to breathe and to focus on myself and bring on myself together...’

‘...I think they’ve done everything they could possibly have done...I think if things are suggested, if people feel things might be useful then they will have a go. They are very open to suggestions...’





Suggestions for improvements

Some participants suggested things they would like Mind to offer:

- Living with Trauma to be an ongoing weekly course;
- Zoom group for couples;
- Zoom groups for younger people only e.g. a young carers group;
- a music appreciation group – e.g. bring a record and discuss;
- a poetry group;
- life hack stuff – e.g. how to fix a Hoover;
- cooking – simple items e.g. scramble eggs;
- different levels of workshops e.g. beginners, intermediate and advanced;
- workshops led by people with lived experience of the issue.

Other Feedback included

- Counselling: one participant thought clearer information was needed about the service and felt that the waiting time for it was long;
- Crisis Café: one participant felt there should be clearer communication around the name of this service as it is not actually a café. (It also adds to the confusion that Mind do actually run a café).

One participant felt she needed 1:1 support but was placed in a Recovery College group, which did not feel suitable. This participant felt they needed treatment as opposed to recovery support.

Despite these experiences the participant did benefit from the anonymity of Zoom and from the support and connection from a staff member connected with running the group. In fact for this individual the support from this staff member had been the most important thing that had helped them through this period.

Wider Health Economy

During the pandemic access to medical help became problematic. Although people were allowed to leave home for medical reasons many appointments and procedures were cancelled and only the most urgent interventions took place. Most GP and other front line services went on line. Many people were frightened to attend hospital for fear of contracting Covid. Here some participants raise some of the issues they experienced of the wider health environment.

One participant explains her frustration with the assumption of about walking to remain healthy and the difficulty in accessing the services,

‘People keep telling me on the television to go for a walk. You have to be aware of what peoples’ capabilities are. (They) keep saying if you’ve got this problem, go to the GP. Yeah trying to get to see the GP is virtually impossible, - and if this is happening go for a brisk walk around the park. There’s a lot of people who would love to be able to do that but they can’t.’

Another participant discusses his distress at struggling with some physical health issues alone and the limited access to professional intervention,

‘Things were going on prior to Covid, but the main thing Covid has done has been increased the lack of medical help I could have got because I was suffering from chronic asthma...Basically it’s been quite horrendous to be left on your own with limited guidance from what you can get over the phone and kinda trying to face medical symptoms you’re not sure of...and not being able to access any help...’



A participant that has been diagnosed with cancer talks about the support she has received from a family member...

‘And now since I’ve been ill with all this cancer thing, she usually Skypes me each day. I had to go up to the hospital yesterday for a scan, she literally came with me which was really nice. We had to wear mask and all that as you know...’

And others on the difficulties in not being able to visit family and friends who were unwell either in hospital or at home. One participant unable to visit their husband in hospital explains,

‘I have tried to do Zoom with my husband in hospital but that’s not actually been very successful because I can’t visit him, we haven’t visited him for months now -we’re not allowed to - but it (Zoom) didn’t work really, not with him.’

She goes on to explain,

‘My husband and I used to do everything together and now half of me is missing so I’m hoping to be able to fill my time with some of the things that Mind does.’

Another participant talks of her long established relationship with a friend and her concern about not being able to see her...

‘I used to go and see a friend who can’t do anything for herself. I used to get all of her shopping for her, which I can’t now...I’m the only one she recognizes. We’ve been friends for well over 60 years...So I feel really worried about her.’

In response to the most important thing that had helped them through the pandemic - one participant praises both Mind and the involvement of their GP.

‘...Definitely the services from Mind, also I got to say my GP has been great....’

Community Support

The project also explored other types of community support that participants received. Participants talked of support from family, friends, neighbours, the church, other community groups that they belonged to as well as the local council - helping some with their shopping. For some this community support had been helpful but in some case this had proved disappointing.

Some talked of really supportive neighbours

‘...My neighbour is very good next door. In fact she’s been in today and got round the places I can’t reach... and cleaned...’

another talked of how neighbours were initially willing to help,

‘...To start with the lady over the road said she’d get my shopping but to be honest I think she got fed up with doing it...’

One participant describes how they were ‘hounded and harassed’ by neighbours resulting in them being admitted into hospital by A&E. They then had a heart attack on the ward as was ‘terrorised’ by two other patients. This participant describes how they had a very difficult couple of months in hospital and when discharged it took them 4 hours to enter their property because of the issue experienced with their neighbours.’

Other participants talked about changing neighbourhoods or being new to a neighbourhood and therefore not having a strong sense of community,

‘...we all used to interact quite a lot but say in the last three or four years there’s a big change of people moving and downsizing etc so I don’t know my neighbours as much as I used to..’

‘...I really don’t see the neighbours, it’s not that kind of road. I can’t imagine anyone knocking on the door and saying ‘Do you need anything?’...’

‘Clapping’ outdoors socially distanced became a weekly tradition during the early days of the pandemic to show appreciation for the NHS. One participant returned to her former neighbourhood to participate in this,

‘...I was going out here and I was lucky if there were three people out in the street and my friends where I used to live said come with us and come clapping...So that was my community I supposed. Yeah I clapped in my old community...’





Some participants spoke of the importance of keeping in touch with friends,

‘...I phone up all the people I know and chat to them so I’m going to have a massive phone bill actually. I phone everybody...’

‘...The other thing I’ve done but I’ve been doing it for years anyway is keeping up with my friends in any part of the country on the phone... That’s been the nature of my experience of people with mental health problems, you tend to share experiences and if you’re friends, you back each other up as and when...’

Some participants talked of the help they received from the local council with their shopping

‘...Bexley came forward and said if we couldn’t get a slot (for an internet shop) you could ring up and get someone to do our shopping for us...it came at the right time because you got to the stage where you couldn’t be bothered to go and queue to get into the supermarket...we used the Bexley offer quite a few times and we were very grateful for this..’

and another on how friends had supported them with essential food supplies,

‘...A few friends have been in touch when I was absolutely ‘skint’ and using foodbanks, people did actually buy me food...’

Some participants spoke of their interactions with church,

‘...I’m on regular zoom meetings...which have been really helpful, seeing people and praying about things and that kind of stuff. It’s a very big part of my life...’

Another of her horror at the church being inaccessible,

‘...Interestingly I reached out to the church, it was in my darkest hours and they were closed, and I found it horrifying that this pillar of community that’s supposed to be there in the darkest times of humanity had their doors closed with padlocks on them...’

One participant when asked about other community support they’d received replied,

‘No it’s Mind, a 100 percent Mind.’

Ease of accessing Digital Services

How easy was it for people to access digital services? And what support did Mind offer?

For some people the shift to using Zoom was perfectly straightforward but for other participants it was more difficult and they needed support to be able to do so.

‘...I was apprehensive about doing it and to start with, I thought ‘No’ but since I’ve tried it... I’ve got the hang of it now and I feel comfortable with it...

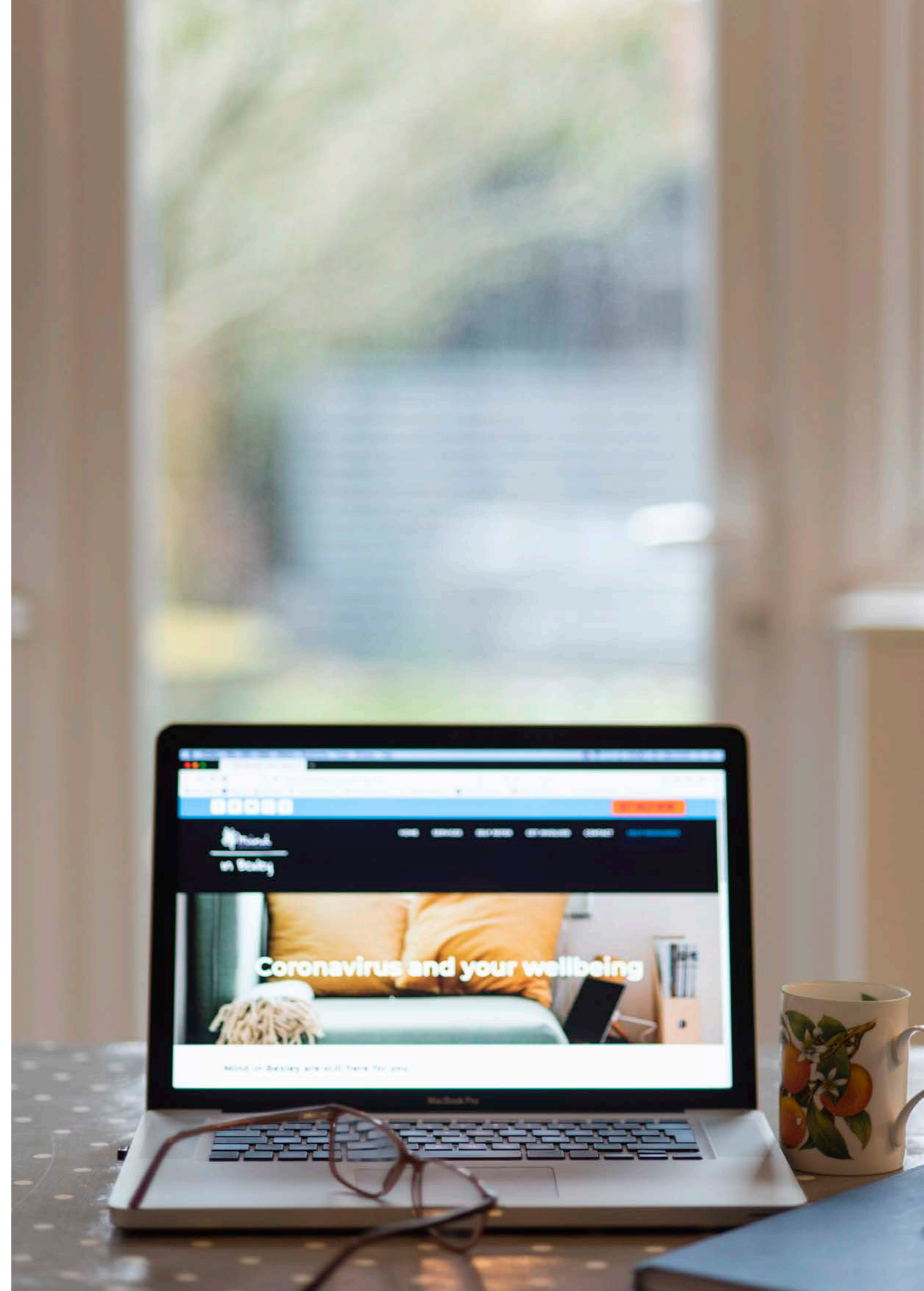
“...It’s a learning game for all of us... And there’s no doubt about it at the beginning when I tried to get on these zoom things I was so uptight to start off with, so uptight I was going to miss my class, because there was a certain way to get into it, but once you get started, to get the hang of it all, it becomes second nature...”

‘...I got my granddaughter to come and set it up because I didn’t know how to do that at all and then as a starting point (names a staff member) showed me. They’d be on the phone while I was trying to access a session...’

‘...I didn’t know how to do it and bless (names a staff member) spent about maybe an hour explaining to me on the phone what to do. The only way I can get in is if they send me a message. I get the message up, I touch the blue bit and then I can get into the zoom meeting...’

‘...It’s something I’ve had to learn. At one stage I was able to use the ID code and the password. I don’t know how the configuration of that works now but if (someone) sends me an email with the link that works well enough for me...’

‘...I was frightened of the technology. When they said it was Zoom meetings, I was like ‘God, No!’ I’m a technophobe. I can’t even send an email...They made it so easy at Mind. All you need to do was click on the link..’



One participant talked about Mind being a 'trusted brand' and therefore feeling comfortable using Zoom to access their services. There had also been an initial induction with Mind conducted via email and telephone, which also helped.

“...I have used it with Mind sessions and it's an excellent and amazing facility...I'm more swayed to use the Mind courses facility on zoom than anything else because I know it's a trusted brand and organisation...”

One participant talked about the difficulty in securing a private confidential space,

‘...getting that private space to do my Zoom calls and stuff was really frustrating because I just couldn't have that private space and if I did it just ended in confrontation/ complications...’

Another participant discussed the difficulties that had been encountered when Mind's procedures were changed and participants needed to enrol every month to join groups and therefore did not receive a recurring link,

‘...It was a bit stressful to begin with, when some people were getting on and other people weren't, and if you'd factored your day around doing this group at 12 o'clock, then that kind of blows your routine out for the day. It does have a negative impact on your mental health in that routine is so important...’

One participant without a computer was able to access Mind's services by going into the office to do so. They were pleased to be able to do this and happy with the technological support received.

Some participants discussed the pros and cons of Zoom activities as opposed to in person activities. For some participants it was seen as a positive and for others a poor substitute to face-to-face contact.

‘...Going on line easier, not so exposed, can come out of that meeting at anytime...’

‘...On the plus side what has been very welcome is being able to be on a zoom group and sit in the pitch black of anonymity until I was ready to engage...’

‘...it doesn't make up for the physical contact of people, it helps, but it doesn't make up for you actually going out and mixing with people...’

One participant talked about feeling too anxious to use zoom and preferring face-to-face contact. This participant needs to gradually familiarise themselves with a location and then the people.

‘...with Zoom you have to do it all at once and it was kind of overwhelming.’

Other digital resources used

Participant did use other digital resources such as WhatsApp, FaceBook, YouTube, Neighbourhood App, Instagram, Skype, Teams, but in general this did not seem to be a particularly strong element of support for people.

Two participants referred to the value they found in using wellbeing apps,

‘... I also joined a well being app, which was good to have support and communication and to chat to other people ...that's really helped to pick me up and to know I'm not alone, I'm not the only one. I found that really useful...’

‘...I also downloaded an app on my phone called CALM...and one of them had a list of activities so when I felt really stressed literally just 10 seconds up to a minute and each one was different and they help you to focus and work with what's going on. I never looked at things like that but they actually are really useful...’

and others in the value of using Alexa to communicate with family members

‘...I've got an Alexa and both my sons come in on the Alexa and say ‘Are you Ok?’...’

Conclusion

This project has highlighted some of the challenges and coping mechanisms encountered by Bexley residents during the pandemic. It is apparent that the findings of this project concur with wider recent research findings, highlighting that Covid related isolation and anxiety can create and exacerbate psychological distress. In addition, the strength, creativity and resilience of participants have been inspiring and the openness with which people have shared their stories and experiences during the Covid pandemic has been humbling. The support that Mind has provided to our local community, as evidenced by the respondents has been overwhelmingly positive and the value of which cannot be underestimated. The recordings, together with transcripts, form a digital archive, which represents a rich resource for future research and development at Mind. A booklet will accompany an exhibition based on the project which will open in Hall Place, Bexley in late autumn.

The outputs from this project act as a lasting testimony to these individual stories and the services that supported them during this unprecedented time. Importantly, this research has provided an opportunity for learning and development, on individual and group levels, as well as in terms of future research planning and administration. There have been significant benefits in terms of public engagement, as the project has given residents of Bexley the opportunity to speak out about their experiences, which will enable the wider community to better understand individual stories. We hope to continue to generate awareness in public attitudes towards the complex issues raised, including those of mental wellbeing and relating coping strategies.

Our health and social care services are and will continue to be under pressure like never before. The devastating loss of life in our community, the impact of lockdowns, and the deepening recession will have an impact on our mental health into the future. Whether we see more local lockdowns, more national lockdowns or finally begin to recover, it is vital that the government puts the mental health impact of the pandemic at the heart of its plans. The coronavirus pandemic meant mental health services have had to develop new ways of working, including offering appointments and therapies via remote and digital forms of communication. While these ways of working offer continued access to mental health services, which is paramount at a time of increasing mental health need, there are still a number of significant issues with digital provision that at as a sector must be addressed and mitigated against. These concerns often similarly apply to wider services that people with mental health are more likely to access, such as support around food insecurity, financial debt and benefits, housing and social care.

Not all digital forms of communication are suitable for everyone, and how people respond to digital services differs widely. For some it might make interaction with the healthcare system and wider support more difficult and privileging digital and remote forms of communication over other forms of communication can serve to limit individual choice. Digital exclusion will only serve to exacerbate existing health inequalities and leave some people without access to care and support and we need to work as wider community sector to assess these issues.

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Minding Covid

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