

The Nelson Trust – Written Evidence (LBC0065)

Positives from the pandemic

The way individuals and communities came together to look after each other.

At Nelson Trust we run two cafes, the Clean Plate in Gloucester and the Sober Parrot in Cheltenham. These were created to help reduce the stigma associated with substance dependence by promoting the fact that recovery from addiction is possible. They also served as volunteering and training vehicles for individuals working to get a foot back in society.

Before it became mandatory we closed both cafes as we recognised our responsibility to the NHS and to the wider public. However, the staff swiftly developed an idea to safely provide food to the needy, the isolated and the vulnerable. Shortly after this we joined a forces with another charity, The Long Table and between us prepared and delivered meals to the same cohort of people and included NHS staff. The initiative was strongly supported by Bishop Rachel of Gloucester. By the end of June we had prepared and delivered over 15,000 meals!

For Nelson Trust it was a great opportunity to look beyond what we normally do, to recognise that some things are bigger than our usual concerns and for our volunteers in recovery to feel like they were giving back to society.

The surge in digital communication development.

As an organisation which works regionally we had already begun to implement up to date digital communication platforms like Zoom. However, what was taking months to achieve with the arrival of the pandemic literally took hours. The benefits were immediate and obvious. A reduction in time travelling to meetings (internal and external); the necessity to work from home made a lot of office space redundant and of course we reduced our carbon emissions by having less traffic on the road; for those who could work from home effectively it gave them much more flexibility to manage time, family responsibilities and had a beneficial effect on their finances with less travel, the time and cost associated with this and childcare.

What this might mean in 5 to 7 years' time? More cohesive and developed communities that can respond to local crises as they arise if government (local and national) invest in community builders. More efficient and environmentally friendly organisations. With more autonomy over how they manage time and working responsibilities, a workforce that is less stressed and better off financially.

What are the things that you are most worried about?

The long term implications and consequences of lockdown

At Nelson Trust we run three women centres (a holistic, gender specific trauma informed approach to working with women who are defined as having multiple vulnerabilities) in Gloucester, Swindon and Bridgwater. We are currently developing another centre in Bristol. We deliver services in the centres and at satellite locations. From the Gloucester centre we deliver services in the Forest of Dean and Cheltenham, from Swindon we deliver services in Salisbury and Chippenham and

from Bridgwater we deliver services in Weston Super Mare. These are just examples and our reach extends to many other locations across the region.

We have seen an increase in episodes of mental health difficulties, an increase in domestic abuse, an increase in substance misuse and an increase in high risk taking behaviour. Many of the women we work with have children and these children will have been exposed to what are known as adverse childhood experiences (ACES). ACES predict with significant accuracy later development in adolescence and early adulthood of substance misuse issues, mental health problems and contact with the criminal justice system. An increase in unemployment levels will only exacerbate the problems so the pandemic is in a sense compounding intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect.

The financial implications will present on many fronts. We know economic uncertainty and distress leads to an increase in the types of challenges our clients face. To address the needs of the pandemic the government has borrowed staggering sums of money which will have to be paid back. Will this lead to another round of austerity? Are we seeing the beginning of a trend with the announcement of pay increases for 900,000 public sector workers without an increase in the relevant government department budgets? The consequences of these policies often trickle down to voluntary sector organisations who rely on grants and the opportunity to participate in publicly tendered contracts from well-funded government departments?

A reduction in or the disappearance altogether of some of these funds make it impossible for organisations like ours to offer the same rewards to staff who continued to deliver services throughout the lockdown. They continued with assertive outreach to street sex workers, helped domestic abuse victims navigate a route to safety and delivered food and essential medication to individuals who had to shield. Further they helped fill the void created by those organisations which reduced and closed cases and in some instances closed down altogether for example by taking referrals from the police of women experiencing distressing mental health episodes. Here are some of the messages of gratitude we received from clients and referrers.

"I have been working with The Nelson Trust in relation to two clients. Throughout this period of lockdown, the worker has continued to provide an intense level of support, if not more than before lockdown to ensure that these vulnerable women are not disadvantaged as a result of services not being available to them. She has attended and participated in all meetings via conference call, she has been easily contactable by text, phone and email. She has also continued to undertake essential outreach work (face to face) to support clients with things including moving to a new house and even giving birth. She has been flexible, offering out of hours support in addition to her usual role."

Advanced Practitioner Gloucester Safeguarding Team

"This is what I love about Nelson Trust, the way they turn system challenges into opportunities to improve services." Children and Families commissioner at a service implementation meeting.

"Just want to say a massive thank you to Gloucester Nelson Trust for helping me through this Covid-19. They are the only people who will help and have done more than I can ever thank them for. If it wasn't for them I

would be in an empty property heavily pregnant with no support whatsoever and would have probably lost my child or worse. I literally can't thank them enough truly brave women X." Client we supported during lockdown

The Sober Parrot:

'I just wanted to thank you for our meals today. What you are doing is making a massive difference. I know my family can eat this week so from the bottom of my heart thank you. Honestly, I sat in the kitchen and cried 'cause' I have food for everyone now.'

What might this mean in 5 to 7 years' time? A further squeeze on the voluntary sector with more and more organisations spending more time and energy on surviving rather than delivering support and services with purpose. When organisations are solely focused on their own survival it means less time for partnership work, less time for reflection on impact, less knowledge to inform innovation and ultimately less support for those who need it.

What do you hope most changes for the better?

Learning from the lessons

In the top right hand corner of its risk register the government lists pandemic as something that is likely to happen, to have a significant impact and it was there before the onset of this pandemic. Did we respond brilliantly with energy, commitment and even sacrifice? Yes we did.

Were we ready? No we weren't!

So what can we learn? Nelson Trust runs 3 community women's centres and is shortly to open a 4th. We have been arguing for years for a statutory investment of core funding which guarantees we can continue to exist. With that core funding we can do the rest. We can compete and partner with others to provide services. We can listen to local commissioners about their local concerns and respond energetically and creatively. We can also be ready for other emergencies which affect the cohort of people we support.

Nelson Trust also provides residential rehabilitation to those affected by substance dependence. When the government placed homeless people in hotels an opportunity was missed to place those with dependency issues into residential rehabilitation. It would have less expensive but also an investment in the post pandemic, an opportunity reduce the number of homeless by giving some of these individuals a start in recovery and a step into a life of independence.

I use the experience of Nelson Trust to illustrate what can be planned for, what can be available and what can be achieved.

What might this mean in 5 to 7 years' time? More cohesive local systems by investing and engaging in those organisations which can move swiftly to reduce demand on statutory services. The voluntary sector is renowned for being fleet of foot and there were many brilliant examples of many different organisations doing just that throughout the pandemic. Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted and a mistake to take it for granted that they still exist the next time they are needed. If they are consulted, engaged and invested in, by 5 to 7 years' time we could have fit

for purpose local systems with much fewer gaps in services, much more resilient communities and much more confidence that no one is forgotten. However, this will require a standard of local leadership that is currently lacking in many parts of the country. A standard that can only be ignited by national government attention and a stronger than token appreciation of what the voluntary sector bring to the table.

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