

Barnet Depression Alliance: 18th Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 14th November 2023 @ 19:30 at meeting venue

Our 26th Year 1997-2023

Group Report for Oct 2022- Oct 2023

The past year has been a challenging one for the group. We have lost two valued members, and faced a difficult period where our group organiser was unable to facilitate meetings due to a family crisis. Unfortunately, this meant having to suspend the online (zoom) meetings for 8 months, but fortunately the committee agreed to continue to facilitate the face-to-face meetings though we suspended the programme and instead had “check-in” meetings (i.e. meetings focussing solely on supportive sharing between members), between March and July. Fortunately, things are now almost back to normal, and we have been pleased to be able to reinstate the online meetings from September.

FACE TO FACE MEETINGS

We had our first face-to-face AGM meeting at our new venue last year November – the previous one had been held online due to the Covid restrictions. It was good to get everyone together and be able to discuss in person how the group was going and what people felt about the new venue. Feedback was positive (see report on survey results below). For our activity we asked members to bring along an object which meant a lot to them and talk about it. It was interesting to see what members chose to share and the stories behind the objects which included a model penguin, a music box, an inscribed wooden plaque, and a satin wedding dress.

In December we had our Christmas social with festive quiz and refreshments which was great fun. Our January 2023 meeting focussed on art that inspires us – and members brought along photos and pictures they had taken themselves or images which they admired. A variety of images were shared including a stunning Malawi sunset (taken by a member while on holiday there), a photo of Whetstone High Road taken a century ago, some colourful Caribbean art, and a tapestry, to name just a few.

We then had a gap in themed meetings until September. From March to July the face-to-face meetings were all “check-in” meetings giving all members longer to share how they were coping. In September, we resumed our original format (themed session followed by “check-in”). At this meeting we paid tribute to a member who had recently passed away, and one member shared some beautiful photographs she had taken on a holiday this summer and described how her depression had begun to lift during this time. In October members brought along words, poems or other writings that had inspired them.

ONLINE MEETINGS

Online meetings took place up until January 2023 and were then put on hold until September 2023 when they resumed. We are pleased to report that the meetings are still well attended and so we plan to continue them. They provide a forum for members who do not find it easy to get to the face-to-face meetings for geographical reasons or health reasons – but who still want to be part of the group.

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SOCIALS

In January we celebrated the New Year with a tea at Hollybella Café in North Finchley.



And in the summer (August) we combined our group walk and group meal. Eight members plus three dogs enjoyed a summer walk over Totteridge Fields visiting the beautiful Darlands Lake on the

way and enjoying a meal at the charming Finchley Nursery Café.

Members also meet up informally during the year e.g. some have attended Age UK's talks by Prof Loveday, or just for coffee or tea. A few have got together to arrange cinema outings. The whole point of the group is not to just provide support at meetings, but to facilitate friendships and support outside of meetings as well.

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Current awareness

Although the primary way we support our members is through group meetings, online meetings and socials, we do provide a rudimentary current awareness service as well. We email members about services and events available in the borough and we maintain links with mental health services and the voluntary sector. Several of our members attend and help at Barnet's Wellbeing service, Meridian. Others have links with JAMI and Mind. We endeavour to arrange speakers from local organisations which may be of interest to members.

Low-cost counselling and one to one support available in and near Barnet – we are in the process of updating this resource which has in the past been useful to members. We welcome any suggestions for new entries.

Benefits support, advocacy, and referrals

We have also been able to draw upon expertise in the group in supporting members in applying for benefits, and in liaising with mental health services. While we do not routinely refer people on to other services, we do make a point of never rejecting a group referral without offering another alternative. Sometimes we do get unsuitable referrals, or referrals of people whose needs would be better met by another service. Fortunately, we have good links with other services and a good knowledge of what is available in Barnet. This year we have referred people to a wide variety of other services including *Barnet Bereavement Service, Sanctuary in Barnet, the Listening Place, a local OCD support group, Andy's man club, Meridian, Mind in Barnet counselling, Barnet and North London Bipolar Support group* – to name just a few. We have also, on occasion supported members to access crisis services when necessary.

PUBLICITY

Our website: we now receive regular statistics from Wordpress on visitors to our website and we are pleased to report that in the last 6 months we have been getting between 29 and 38 visitors to our website each month. It is also good to note that if you do a google search using the words "depression" and "Barnet", our website is the first to appear followed by links to our group from Barnet Council and from the NHS!

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We are also now listed on the *Hub of Hope* a new website which has superseded Mind's Peer Support Network. We have noted that several prospective members heard about our group through this website which can be found here: <https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

In addition, we are listed on many other websites including Barnet Council, the NHS, Barnet Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust, and Anxiety UK.

LIAISON WITH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES OVER CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVISION IN BARNET

We try as far as possible to keep ourselves informed as to what is going on in Barnet regarding mental health care. As reported in our last two annual reports, we were deeply concerned about the devastating effects the Covid lockdown has had on our group members' mental health, and that of society in general – and noted the closure and restriction of mental health services just at a time when they were most needed. At that time, we raised our concerns with the local MP.

In December last year, our group was represented at Community Barnet's *Zero Suicide Alliance training*. This was a 2-hour training session for voluntary sector workers who might come into contact with vulnerable members of the community. We were very concerned that no one from the mental health trust was present at the meeting – which was attended by over 100 voluntary sector representatives. Furthermore, we noted that at no point were our own mental health services (in particular, crisis services) mentioned in relation to supporting clients who were suicidal. Instead, we were told to refer people to *The Listening Place* – a Samaritan-like organisation, staffed by volunteers, who could offer face-to-face support for anyone in Barnet able to travel to Kings Cross. However, the support was limited to fortnightly meetings over the course of three months, and we understand that the service has been inundated with referrals. We were concerned that people who are suicidal generally need urgent intervention from professional mental health clinicians – and in most cases need crisis input.

We raised our concerns with Community Barnet, and this led to us meeting up with Helen Price – Head of Community Operations for Barnet (BEH Mental Health Trust). We received useful information about some quite significant changes to mental health service provision which we were able to share with the group. She mentioned the new BEH Crisis Telephone service (this is separate from the Crisis team) which is a 24-hour screening service for people who need urgent help – and a new Crisis Café run by Mind (Sanctuary in Barnet) which is open on evenings and weekends.

We were also told that services were moving away from one-to-one support because *Not everyone needs a diagnosis. People become ill because of things that happen to them and not because they have a mental illness. Most people do not need a psychiatrist. There is an unrealistic expectation of what they can do.* We did challenge this. We do feel that suicidal people need urgent psychiatric intervention, and that people, including members of our own group, have often failed to receive the support they need sometimes with serious consequences. We also feel that people do become mentally ill as a result of life circumstances, as well as due to other issues e.g. genetic predisposition – and to suggest that what used to be called reactive depression is somehow less serious than endogenous depression is both wrong and unhelpful.

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COMMITTEE UPDATE

The committee continues to meet regularly to plan meetings, draw up a rota to facilitate both the face-to-face and online meetings, and review group administration e.g., managing referrals, managing the phone, dealing with complaints etc. There are five members on the committee, but we are always looking out for additional support.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Please see Appendix I for current statistics. Group numbers did fall off due to the two years we had to close over the Covid lockdowns (2020 and 2021) and we have left in the figures for 2019 so you can see clearly the drop off followed by the recovery in 2022. However, both our meeting number and attendance figures are reduced this year (2023) due to having to put the online meetings on hold for 8 months. The group is now gradually building itself up again and we are confident that numbers will return to the levels we had before, if not exceed them. Our new venue is more central and well connected for transport links which is a plus.

IN LOVING MEMORY: PAT AND SHEILA

This year we were very sad to lose two members: in March, Pat who had been a long-standing member of the group (between 1997 and 2020) and had been our treasurer for 8 years as well, died after a long battle with kidney failure. Pat worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that our accounts were kept up to date and in meticulous order. She was a wonderful caring friend to many in the group and attended meetings faithfully. Several members attended her funeral, and one member gave a lovely tribute.

In September we were distressed to hear of the premature death of another member, Sheila, who had attended the group regularly for about 10 years and intermittently after that. We had been delighted to see her at our 25th anniversary meal last year and once again at a meeting this year. Like Pat, Sheila had contributed greatly to the group in several ways though always modestly behind the scenes. For example, she was an expert baker and cake decorator and had made our 20th anniversary cake for us. She also shared many useful resources with the group which many found helpful – she was especially interested in mindfulness meditation and the Wim Hof breathing technique for anxiety. At our September meeting we spent some time reflecting on our happy memories of her – several members described how kind and thoughtful she was, always looking out for others. One described her as simply: *one of the loveliest souls I've ever met*. Her depression and associated mental health problems had escalated in 2022-23 and sadly led to her passing. Several members attended her funeral and we have kept in touch with her family. Donations in her memory can still be made to the *Listening Place* which had been supporting her.

GROUP SURVEY

Last year's survey comprised 6 questions eliciting feedback from members as to what they would like from meetings in the future, any difficulties identified, offers of help, and there were specific questions about how people felt about the new venue and the new format of alternating online and face-to-face meetings. There is a separate document detailing all the feedback in detail, but here is a summary:

Feedback on the venue

This was almost universally positive except for a couple of members who lived closer to the previous venue in High Barnet. People felt it is quite central and convenient to get to; spacious and comfortable; and affording the privacy that we need (we do not meet alongside any other groups unlike the previous three venues we have used in the past). We also appreciate being able to let ourselves in and out using a key code rather than being dependent on a caretaker.

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Feedback on alternating online and face-to-face meetings

Again, most respondents, but not all, felt that offering online meetings alternating with face-to-face meetings was helpful.

Ideas for future meetings

We always try to incorporate members' suggestions when planning meetings for the future. This year we had to suspend themed meetings for 7 months, but we will try to include some of the below ideas in the next year. We have already approached Prof Loveday, the popular neuroscientist who gives talks for Age UK and she has agreed to speak to our group next year.

Here are a few of the ideas mentioned: arts and crafts sessions; Tai Chi; mindfulness sessions; music meetings; more personal stories; more walks and socials; more external speakers. We have covered all of the above in the past and will certainly hope to return to some of these next year.

Difficulties at meetings

Most of the difficulties cited were to do with the way we run the check-in. People felt that we needed more time for check-in and that the first part of the meeting often went on too long (we have now addressed this). There were also differences of opinion as to whether people preferred to share in a large group or break up into smaller groups. A couple of people said that they felt inhibited speaking in a large group – however others felt that they wanted to hear what everyone had to say which is not possible if the group is split. Some people felt self-conscious about talking about their problems if they perceived someone else to be having a worse time than them.

COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

Please see Appendix 2 for groups survey 2022 feedback for Q6 *How has the group helped you in the past year?* We have also listed some of the compliments received in the past year. Please note, we record only written compliments which are normally received by text or email.

We have had no formal complaints this year, but we have had one informal complaint which was discussed by the committee which came to a unanimous decision as to how to handle the issue.

FINANCIAL REPORT

We are once again very grateful to one of our members, Ian, who is an accountant, who has helped us with our accounts (Appendix 3). As you can see from the figures, we have good reserves but are carrying forward a deficit every year. We must apply annually for our grant from Barnet which has remained static since 2012 despite huge increases in costs – principally in meeting room costs as well as increase in charges for phone, postage, refreshments etc. It is interesting to look back over the period of Barnet funding to see how the grant steadily diminished from a high of £1,200 pa. in 2002 to £800 in 2006, then £589 in 2011 and finally the current £454 it is now. We have made up the difference by volunteer contributions from members and through donations and fundraising. Now we are only meeting once a month face-to-face, our costs have reduced as the Zoom subscription is considerably less than renting a room. However, we cannot continue to operate on a deficit – our annual grant plus member contributions is not sufficient to cover our costs long term. We will be seeking an increase in the grant in due course. We believe we offer very good value for money as we offer a year-long service to our members for as long as they need us. We also have been able to draw on expertise in the group to offer additional support e.g. on applying for benefits, liaising with mental health services etc.

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APPENDIX I: MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS MEMBERSHIP AND MEETING STATISTICS

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (TO Sept 2023*)
Total referrals	32	10	9	25	17
Website referrals	26	8	9	19	16
Answerphone referrals	6	2	0	6	1
Total membership (Dec each year)	62	39	28	32	28
New attendees (first meeting)	9	5	4	8	4
Meeting attendance max and (min)	21 (5)	13 (7)	13(5)	16 (5)	14 (5)
Meeting attendance total excluding socials	201	302	232	191	85
Meeting attendance total including socials	247	329	237	213	98
Meeting attendance average (excluding socials)	11	10	9	9	9
Socials attendance average	9	9	5	11	7
Meeting attendance average Main meetings (excl Zoom)	13	11	N/A	9	
Meeting attendance average Thursday meetings (excl Zoom)	7	8	N/A	N/A	NA
Total number of Zoom meetings		29	25	13	2
Zoom meeting total attendance		254	232	114	13
Zoom meeting average attendance		9	9	9	7
Meeting number	20	35	25	22	11
Socials number	3	3	1	2	2
Committee meetings	3	7	2	3	3
Total events excluding committee meetings	20	38	26	24	13
Total events	23	45	28	27	16

*Please note meeting number reduced this year due to circumstances beyond our control.

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APPENDIX 2: 2022 GROUP SURVEY FEEDBACK

Q 6 Has the group helped you in the past year and if so, how?

- Knowing the group is there is such a relief and has helped keep me going at times when I've been at my lowest. It makes all the difference to be with others who know exactly what depression feels like and how it affects you. I really am so grateful to have found this group. ... the group is always welcoming, warm and supportive. I feel very lucky to have a group like this so near to my flat too.
- I am the oldest in the group and do feel it. But I continue to very much appreciate the value of the group's support to those with depression and anxiety, particularly recently.
- I have found our meetings a real support especially during Covid, when online meetings made me feel less isolated. I have made friends in the group who understand what it is to feel depressed. It has a warm welcoming atmosphere.
- After taking a break from the group I felt the need to come back again. I find it comforting to be with people who understand my experience of depression. [The group facilitator] is very good at giving useful information and providing a safe space.
- The group reduces social isolation. Helps make me feel more connected. Individuals have helped me in various ways and have been supportive. The group understands what it is like to live with depression and be non-judgmental.
- I could not join the group as much as I wanted but I think a self-group like this one often does an excellent job considering the personal circumstances of those who run it. Most self-help groups fall apart quickly but the fact that this group has been running for 25 years is a testament to the caring nature of the [people] behind this organisation. I do not take this group for granted as it has brought me out of isolation.
- When I was in hospital, I was able to join a Zoom group. That really helped me. To know that every two weeks there is a space to share things is very important. The group has regular members who attend, and this helps so it is not always new people giving continuity.
- Meetings provide me with social interaction as I'm quite isolated.
- It helps to connect with others in a friendly setting especially as there aren't many opportunities locally.

Written Compliments

I don't think I have ever come away from a meeting without feeling heard and with more hope than I had before the meeting. (April 2023, by email)

I cannot thank you enough for your help, conversation, and time. (Aug 2023, by email)

Lovely day to walk with DA members and a nice lunch too (August 2023, text referring to group walk)

Thank everyone for their kindness ... we loved everyone's company (Aug 2023, text referring to group walk)

Surprised and pleased you've been able to reinstate the zoom group. (Sept 2023, by email)

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APPENDIX 3: ANNUAL STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2022/2023

Barnet Depression Alliance: Accounts for Year Ending 31st March 2023

<u>Income</u>	2022-23	2021-22
Subscription from members	£125.92	£28.00
Grant from London Borough of Barnet	£454.00	£0.00
Donations	£0.00	£0.00
Fundraising	£0.00	£0.00
Total Income	£579.92	£28.00
<u>Expenditure</u>		
Meeting room rental / Zoom charges	£396.00	£341.88
Meeting refreshments	£30.81	£14.60
Social events	£28.00	£0.00
Speakers	£0.00	£50.00
Library	£0.00	£0.00
Transport	£0.00	£0.00
Administration (postage, website, phone)	£178.78	£97.38
Total Expenditure	£633.59	£503.86
Deficit for the Year	£53.67	£475.86

<u>Cashflow Statement</u>	2022-23	2021-22
Cash balance at start of Year	£1,837.75	£2,313.61
Deficit for the Year	£53.67	£475.86
Cash balance at end of Year	£1,784.08	£1,837.75
<u>Balance sheet</u>		
Library books & equipment	£50.00	£50.00
Cash at Bank	£1,735.51	£1,748.85
Cash in hand	£48.57	£88.90
Total cash	£1,784.08	£1,837.75
Total assets	£1,834.08	£1,887.75
Represented by Accumulated Fund		
Balance at start of Year	£1,887.75	£2,363.61
Movement in Year	£53.67	£475.86
Balance at end of Year	£1,834.08	£1,887.75