

## **Barnet Depression Alliance -- 1997-2025: 28 years of supporting depression sufferers in Barnet: the case for continued funding**

Here is a brief background to Barnet Depression Alliance which is probably the longest running and most successful mental health peer support group in Barnet. We are currently threatened by closure due to our funding being discontinued from 2026. We feel we have a strong case to argue for our funding to be maintained so that we can continue to support Barnet residents who suffer from depression. Depression and anxiety are currently the number one issue cited by service users who are referred to Barnet's social prescribing service – indeed more than a quarter currently cite depression and anxiety as their main reason for referral. We believe we provide a valuable and unique service to mental health service users suffering from the most common mental health condition of all – clinical depression. Furthermore, being entirely volunteer led, we believe we offer excellent value for money. Indeed, we would argue that we provide a net financial benefit to the council in reducing members' reliance on Barnet's NHS mental health services and social services. The brief overview below endeavours to illustrate the achievements of our group and the value it represents to the Barnet community.

### **History of the group**

Barnet Depression Alliance was formerly a part of the national charity Depression Alliance. Depression Alliance was a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee.

Barnet DA began in 1997. It was set up by two Barnet residents with the support of the national charity which vetted the group leaders and provided training and ongoing support. One of the group facilitators had previously run a similar group, supported by the same charity, in Oxford in the 1980s.

In 2016, due to financial constraints, Depression Alliance was taken over by the national charity Mind which continued to support the former Depression Alliance groups but offered a lower level of support. In May 2022 Mind ceased to support the Depression Alliance groups but Barnet Depression Alliance continued to run as an independent not-for-profit community group which continued to be advertised on Mind's Peer Support Network until 2023. From 2023, Mind's network was taken over by the *Hub of Hope* which can be found here: <https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

The group is advertised on Barnet Council's Website, by Inclusion Barnet (Barnet Voice for Mental Health), the NHS service directory, Anxiety UK, local newsletters, and some GP surgeries and libraries. Our group also featured in the latest mental health trust's directory of services. In 2016 the group received a commendation from Mind's Marsh Award for excellence in peer support.

### **Experience of the group facilitators, committee and members**

The group is run by an experienced group facilitator supported by a committee of four longstanding group members all of whom bring valuable skills and knowledge to the group.

The groups' main facilitator has worked for many years in the mental health field and had five years' experience working for the Samaritans. In addition, prior to setting up Barnet Depression Alliance, she had already set up and run a support group for people suffering from clinical depression in Oxford in the 1980s. She had done research (MA) on the use of creative therapy in treating depression. She worked

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in Barnet's first and only user led crisis house – Kaya House and then spent nearly four years helping to run Barnet's Elysian House (crisis house then run by Rethink Mental Illness). She also worked with Enfield Mental Health Carers running a mental health befriending service. To date she has had over 30 years' experience running depression peer support groups in Oxford and London.

Other members of our current committee have a wealth of experience between them. These include a very experienced mental health peer support worker and former Chair of Barnet Voice for Mental Health; a retired state registered nurse, and two special needs teachers. The group also draws on the expertise of other group members including two retired social workers, and a chartered accountant who helps us with our accounts. We also have members who can use their skills to help others – such as applying for benefits, for example, or liaising with GPs and mental health services. Finally, we have members who have shared their own skills with the group in areas including creative arts, photography, painting, cooking, salsa dancing etc.

But above all, we cannot emphasise enough that all those running the group and attending the group have suffered from clinical depression themselves and so are experts by experience. We believe that people who have themselves suffered clinical depression have something unique to offer other sufferers in terms of support, acceptance and understanding.

### **How the group is run**

The group is now run by a single facilitator supported by a committee of four longstanding group members. All have experienced clinical depression. Everyone who gives of their time to run the group does so voluntarily and Barnet Depression Alliance has no paid staff. Most of the committee have their own families and jobs and so fit in running the group around these.

Committee meetings are held three times a year and a programme of meetings and socials is decided upon in advance. This is communicated to members through a regular newsletter which is sent out by email and by post and the programme is also advertised on the group website – [www.barnetdepressionalliance.org](http://www.barnetdepressionalliance.org).

The group holds an Annual General Meeting once a year in which members can have an active input into how the group is run – please see our AGM reports which are available to read on our website.

### **Resources provided by the group**

The group provides a small library of books and pamphlets which it lends to members. It has also produced several useful resources including our popular and much consulted *Low-cost counselling and psychotherapy resources in and near Barnet* as well as two other local resource lists – all of which have been shared with other organisations in Barnet. These can all be accessed on our website.

The group also provides a current awareness service by email, alerting members to events and services available in Barnet which may be of interest to them, through our links to local organisations such as Community Barnet, Age UK, Meridian and Inclusion Barnet's *Barnet Voice for Mental Health*.

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The group has also kept abreast with the latest research on treating depression and we have benefited from hosting speakers who are experts on alternative treatments for depression including mindfulness meditation, nutritional approaches, creative therapies, movement and exercise etc. Most recently we have teamed up with Flow Neuroscience who have developed a headset for treating depression using transcranial direct current stimulation (TCDS). This has the support of several mental health trusts. We have been able to purchase a headset from them at a discount, and they have set us up to enable us to loan it to our members so they can try it out free of charge; normally the headset costs £400.

### **Group meetings and socials**

Our meetings vary in their format. Most of our main Tuesday meetings will feature a talk by a guest speaker or one of our members, or a video or some other planned activity with a break for tea or coffee in the middle. After refreshments, we divide into small groups and have a "check-in" time where members can share how they are coping with depression. At our online Monday meetings, the entire time is devoted to "check-in". We also arrange regular socials to give people a chance to get to know each other better. Socials include an annual summer meal and nature walk, and annual New Year meal out, cinema and theatre outings and coffee meetups.

### **Has the group been successful?**

The group has been very successful. It has run without a single break for 29 years (it met online during Covid) and in this time we estimate we have been in contact with well over 900 people suffering from depression, of which approximately 450 have attended the group. We respond to each enquiry individually and for those we cannot accommodate within the group we refer on to other support groups and organisations. In our 29-year history we have run well over 600 meetings and socials

Over the years Barnet DA has forged good links with local organisations including counsellors attached to GP surgeries, the former Barnet Voice for Mental Health now run by Inclusion Barnet, the mental health trust, Barnet social services, and Community Barnet. Most of our referrals now come to us through our website and through the Hub of Hope.

### **Member feedback**

For feedback from our members please have a look at our website where you can see what members think about the group in their own words in feedback given in our annual group surveys.

Here below are just a few comments members have made which illustrate just how much the group is valued, and give some idea of the true nature of mental pain and suffering which clinical depression brings and which few people who have not experienced it firsthand truly understand:

*The group has been a great place to be when I was in the depth of depression. It provided a safe space to come to and be accepted for who I am without judgement of my 'condition'. For some people, this group may be the only social space where they can speak of their depression without fear of judgement and that's absolutely vital.*

*Since I have been coming to the group, together with medication, my depression has really lifted, and I am now more able to live a more normal life. It is crucial to be able to talk to fellow sufferers in the reassuring safety and confidentiality of the group. It is sometimes difficult to talk to your own family about your anxieties, fears and thoughts, as you feel you don't want to be a burden on them, and you doubt whether they could understand*

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*what you are going through anyway. The group enables you to escape the isolation that this crippling, debilitating illness causes. It is vital for this group to continue as it is a lifeline for so many!*

*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.*

*I always feel better when I come to a meeting. No matter how low I am, my mood lifts when I am with fellow sufferers who understand the experience of depression. • The group has been really helpful in providing a place where I can release some of the emotional burden I am carrying and feel supported, listened to and accepted.*

*Attending the group is of great value to me because however I feel I am somewhere where I feel understood, not judged, and genuinely supported. Through the group I have made friends, feel less isolated and [feel] that I can make a contribution to society.*

*The group has saved my life! The support from individual members as well as the meetings are a huge support to me. I would hate to think how I would cope with life if this group did not exist.*

### **Funding of the group**

For 27 out of the 28 years we have been running, we have been funded by a small grant from Barnet Council. In our first year we were funded by a startup grant from our parent charity Depression Alliance. For the first few years of our funding, we received approximately £1,000 per annum which is what we needed to cover all our costs. Over subsequent years this grant was cut to the present level of £454 per annum with the group making up the rest of the funding by voluntary donations and other fundraising.

The bulk of the group's expenses are for room rental, but additional funds are needed to pay for our Zoom licence, group mobile phone, website fees, occasional speaker's expenses, and to fund the newsletter and postage costs. Additional small amounts are also needed for refreshments at meetings, maintaining the group's library, printing group resources etc. Full accounts have been kept since 1999, and these have been submitted annually to Barnet Council along with a financial report and AGM report.

In 2025, after 27 years of funding us, we asked Barnet Council if they would consider increasing our grant because, due to increased expenses (rent etc) we were running at a deficit each year. The council responded by saying that they had decided to cease funding the group altogether and that this financial year would be the last one. The reasons given were financial constraints and that they would only fund projects which were "evidence based." Our appeals against this decision were unsuccessful. We received our final £454 grant in June 2025, covering the financial year up to March 2026.

### **The case for continued funding**

#### ***Our group activities are fully in line with the council's prevention framework and funding priorities for recommissioning***

- **Emphasis on prevention:** depression support groups play a major role in helping people to avoid relapses by providing regular support and the opportunity to develop friendship with people who understand the illness. The support is free and available for as long as the person

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wishes to access. Depression support groups also help people who are on the road to recovery stay well.

- **Increased use of volunteers:** all our group helpers are unpaid volunteers
- **Developing a user-led market:** We are entirely user-led
- **Enabling people to define and find solutions for themselves:** this is the essence of what a peer support group such as ours, is about

### ***The type of help we give is in line with the priority indicators set out in previous Barnet recommissioning protocols:***

- **We provide information & advice** – we have a library of self-help materials and have developed a low-cost counselling list and resource for members to access. We invite speakers to address the group on a variety of self-help strategies e.g. art therapy, mindfulness meditation, nutrition and exercise. We provide regular information and updates by email.
- **Our work is supportive of Barnet’s suicide prevention strategy** -- many depressed people become suicidal. We have nearly 30 years’ experience in supporting people who have reached this point of desperation and have enabled many to receive the urgent help then need in this situation -- for example, we recently referred a member to Maytree Respite Centre.
- **We provide group support reducing social isolation:** this is provided through our programme of meetings and socials
- **Our work supports carers:** our programme of meetings and socials also helps carers. Often it is carers who contact us in the first place, on behalf of their relative or friend, and they often transport their relative/friend to meetings.
- **We provide support between meetings** as group members make friends with each other, and many choose to socialise outside of the group
- **Outreach to minority communities:** the group has good links with the statutory and voluntary sector and has group members/committee members from a range of ethnic minority communities.

### **Summary**

- **We believe that Barnet DA represents very good value for money.** For little over £900 per annum (of which just half comes from council funding), approximately 40 people at any one time who are diagnosed with clinical depression are receiving regular ongoing support of a type which cannot be provided by social services or the NHS. In addition, many who have used the group in the past feel supported by knowing they can return to it should they become ill again. We also support and signpost over 30 new enquirers every year.
- **What we do is fully in line with current prevention strategies and user led involvement in social care, as exemplified in “the big society” concept** – We feel we fulfil all of the recommissioning criteria identified in Barnet Council’s protocol.
- **The group cannot continue if funding is discontinued or is inadequate.** We believe we should be treated differently from organizations where staff are salaried and where part of their

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grant goes towards these salaries. We do not have the option of reducing our expenses any further e.g. by cutting staff or reducing salaries, as none of us are paid.

- **We do not have the resources to devote to raising funds in any other way** as our volunteers are all employed in other jobs. The time which is devoted by our members is best used in running the group and supporting our members who are suffering from clinical depression. This can be very time consuming. In addition, many of our members are at varying stages of illness due to depression and cannot support the group in fundraising. Indeed, many are unemployed due to their mental health problems and cannot contribute much financially themselves. Those that can, do contribute voluntarily at meetings.
- **We have always been open to inspection**, and our activities have always been closely monitored by various organisations over the years including Depression Alliance, Mind and by Barnet Council which has funded us for the past 27 years. We have provided evidence of our effectiveness by the regular provision of:
  - *AGM report including annual accounts and financial report*
  - *Written minutes of all our committee meetings*
  - *Newsletter produced 3 times a year*
  - *Written constitution*
  - *Written guidelines and ground rules*
  - *Website regularly updated*
  - *Questionnaire sent to all our members by Barnet Council's Supporting People in 2009 – we have been told that the response was good and very positive*
  - *Previous grant application forms submitted regularly to Barnet Council which required detailed information on all our activities, policies and procedures*
  - *Two detailed forms filled out for Supporting People as part of the 2013 commissioning consultation*

We would submit that our work provides relief and support to some of the most vulnerable people in our society who are experiencing severe mental suffering. We very much appreciate any help we can get to secure ongoing funding for our group to allow it to continue to provide this valuable service.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACT DETAILS**

**Website:** [www.barnetdepressionalliance.org](http://www.barnetdepressionalliance.org)

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