

SAMARITANS

Weston Super Mare
& North Somerset



Annual report 2019–20

Director's Report

2019/20 was another interesting and successful year for the Samaritans of Weston Super Mare and North Somerset, but one which turned out to have a nasty sting in its tail. The year began with the gradual transformation of 137 High Street from its rather dowdy and down at heel, chilly and inaccessible old self to a bright refurbished building with carpeting, central heating, a shop, improved security and, most importantly, full disabled access to the ground floor of the building, including the operations room and the Face to Face (interview) room. I commented on how this was achieved in last year's report, so I won't go into more detail here, other than to thank again all those involved in funding, planning and implementing the project, particularly Joe (now John) my predecessor as Director, and David Cole who acted as project manager. Sadly, the year ended with the accessible operations room being temporarily relocated to the relatively inaccessible second floor to enable social distancing and the shop sadly closed, due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The loss of the shop was particularly regrettable as Simon, our new manager, who took over in October had worked with great energy with his group of volunteers to make the venture a financial success.

The Branch Visit

In late November, the branch had its three yearly 'visit' (inspection), the last one under the old quality assurance regime. Our excellent visitors Mary Noble from Portsmouth branch and Anne Rose from Northampton spent the best part of three days checking us over against Samaritans' national standards and requirements. The feedback was very positive, and we have acted on the visit recommendations (which were few in number).

Closure of SMS (Text Messaging)

In late January, we were informed by Samaritans Central Office that the SMS service was to be closed from 4th February. We felt this was a loss to callers and a waste of the expertise of our volunteers but were assured that there were good reasons for the closure and that 'SHOUT' the new 'free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope' would take up the slack. The service has now ended permanently.

The Service

Rota cover improved gradually through the year, enabling us to reinstitute the Tuesday morning shift which had been removed from the rota in June 2017. We had 52 active listening volunteers in March 2020, a couple more than in the March before. However, the volunteers were also more active, with the result that we provided 6,282 hours of service over the course of the year, compared with 5,787 in 2018/19, an increase of 8.5%. It may seem surprising, therefore, that we took significantly *fewer* calls – 13,135 as compared with 17,068 the year before, a fall of 23%. This is accounted for by the fact that the average call was significantly longer – my estimate is 35% longer. This happened because more effective measures have been put in place centrally to reduce the number of 'misuse of service' calls. These calls are typically brief for obvious reasons. We also responded to 1052 emails during the year (985 in 2018/19) and to 971 text messages over the ten months before the service was closed (993 in 2018/19) and had 14 face to face callers.

Fundraising

From a fundraising and financial point of view, it was a very successful year for the branch, too. Many thanks to John, our fundraising lead, who is reporting separately. Phil also covers this in the Treasurer's report so I will not go into more detail here. I must thank Lucy though, who has taken charge of grant applications and whose efforts have proved extremely fruitful.

Our Branch Activities

Our outreach work continued almost throughout the year (until curtailed by the pandemic) under Mac's careful guidance. Ann and her team (Jo and Marion) ensured that the caller support system ran with its usual smooth efficiency. Millie steered recruitment through some awkward procedural changes with the result that we were able to train 14 new volunteers during the year. Ruby both delivered and coordinated this training with great skill and efficiency and managed the transition to the new Core Training model for new Samaritans seamlessly in very difficult circumstances. (In April this year, we made the transition to delivering this training online rather than face to face.) Luke organised a series of successful ongoing training sessions on problematic gambling in cooperation with the regional GamCare trainer and organised our ongoing mentoring. Amy kept a weather eye on the welfare of our volunteers, a demanding task, particularly in the last weeks of the year as the pandemic loomed, and finally hit us. Holly oversaw the success of the shop, supporting Simon whenever needed. Jodie was a rock as ever as branch secretary ensuring the proper organisation of meetings and branch affairs generally, dealing with everything with calm efficiency and keeping us on the straight and narrow administratively. Phil kept our financial affairs in ever-improving health. I would also like to thank Rachell who does so much work on maintaining Samaritan IT accounts, keeping up with the many changes that have been needed to Three Rings (the rota management system) and flawlessly managing the administration of DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks for new and existing volunteers. Finally, how could I not mention Eddy, our IT lead (who has just recently left us for fresh woods)? Eddy has put hours of his time into sorting out our IT network and software over the years through all the changes that have taken place in the branch and most recently effortlessly managed the technical aspects of moving the ops room upstairs. We shall miss him (though we are fortunate to have an excellent replacement in Will).

National Developments

Nationally, the 'There for Everyone' project, which I mentioned in last year's report, continued its roll-out, bringing changes to training for new Samaritans (the new 'Core Training' model), changes to recruitment procedures, changes to branch technology and the call distribution system and preparations for the implementation of 'online chat'. These are major initiatives affecting everything we do in the branch. Safeguarding procedures were updated in August 2019. The latter part of the year saw a considerable and welcome rise in the number of volunteer enquiries nationally, and at the very end of the year, in the shadow of the Covid crisis, a Samaritan support line was established for NHS staff with the help of volunteers who were unable for health reasons to come into branches (two of whom were Weston and North Somerset volunteers).

Covid 19

Normally that would be the end of my report. However, times are not normal and, although most of what has happened in relation to the pandemic has happened in 2020/21 rather than in 2019/20, I will say just a little about the branch response to the current public health crisis.

At the beginning of March 2020, as I noted earlier, we had 52 active volunteers (with a few more on sabbatical). By the end of March 2020, due to the need for many volunteers to shield themselves from exposure to the virus, we had 25. Michael Eavis had been due to 'open' the refurbished branch on 2nd May. We were still discussing this great event on Tuesday 10th March. Six days later we cancelled it.

On 23rd March, the lockdown finally happened. By 3rd April, our accessible ops room was accessible no more, as it had moved to the second floor (thanks to Eddy) to allow space for social distancing. In March, most people were using the telephone handsets to take calls. In April, everyone was provided with a personal headset to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus via our telephony equipment. The shop was closed. Hand sanitiser and disinfectant sprays became the part of the tools of our trade. We got used to being two metres apart.

Through all this, we have kept the service running reliably. Leaders have been available to lead, whether they were still able to act as listeners or not. The listeners who are able to come into the branch have filled the rota more effectively that we managed to do with many more volunteers last year. As time has gone on, more listeners have returned to duties. Amy has kept in touch with those who have been unable to, assisted by other BLT members. At the time of writing, we have 38 active listeners, still well below our full complement – 38 listeners would normally be expected, at best, to provide 104.5 hours of volunteer time each week. 133 hours of volunteer time are needed to fill the rota. Yet the rota has been almost always filled. Branch business has continued through virtual meetings and training sessions online, including a Zoom Branch meeting attended by twenty-six people. Keeping our show on the road has been a huge achievement on everyone's part. We must accept that the challenges are far from over. There will be more mountains to climb, but I have no doubt that, together, we will climb every one of them (and ford a few streams along the way).

Andy 646
Director

Treasurer's Report

Income for the year was £49,814, and operational expenditure for the year totalled £40,883, giving an operating surplus for the year of £8,931, which is added to the unrestricted reserve funds.

The building refurbishment programme, managed by David Cole, was completed successfully and within budget in mid 2019 – a big thank you and well done to David and all involved. Total costs paid in the year from the Branch's restricted funds amounted to £137,395, which left a balance of £16,267 of restricted funds at the year end.

The Branch opened a charity shop in July 2019 under the leadership of Holly Cole and Luke Bugler, but was forced to close it in March 2020 because of Covid-19 restrictions. During its nine months of operations, the shop generated income of £14,463 (which included a very generous grant of £5,000 from the Quartet Community Foundation Trust) and incurred costs of £12,396, providing a surplus of £2,067 to the Branch. The Branch will look to re-opening a shop at some time in the future when circumstances improve.

Other operational income for the year included £10,118 from grants and donations which included a suicide prevention grant of £4,500 from North Somerset Council's Public Health Department. Gifts from a number of generous donors included £2,000 from the WSM Golf Club. Fundraising activities produced an amazing £16,805. These included a brilliant Golf tournament organised by our Wedmore volunteers, £1,400 from the Glastonbury festival led by John Pawle, £2,430 from the Christmas raffle organised by David Cole, and many other activities organised by energetic volunteers including Olivia (masterminding many coffee mornings and jumble sales), Helen (arranging for Waitrose to nominate the branch as a local cause raising £479 to the Branch), and Mac and Jodie (a side effect of giving talks to various local charities). Lucy took on the role of grant application coordinator with great success. Finally, expenses generously donated back by volunteers grossed £8,428, an important and regular source of funds for the Branch.

The bank balances as at 31 March 2020 stood at £80,280, of which £63,663 is available to cover general operating costs of the Branch and £16,267 is available for further building works and rental costs.

Financial accounts are produced every month. The Branch Leadership Team (BLT) reviews the latest report at each of its bi-monthly meetings, to ensure that both income and expenditure are closely scrutinised.

Phil 721

Fundraising Report

As reported by our Treasurer, income for last financial year was £49,814 generating a healthy surplus for the branch. A great team effort by the fundraising and publicity committee and the whole branch. Thanks to all those who have contributed David, Olivia, Jake, Andy, Lucy (trusts and grants), Luke (social media), Helen (publicity), Vera (Christmas market) and Mac (jazz concert).

For this year the whole world is turned on its head because of COVID and all face-to-face events such as the Wedmore Quiz, jumble sales, collections and the like, have been postponed because of COVID, and we don't know when they will be able to be resumed.

So, our fundraising strategy had to be radically pivoted because of the Pandemic to switch to focusing on trusts and grant applications and on online virtual fundraising.

Thanks to Lucy and Phil We have had a lot of success with Trusts and Grant Applications including getting a business interruption loan for closure of the shop from the Council and a number of large one-off donations.

The virtual fundraising effort includes the virtual Samarathon which raised at least £5,920 not including gift aid that we know about. Thanks to Andy, David (friend of Andy), Eddy and his work team, John, Richard, Stephen, Sandy, Deborah and Matthew for doing it. We plan to replace the Wedmore quiz with a virtual quiz which we are currently setting up. And finally the Christmas raffle has moved away from selling books and is being relaunched online (<https://samaritans.charitylotteries.co.uk/>).

All in all, these revamped fundraising efforts have resulted in an income so far this year of £32K against a target of £24K. Again, a great effort by all.

John 633

Thanks from the Branch Leadership Team to Our Director

As you will see in his Director's report, Andy has thanked everyone for their efforts on behalf of the Branch before and during covid. It would not be a full list of thanks without mentioning Andy himself who has gone above and beyond the call of duty to lead the Branch in this challenging time.

Like many volunteers he has done multiple shifts, many of them filling gaps in the unsociable hours shifts. He has also been there with Eddy moving furniture and plugging things in to make covid safe spaces to listen to callers, troubleshooting telephony issues and sorting out anything else that might go wrong. We're surprised he hasn't installed a bed to stay over!

Andy's leadership has been professional, responsive, informative and always with a good dose of good humour. Thank you, Andy, on behalf of the Branch Leadership Team and all the volunteers.

Jodie 674

We're here to listen

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