

Newspoints May 2021

This month's Newpoints is taken from the draft Trustees' Report for financial year 2020/21.

Impact of COVID-19

To say that the charity was "impacted" by Covid lockdowns in fy 20/21 is an understatement. The most immediate impact of lockdowns was the immediate cessation of face-to-face meetings. These monthly meetings, at ten locations around Wales, were our main contact with service users, and provided the dominant route into the charity for service users. Similarly, our Aegis male domestic abuse support service was spearheaded by the weekly drop-in sessions in Swansea and Neath, which also ceased completely. There have been no face-to-face meetings at all in fy 20/21. The charity has undergone a radical overhaul as a result of being obliged to address this issue.

In short, all the charity's activities have moved online or to phone or email communication throughout the whole of fy 20/21. One of the most unfortunate implications of having no face-to-face contact with service users is how this has hampered our Buddy emotional support service. A key focus of this initiative is to counter non-resident fathers' social isolation by organising social events. This has been prevented by lockdowns in fy 20/21. Another unfortunate consequence of lockdowns is that many of our volunteers, whose involvement was to help run local meetings, have become inactive as their role has not been required. Both these significant downsides have been countered in the manner described in the rest of this report, not least due to the energetic work of the management team.

However, there have also been unlooked-for benefits resulting from being obliged to move all activities online. By the start of June 2020 we had acquired Microsoft Teams and had initiated management meetings using the associated video conferencing technology, a steep learning curve for the management team. The difficult circumstances, together with being obliged to adopt online video conference facilities, led to far more regular (i.e., weekly) management meetings than hitherto. As a result, the charity's working practices have undergone a very rapid evolution as amplified below.

It is with great pride that the Trustees note that the value and reach of the charity's work has not been reduced by the Covid lockdowns, in fact the volume of registrants has been increasing over the year. This is a remarkable achievement with Trustees, staff and volunteers all working from home.

Achievements and performance

Despite the absence of physical meetings, the charity has continued to deliver two parallel and complementary services under the titles BOTH PARENTS MATTER and AEGIS DV. The former relates to services users of both sexes, both parents and grandparents. The AEGIS service relates to support for victims of domestic abuse and is male-specific. The overwhelming majority (95%) of the charity's service users continue to be men who are being prevented from having a full relationship with the children they care about. We also see grandmothers who are supporting their sons to remain positive in the face of the emotional and psychological abuse of child contact denial, as well as grandparents who have access issues of their own. We also see a small number of mothers who are not the main carers for their children but who have contact difficulties. In short, the services

provided this year have not changed compared to the preceding year despite the mechanisms of delivery undergoing major changes.

In terms of numbers of registrants, the absence of face-to-face meetings has been more than compensated by increased calls to our helpline, use of our web site contact from and – most importantly – referrals to us from a wide range of agencies and other charities, of which solicitors are the largest provider.

The Caseworker.mp file management system, introduced last year, became an embedded and key part of our operational procedures this year. All service users' correspondence and other case information are held in this confidential system to which only management team members have access. In particular, the standard six-page Service User Pack, also introduced last year, is recorded for each service user within Caseworker.mp.

During the year a new workflow process was devised and implemented. The new process is underpinned by a suite of documents defining volunteer and management roles, and providing Induction Briefs for these roles. The key volunteer roles are further supported by training videos which assist assimilation of the procedures by new volunteers. Every new volunteer has an online Induction Interview as part of the Induction process. The benefit of moving to this system is that it provides a well-defined structure and set of procedures within which volunteers can be fitted and put to work in a manner which is consistent with the efforts of everyone else in the team.

To lever the advantage of the new workflow process, we have had an ongoing and very vigorous campaign of recruiting volunteers this year, and this is set to continue indefinitely.

During the year, two new part-time salaried members of staff have started with us, both via competitive interview. In April'20 our new Buddy Coordinator, Phil Davies, started, and in January'21 our new Workflow Coordinator, Steve Wells, started with us. Both quickly became integrated into the team. Phil continues the work started by Dr Sue Whitcombe in 2019 when the Buddy scheme was first introduced, although he has had the major difficulty of taking over an emotional support role under lockdown conditions. Steve is the first incumbent of a new role created by the new workflow process. The benefits of the new process are already clear and the Workflow Coordinator is essential in driving it and line-managing the team of outbound callers.

During the year we gradually phased out both the old web site and the old helpline. We now have a new, more modern looking, web site (<https://bpmuk.org>), and a new helpline on a VOIP system (see below).

In summary, it has been a year of intensive changes, driven initially by necessity and later by the realisation that we had an opportunity to improve our working practices and increase our capacity to assist callers and referees. The Trustees are grateful to all the management team and volunteers who have been crucial in not only keeping the charity going but improving the charity despite adverse circumstances.

Volunteers

The new workflow processes introduced this year require teams of volunteers to drive them. Accordingly, the charity had a particularly vigorous recruiting drive for new volunteers this year. As

part of the new workflow arrangements, volunteer roles have been more closely defined via a series of role specifications and induction briefs. The latter have been especially helpful in carrying out formal inductions for new volunteers of which there have been 44 in the year. However, many volunteers are placement students who are with us only for a relatively short period. Consequently 30 of the newly recruited volunteers remained with us at the end of fy 20/21.

Many volunteers whose role was to assist at service user support meetings throughout Wales have become inactive during the year as there have been no such local, face-to-face meetings. However, about 11 volunteers from earlier years have remained active, making a total active volunteer compliment of 41 at the end of fy 20/21.

As a consequence of having no face-to-face meetings this year (the activity which, in previous years, required the greatest involvement of volunteers) the number of hours which volunteers have contributed to the charity's efforts this year is much reduced compared with recent years, namely 1,847 hours. To this should be added 2,681 hours by unpaid Trustees, an abnormally large effort by the Trustees in response to the abnormal conditions. Total unpaid hours 4,528 hours.

Numbers accessing our support services

Meetings

The most significant change this year was the complete absence of any face-to-face service user meetings. In the preceding year, fy 19/20, the monthly support meetings at ten locations around Wales, plus the weekly Aegis DV drop-ins in Neath and Swansea, saw a total attendance of over 1000 (including repeat attendances). No such meetings have taken place at all in fy 20/21 due to successive waves of Covid lockdowns. Like so many other charities (and businesses), we were wrong-footed by the lockdowns, not initially having the facilities and processes required to replace face-to-face meetings.

However, by June 2020, having acquired Microsoft Teams, we started our weekly all-Wales service user support meetings. These were chaired by the National Manager and attended by a varying number of the management team and volunteers, in addition to service users seeking support. These online meetings have proved popular as service users have gained familiarity with them. At the first such video meetings in late June 2020 attendance was in single figures, but attendance increased steadily and was sometimes as high as 30 or so by the end of the year. We estimate over 700 attendances at these weekly online support meetings, including many who have attended more than once, in some cases regularly.

Helpline

Our helpline was another area of major change this year. The old helpline was manned very competently for many years by Conrad McBride, but Conrad retired from the role at the start of the financial year. The Trustees would like to place on record their appreciation for Conrad's many years of excellent service for the charity. Conrad's retirement initially left the National Manager having to man the helpline by default, not a desirable position. In the summer of 2020 we acquired a new VOIP-based phone line (0333 050 6815) supplied by CircleLoop and funded from Covid-19 emergency funding (see below). This came into service at the start of October 2020, initially with the National Manager manning the line. After energetic recruiting of volunteers over the next two

months, a rota was devised which relieved the National Manager of this duty. By early January 2021 the new helpline was manned entirely by volunteers, as it has been since. The old helpline number was gradually phased out in late 2020.

In the first half of the financial year there were about 375 calls to the old helpline (together with direct calls to the National Manager's mobile). In the second half of the financial year, the new helpline took a total of 536 incoming calls plus returned missed calls, making a total of 911 helpline calls over the year, an increase of about 21% over fy 19/20.

Registrants

In fy 20/21 the charity registered 443 new cases in the Caseworker.mp system. Linear fitting to monthly registration data indicated a steady increase in the rate of registrations through 2020, with a steep increase in February and March 2021. The latter saw an all-time record high of 70 registrations in the month, nearly double the average over the year.

Legal advice clinics

Prior to Covid lockdowns in mid-March 2020, the charity had been running the largest number of LawWorks legal advice clinics in Wales specialising in Family Law issues through its membership of the Law Society's charity network. The charity is grateful for the funding it received in 2019 from The Law Society in respect of this service. Unfortunately putting service users in front of solicitors for *pro bono* initial consultations was one of our usual services which we struggled to provide under lockdown conditions, though demand remained high. We finally devised a process for effective referral for *pro bono* initial consultations with solicitors only in March 2021, but 34 such referrals were made in that closing month of the financial year. We are very grateful to the solicitors who have agreed to deliver this service.

Our annual return to LawWorks for calendar year 2020 indicated 311 service users had received support from the charity other than that delivered by *pro bono* solicitors.

Legal aid support

Responding to needs identified for service users on low income, the charity continues to focus on assisting such service users to access Legal Aid funding in Private Law. The charity – as a specialist domestic violence support service for male victims – produced 253 LASPO 'evidence letters' during the year to assist men in accessing professional legal help, an increase from the preceding year of about 15%.

Funding

Currently the charity's largest funder is Tudor Trust. This year we received the second of an anticipated three annual payments of £30,000. This funds the Buddy scheme, in particular a part-time salaried Buddy Coordinator. The first instalment was received in January 2020 and interviews for the Buddy Coordinator role were carried out to permit the new incumbent to start with the charity on 1st April 2020.

In the summer of 2020 we gained four awards under Covid emergency funding, namely from the Community Foundation Wales, Moondance Foundation, the Charities Aid Foundation, and the

National Lottery Awards For All. The first three, totalling £9,520, were primarily to fund our acquisition of IT equipment, two new VOIP CircleLoop lines, and a large number of mobile phone contracts for volunteer use. These had become necessary due to being obliged to move entirely to online or phone communications. The Awards For All grant of £9,700 continued their similar award the previous year, supporting our Aegis service, initially in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot. We were also awarded £234 by the Co-Op Local Community Fund.

We continued to enjoy a pleasing level of income from private donations.

We plan to apply for further funding in fy 21/22, concentrating on obtaining sufficient funds to cover the Workflow Coordinator's salary, and the salaries of one or two additional part-time members of staff, over three years.

Research, lobbying and campaigning

The charity ran a survey in May'20 asking respondents about their experiences in respect of child contact during the first Covid lockdown. The results can be found on our web site: [Research | BPM Cymru \(bpmuk.org\)](https://www.bpmuk.org). 61.5% of men responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children during lockdown, a huge increase from 14% which prevailed prior to lockdown. In comparison, 27% of women responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children after lockdown, an increase from 9% prior to lockdown.

The systematic use of our standard Service User Pack, complete with its well-being and loneliness questionnaires and DV Risk Indicator Checklist (RIC), is now providing the charity with a substantial body of quantitative evidence regarding the degraded mental state of non-resident fathers as well as their risk from domestic abuse, and the association between the two. This may be the most extensive body of data of this kind in the UK. That being so it is important to make this evidence available more widely and this is being done by publishing in the academic literature. The first such publication can be found on our web site, and a further publication is anticipated in fy 21/22. Formal academic publications of this kind will help put the charity, and fathers' issues in particular, on the academic map.

The charity has five declared campaign areas: recording social workers, parental alienation, shared parenting, domestic abuse support for men, and promoting our causes. Towards the end of fy 19/20, the Petitions Committee of the Welsh Parliament (then the Welsh Assembly) rejected our proposed petition in respect of making recording social workers mandatory. This was disappointing as we regarded the grounds of the rejection to be invalid. Recording social workers remains our top priority campaigning issue. The charity holds the view that adopting statutory recording has no downside and is a win-win. We will continue to pursue the matter.

The charity raised a petition with the Welsh Assembly Petitions Committee in fy 17/18 calling for male domestic violence victim support services to be independently run and funded, separately from Women's Aid Cymru & all associated services. Our petition was considered at 11 different Petitions Committee meetings between February 2018 and March 2021, at which last meeting the Committee declared the petition closed. We were again disappointed as the Welsh Government's grounds for rejection appeared to miss the point and conflated the issue with a request for funding, this being despite many clear communications on the matter from the charity.

The National Manager continued to attend all (online) meetings of the Cafcass Cymru Advisory Committee to represent the views of Non-Resident Parents.

Future developments

Priorities for fy 21/22 and beyond include,

- [1] To move the Buddy group support from lockdown to the full social-event driven service it was initially intended to be;
- [2] To obtain funding support for the Workflow Coordinator over a number of years (currently funded only short term off unrestricted funds);
- [3] To further bolster our provision of LawWorks *pro bono* initial solicitor consultations by provision of this facility within the weekly online support meetings;
- [4] To obtain funding for one or two further part-time salaried staff, the first priority being an additional Case Advisor, and after that a staff member doubling up as chief outbound caller and reserve Workflow Coordinator;
- [5] To provide a second weekly online service user support meeting, open to all registrants with a completed SUP and chaired by a different Case Advisor.

It is likely that the charity will not seek to return to monthly locally-based, face-to-face support meetings but instead continue to use online video for support meetings, but with an intention to expand capacity in terms of numbers attending. This has the advantage of avoiding any residual measures associated with Covid which continue in force at public venues. It also has the advantage of avoiding disadvantaging people who were too distant from their nearest meeting for attendance to be practicable. However, the charity recognises that face-to-face meetings are significantly beneficial in terms of relieving social isolation. Hence some meetings may continue but now reimagined as part of Buddy group emotional support.

The Trustees look forward to building a resilient and increasingly efficient service, capitalising upon the revamped working processes introduced this year.