



## COVID-19 – Service User Involvement in Practice

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### Rationale

Desistance theory<sup>1</sup> hypothesises that when service users are given opportunities to become ‘active’ members in the community, this will reduce their risk of recidivism. North Ayrshire’s Making A Difference (MAD) service user involvement group, provides a positive platform for our members to become included in the development and delivery of Justice Services. Service users can have their voices heard, continue to learn new skills, increase their confidence and become involved in the on-going development of activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented Justice Services with several barriers to supporting service users on lockdown. As a service, we have been forced to think ‘outside the box’ and adapt our approach to lockdown restrictions. These restrictions exacerbate existing issues that service users experience, such as isolation, mental health problems, substance misuse and accessing services. This report will outline the progress in engaging MAD members and continuing activities on lockdown. It will summarise our approach, our outcomes and conclude with some reflections and recommendations for future practice.

### Our Approach

Our MAD members told us that they found the fact that we were not going to be able to publish our magazine due to the lockdown restrictions quite demotivating. Therefore we spoke about using our Making a Difference twitter page (@MADGroupNAC) as a method of ‘distributing’ a lockdown edition of our magazine. Our members loved this idea and got to work furnishing us with the sort of information we wanted to be sharing with our followers. This included:

- Sharing some hints and tips on recovery during lockdown every day for a week
- Being aware of national campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness Week and using this as a platform to promote the impact that recovery and addiction can have on mental health (below is an example of one of our Twitter posts)



I check my emails and texts in case any of my recovery family need help or anything and after that I'll check in with my close friends, the one or two that I feel closest to. If they're all fine, good. Otherwise I'll do what I can to help out - from sending little keepsakes to books to anything really. Most of them live alone and don't have close family so contact is important just to let them know people are still here and still care about them. Losing hope is as easy as being bored but far more dangerous especially in recovery.

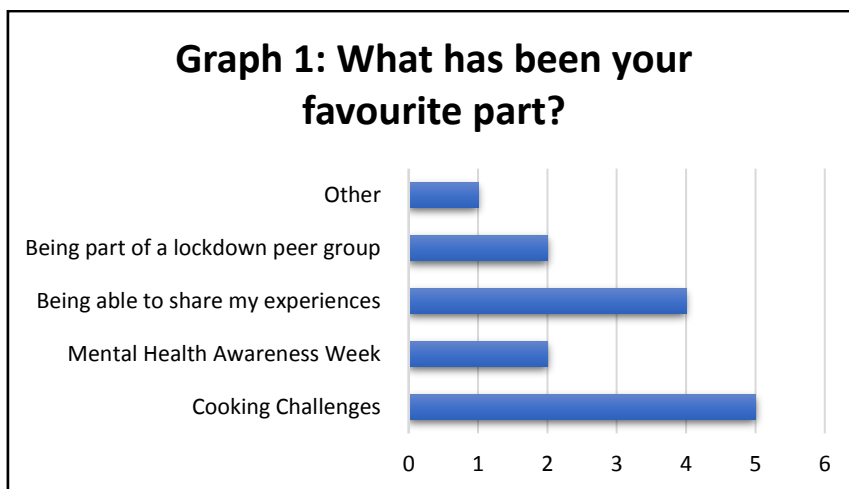


<sup>1</sup> McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C. and Maruna, S. (2012). How and why people stop offending: discovering desistance. *Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services* [Online].

- Sharing views from their daily walks and exercise with our followers
- Developing and compiling an activity book to send out to isolated and lonely service users in the community. This booklet had various activities in it, guidance for mindfulness and also some relevant helpline or services if they were to find themselves struggling during lockdown
- Sharing the acts of kindness our MAD members have carried out during lockdown or had shown towards them
- And finally one of our most popular activities was the cooking challenges. Packs of measured out ingredients and recipes were dropped off to each of our members and they were to cook various meals. These were then voted on by followers on social media



## Outcomes



A survey was sent to our members to gain feedback on what has been offered so far. 100% of our members advised that the activities had benefitted them during lockdown. Graph 1 depicts what areas the members preferred. The cooking challenges and being able to share their experiences were enjoyed the most by our members.

We asked our members to elaborate on how the lockdown activities have helped and they confirmed that learning new skills, doing something practical and having a safe space to share experiences has been beneficial. Overall, it appears that having something ‘fun’ to do also allows members to cope with some of the negative aspects of lockdown, such as boredom, isolation and a lack of connection.

*“[It’s] given me the help to be able to cope with the lockdown”*

*“They are helping me greatly, I enjoy cooking, so this cooking challenge/fun is amazing”*

*“When u spend all ur time lookin after family it’s nice to just chill out n do something fun knowing that there are others doing the exact same thing”*

*“Being connected to my people and able to help them”*

Feedback from the lockdown activity book that was sent out to service users evidences that the tool provided them with some distraction and relaxation. It was also used with family members showing that Justice Services have been able to provide a platform for families to connect during lockdown.

*“That’s awesome. Those riddles were brilliant. Love the mindfulness parts and relaxation ones too. Thanks for sharing this with me.”*

*“My favourite was the relax guide thing. It really calmed me.”*

*“It literally took up a whole day then I shared it with my mum.”*

*“We had a family quiz with it – [the] kids loved it”*

The fortnightly 'fakeaway' cooking challenges have been a huge success and so far our members have made pizzas using fresh dough and burgers made from scratch. They are given all necessary ingredients which are dropped off to them employing all social distancing measures.



*"The cooking was good...I quite enjoyed the process, but it was a bit of a faff trying to wrangle the dough into shape, until I broke out ma ingenuity and used a jar of 'dolmio' as a rolling pin."*

*It's probably one of the best things I've eaten for a wee while...I'm well chuffed wae it...here's me that can't cook as well!"*

*"[I shared] it with my parents...So turns out it was the best pizza my dads ever had. You gotta send me the [recipe] for the dough."*

*"thanks again for all the ingredients to make the burgers...loved being a part of this, had so much fun as always."*

## Reflections

When lockdown was announced it would have been easy to simply cancel our activities and consider beginning this again when restrictions were lifted. However this could have meant potentially losing a group of members who were motivated and benefitted greatly from their involvement in the MAD group. Thankfully we recognised with a bit of creative thinking we could still engage with our members and provide them with support and activities throughout this challenging time. We found that virtual platforms were key. We learned that we could develop activities that members could work on and provide us with their progress and feedback using these platforms as a means of evaluating their success. While we had anxieties around putting pressure on members, we in fact found out that this was beneficial to our members, as they were often experiencing episodes of boredom and 'bumps in the road' with their recovery.

## Recommendations for Practice

- We would hope that service users can be equipped with devices to engage in virtual platforms as this allows for much higher levels of involvement and participation – perhaps utilising the Connecting Scotland initiative which aims to provide isolated service users with virtual networking devices could be a positive option to explore<sup>2</sup>
- Engaging service users in MAD activities requires on-going support with any obstacles that may arise for the individual for example a relapse into substance misuse
- On-going consultations and reviews to establish how MAD can function under current lockdown restrictions and what this will look like as restrictions lessen
- Consultation on how we engage new members when we do not have the opportunity for face to face meetings
- More activities focussed on sharing of experiences during lockdown – perhaps we could ask our members about this via phone consultations to really expand on how they are feeling
- Explore the prospect of involving families in lockdown activities

<sup>2</sup> Connective Scotland Initiative (2020). *Supporting the most vulnerable to get online.* <https://connecting.scot/>