

“The Living Room; A place to Feel at Home.”

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Introduction

The Living Room is a community mental health and wellbeing hub based in Largs, North Ayrshire. It is a very recent development for the community as it is just over 1 year old. This centre of wellbeing focuses on 4 main disciplines: bereavement, parent and family support, financial troubles as well as just being there to listen to those in need. However, in my opinion The Living Room is much more than this – let me explain why.

I decided to volunteer for this project at the very beginning. There was a clear need for some form of local support in Largs as the suicide rates had increased. Suicide in Scotland in 2019 was 6% higher than 2018 and at its highest peak since 2011. Also, suicide related deaths in Ayrshire and Arran were at 63 [1]. This has been increasing over the past 3 years. Personally, I am not from the area. However, I am a close friend with Rev. Jonathan Fleming who was the drive behind this whole mission to provide care and support where needed. Once I had heard the plan for the Living Room I simply needed to be involved. In his eyes, too many people were dying needlessly and he could not simply watch.

However, this project did not only have backing from St Johns church, but also the local council, CAP, See Me, Care for the family and many other support organisations. So, The Living Room was opened in the centre of Largs, allowing those in need to come in and have a chat whether that be in the private rooms or on the sofas on the main floor and receive the help that they needed.

In the beginning, many people came in as a curiosity. I always volunteered on my Wednesday afternoons that we have free from clinical placement. One of my very first visitors was a disabled lady who was feeling the effects of isolation. She came in just to talk and visited us often after that. Just making her day a little less monotonous and having some tea and a conversation made as big a difference as any. There were also visitors who were struggling with using services such as food banks, so we could also assist with this.

Of course, the young adults needed to be involved to help engagement and help with teenage mental health. Thereby, the local school got involved with representatives doing evening sessions in The Living Room to provide young people with a place to go and talk if the needed to. These talented young adults became Youth Ambassadors, who provided unmeasurable support for the greater community. It also goes to show that young people are becoming more and more aware and interested in mental health. In my opinion, this is one of the key ways that we will begin to break down the negative stigmas surrounding mental health.

The Living Room also created a community of volunteers that often stepped up when it was really needed. We were all provided with training on BLS, Bereavement, self-harm awareness and many more. In fact, the living room became a very diverse place. There were all walks of life in the volunteering bank: people from the church the school, first responders as well as people like myself – a medical student.

For me, The Living Room is a fantastic resource. GP surgeries were referring people to the service so we could help support and signpost them what they needed.

As a medical student, I was able to use my history taking training to listen to members of the community and felt empowered to ask the more difficult questions.

Care for the Family: Bereavement

Bereavement, one of the most difficult things people need to deal with. Some say that bereavement is just love in another form and I truly agree with this. As a volunteer in The Living Room I have spoken to many visitors about their loss whether it be very fresh or a few years gone by. Especially now in the pandemic, loss can be a big part of people's lives and it is helping people as they learn how to live with that loss. Care for the Family is an organisation that provides many support services including bereavement. With their input, The Living room made a support group made up of many bereaved individuals that met over a period of months. There people were supported and supported each other through the most difficult times in their lives.

Christians Against Poverty (CAP)

Debt and financial uncertainty has a huge impact on people's mental health. So, having a service that people can come in and ask for advice was key. CAP was the organisation that provided training to many members. The main issues that people needed assistance with were PIP forms, utility bills and debt issues. For example, I was volunteering and a young man came into The Living Room in a lot of stress. He had severe PTSD from his service in the army and needed assistance with his finances. Simply by helping him through that form you could see his anxieties melting away.

Parenting and Family

In the space of The Living room all walks of life were welcome. Often on my shifts there would be families in receiving support. Much of this was signposting or just the need for a cuppa and a chat. However, Men Behaving Dadly was an initiative to help Dads and father figures to have a space that they could have some quality time with their child. Because as we all know men's mental health can be much more silent. Three quarters of the suicides reported in 2019 were men [1].

Faith and the Living Room

For many people, faith is a large part of their mental health. The original idea of The Living Room was hatched – as previously mentioned – by Rev Jonathan Fleming. The Living Room among all other support can offer spiritual support. This is a non-denominational resource because we are all human at the end of the day.

COVID-19 and The Living Room

As you can imagine pretty much all of the above information occurred pre-pandemic. Now, The Living Room is very different but by no means gone. It became very clear during the first wave that no face to face services would be manageable to The Living Room moved mobile. We created a phone line so that the community were able to ring in during their times of need and receive the support needed over the phone – or as much as we could. For myself, this gave me much more exposure as I no longer had to make the 40-minute journey to Largs from my house. Many of the calls that I took were people who were distressed about money. The most challenging call was with a service user who had manic depression and was having financial difficulties. My priority quickly turned from sorting out his documentation to his mental welfare. Like I said before this volunteering pushes you to ask the difficult questions such as “have you thought about harming yourself or ending your life?” Personally, I found this much more difficult to ask over the phone. On clinical placement in university this is exclusively face to face (pre COVID) therefore it felt very alien and almost impersonal to me. In the end, I had to ask social work to follow up on this gentleman due to my concerns.

Many other calls have been regarding loneliness. For me I always hope that the person just talking about their concerns and worries makes them feel a little better. And I truly am happy to give up however long of my day if that is the case.

On top of the hotline. The help with financial issues did not stop. Some of the volunteers ran an online CAP Money Course: Budget, Spend, Save over Facebook like. This was a series that helped people find the issue they needed assistance with then The Living Room could help from there.

The Youth Ambassadors once again stepped up to the challenge by talking time out of their studies to learn a new skill/hobby. This was to help inspire young people to stay creative even in this difficult time for young people.

However, The Living Room adapted once again. Perspex screens, social distancing markers and many new policies and regulations has allowed The Living Room to open its doors once again on a provisional basis. All volunteers have adapted to wearing PPE and regulating who can and cannot enter the building. Yet, for me, the volunteering on the hotline has not changed. As I previously said I live a distance away and have had to continue my volunteering by manning the phones on a Wednesday afternoon – or whenever I can.

The Living Room and Me

The Living Room has really pushed me out of my comfort zone (in a good way). I do not think that my professional manner and consultation style would be the same without this volunteering opportunity. I plan to take these new skills and confidence with me onto my future career.

I believe that mental health support and volunteering is one of the most rewarding. Especially with the current NHS services having such high waiting lists and private counselling being expensive. No one in The Living Room claims to be a counsellor,

we are just there for people when they need us. The sheer scale of the work done by The Living Room is moving. I believe that any student/doctor or anyone in the health care profession would be able to improve some aspect of their practice by volunteering with an organisation like this. At the end of the day we do this because we care. The volunteering also gives way for professionals to be mindful of a more holistic approach. Including all social aspects of potential patients: financial, housing family employment yet. Of course, we all keep this in mind however this was really highlighted to me in my practice.

As I previously mentioned many people used The Living Room service due to loneliness. At the beginning of the pandemic 1/10 adults said that they felt lonely and 44% of 16-24 year olds also stated this [2]. Apart from financial advice, I would say that one of The Living Room's biggest tasks has been to help this 'loneliness pandemic'. Remembering that long term loneliness can lead to depression and anxiety [2]. This work was once again done over the phone lines. I personally cannot imagine how difficult it must be for an isolated person, particularly if they are elderly. But that is the beauty of this volunteering – not only are you helping the service user's mental health – but also your own. Because what else boosts morale than helping others. In fact, in a roundabout way I would say many of the more elderly volunteers would have felt a difference with doing the phone lines. The saying is correct, we are all on the same boat, but we are definitely not on all on the same deck. And this is the whole point, to help those that are struggling to cope the most.

In my opinion, the way that The Living Room has been handled pre-and during the pandemic has been inspiring – a true centre of excellence.

So, there it is, The Living Room really is a place to call home. For those in distress, grieving or lonely. At the end of the day it doesn't matter who you are or what your background is. What is important is that when you are struggling you take your first step to feeling better – getting help. And that is why it is such a privilege to be a volunteer at The Living Room.

References

1. Scottish Government 2019 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-19-00916/>
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3. The Living Room, Largs Facebook Page