

Wellbeing from the Margins

How the core values of wellbeing can be applied to how we work with people

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has shown us how fragile our wellness is. The pandemic has already had an impact on mental health and will continue to do so. Using the lived experiences of people who are often marginalised by society, this briefing examines how wellbeing can be better supported for everyone. We believe that the answer lies in seeing wellbeing as a set of core values that should underpin how we work with people, to fundamentally address issues surrounding wellness in our society.

“I’ve never had a place to call home, I’ve never felt settled...”

Imagine being the person behind this statement. How would you feel? How different would your life be? How would you cope?

We know that wellbeing is important to all of us. It’s a common denominator amongst people of all social stratifications. The evidence for this briefing derives from stories of lived experience from people in Greater Manchester who are often marginalised by prevailing social structures, overlooked by services and institutions and who have the least resources and power in society. From these stories, we have identified a set of values that support wellbeing and can be practically applied in services and strategic visions.

Greater Manchester has significant health inequalities when compared to the average across England (Greater Manchester Population Health plan 2017 - 2021) and people in the metropolitan area are more likely to access support from mental health services than other areas (Greater Manchester Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2016). It is therefore pertinent that we make concrete moves to address such issues, particularly due to the added impact of COVID-19.

Whilst we know a lot about ‘what’ keeps people well – such as access to shelter and food, social connections and opportunities for growth – and people and organisations have made significant efforts locally to support this, the purpose of this briefing is to look underneath the ‘what’ and unearth ‘why’ this keeps us well. This briefing argues that the answers lie in the fundamental values of wellbeing and it is through these transferable set of values that we find kinder, more

WHO WE ARE

People’s Voice Media is a social change charity established in 1995. We are committed to supporting people to improve their lives and bring about positive social change from the ground up. We believe that people’s stories about their lives contain valuable insights. Working with people and communities across the UK and Europe, we use Community Reporting - a lived experience storytelling methodology - as a catalyst for changing practice, processes and policy.

human ways of working with people on a systemic scale that transcends individual services and institutions.

So, what are the core values that support wellbeing?

Across the stories gathered from local people, five core yet interwoven values that support wellbeing emerge: honesty, openness, empathy, fairness and welcoming. **Honesty** supports wellbeing through enabling the development of relationships of trust. Without truth, trust cannot be built and without trust, positive relationships cannot be formed. Speaking about their experience of the care system, a young person describes how they would “always tell them what I wanted them to hear” and that this meant they could go “under the radar”. Ultimately, what this demonstrates is that the lack of truth between the young person and the care system, meant that the ability of the service to respond to the young person’s needs was reduced.

To allow honesty to grow, **openness** must be present. Openness involves creating a space in which people are listened to and their voices heard. When talking about their experiences of mental health, one person describes how they felt the medical practitioners “quickly jumped to medication” as the solution and that the support was “too systematic”. From the stories, it is clear that when people feel they are voiceless in a situation with professionals, the solutions proposed by services tend to be ineffective.

Listening, really listening, to people supports **empathy**. Empathy is about understanding where that person is at through the emotions they experience, and connecting to that at a human level. As a young person explains, when they were moved out of a residential care facility in their home city to one far away, it led to a relationship

break-up and their friends “moving on”. This person “lost the will to live”, which had a negative impact on their behaviour and resulted in them receiving a criminal record that could potentially have been avoided. This story patently illustrates how a lack of connection to how others feel can hinder decision-making in services.

Being **welcoming** is fundamental to people making long-term connections. It creates a sense of belonging and allows people to feel settled and rooted in a community. When this doesn't happen, they disconnect with others and also themselves. One person describes how negative attitudes towards trans people affect their “self-confidence”. Consequently, they try to do things to fit into society - “It changes the way I present myself - I wear tracksuits instead of make-up and stuff”. What this shows is that unwelcoming environments prevent people from doing things, and most importantly, being themselves, which can in the long run, lead to mental health issues.

Related to this is **fairness** - the sense of justice and equality. When the dice is loaded, people see it. Speaking about their experience of growing-up in care, one person describes how “kids in care get bullied because we are different”, and that they were “treated different” and “got left out a lot” in foster homes because they were older than the other children. When we are the direct recipients of injustice we are usually angered, and if that injustice is consistent, it is unsurprising that resentment evolves to create people who are despondent and at conflict with society.

How can we apply these values to how we work with people?

Values - by their nature - are more transferable than specific actions. However, this should not suggest that they can't be applied in concrete ways.

Leading the way is a resident in Greater Manchester who has organised a local growing project. When the produce is harvested they “split them into small bundles and take them round to the people who are helping and the people who don't help”. This resident treats everyone in their community equally - sharing the produce out regardless of others' involvement in growing it. By sharing in this way, the invitation is extended to people not currently involved to join in - a subtle acknowledgement that they are welcome in the growing project. As the resident puts it, “that's how a community is built.”

Ultimately, working with people with the values that support wellbeing is not rocket science. **It's simply being human.**

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

To enhance wellbeing across Greater Manchester we need to actively embed the core values of wellbeing - honesty, openness, empathy, welcoming and fairness - into our policies and strategies. This means focusing not just on ‘what’ we do but ‘how’ we do it. These values MUST be woven into how we make decisions (i.e. governance), how those decisions are communicated (i.e. policies & strategies) and how those decisions are delivered (i.e. services). With one of the consequences of COVID-19 being its lasting impact on people's mental health, this is now more pertinent than ever.

ABOUT COMMUNITY REPORTING

Originating in 2007, Community Reporting has been developed across Europe as a mixed methodological approach for enhancing citizen participation in research, policy-making, service development, and decision-making processes. In-line with work such as Glasby (2011), Community Reporting purports the validity of lived experience and knowledge-based practice in these fields. It uses digital, portable technologies to support people to tell their own stories in their own ways, and then connects these stories with change-makers in different settings and sectors.

REFERENCES

- Glasby, J, (2011). *Evidence, policy and practice: Critical perspectives in health and social care*. Bristol, Policy Press
GMCA, (2016). *Greater Manchester Health and Wellbeing Strategy*.
GMCA, (2017). *The Greater Manchester Population Health Plan 2017 - 2021*.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The evidence that has informed this briefing has come from Community Reporter stories from across Greater Manchester. Specifically, the stories are from young people in the care system, sex workers and people experiencing health, housing and economic inequalities. This has been supported locally by:

- The Men's Room: An arts & health charity that supports men and trans people across Greater Manchester.
- Gorsehill Studios: A youth-focused charity based in Trafford that works in creative education.
- Winning Hearts and Minds: A joined-up approach to improving people's long-term heart and mental health in Manchester.