

Briefing speech from Dr Bishop – 9 July 2021

Many thanks for inviting me to attend a briefing again.

I have been asked to speak about the psychological impact of the last 18 months on our population and give some thought as to what may be helpful moving forward.

On the first occasion I attended the briefing, I clearly remember speaking about how well our population was managing with what was then an unprecedented situation. Who knew that it was going to last so long?

At that time, there was a huge amount in the global press about how an impending “mental health pandemic” would ensue, which has not truly been the case, in Guernsey or beyond.

When I spoke on the second occasion, during mental health week, I encouraged people to be kind and be aware of the need to support others, but also acknowledge when they too needed support.

Today, these 2 topics remain foremost in my mind, but my views have changed, as I suspect many of yours have too.

I think that I speak for the majority when I say that the second lockdown and 2021 in general has been much more of a challenge than the initial phases of this experience.

During 2020 there was a genuine feeling of togetherness and positive community spirit. The community was supporting each other and some were actually thriving. To me, this seems to have abated somewhat.

People are stressed and exhausted with a degree of compassion fatigue and a tendency towards mistrust of the team leading us through this experience, despite the fact that we are doing as well if not better than any of our surrounding jurisdictions.

It is fair to say that there are probably very few people who have not been negatively impacted in some way at some time during the last 18 months. Whilst some have struggled with lockdown and isolation, others have found these periods containing, but conversely the easing of restrictions intensely difficult. Many have spoken of missing loved ones in the UK and beyond and needing the rejuvenation of being able to escape the rock.

We have seen an increase in MH referrals and those who are presenting are more severely unwell. Many of these individuals have never been known to services and are from very different demographics to those that normally present with a first episode of illness. However, this is not to the level of the MH pandemic as was predicted.

We are also seeing more complaints across the board, staff relationships are deteriorating and the positive team spirit has diminished. People are burnt out. Our staff are also receiving increasing amounts of abuse from members of the public, even those working with the Covid response teams, which you would expect to be the most respected people on the island. This

is not normal behaviour from our community and was not seen in the early stages of the pandemic.

These are the indirect effects of Covid. As the balance of risks has changed, particularly with a mostly vaccinated population, they are a greater risk to our community than the virus itself and that is why – for our own overall health and wellbeing - we have to get back to normal.

So how do we move forward, because move forward we must? We cannot isolate ourselves from the rest of the world; to do so removes some negatives, but it removes as many positives and it is the positives in our lives which enable us to manage the difficult times and make life truly worth living.

We must acknowledge the fears of all the community. From those who think we are moving too quickly, to those who find the opening up to be glacially slow. Everyone's view is valid and should be respected.

The difficulty is that people want certainty, as this calms their fear, but it is not possible to give absolute certainty in such uncertain times. So we must follow the evidence and trust the experts who have protected us so well over the last 18 months. They are slowly and carefully leading us back towards normality. We have to tolerate a certain amount of fear and manage our own stress and distress by admitting it is there and doing the healthy things that we know help.

We have to return to the positive community spirit and be kind to those around us who are struggling, even if it is in a different way and for an opposite reason to our own difficulties.

Social media can be a force for good, but at present I do not see this to be the case. I encourage people to have (safe) face to face contact with those who are important to them, not recede into an online world of staunch opinions and angry exchanges.

Guernsey did incredibly well during the early phases of the pandemic and our situation is now the best it has been, but we are struggling more. We finally have sight of the end of the acute phase of the Covid pandemic and must get to a position whereby we live with Covid safely for what may be several years to come.

So keep hope, be kind and respectful to all, feel safe, trust the team who have led us so well and support each other in the way that we know our community can.

Thank you.