

A Museum Development Officer and the West Oxford Hub

Friday 17/04/2020

Although I've been in the hub since the Easter break (Tuesday 14th) I am only writing this morning as I have a couple of minutes before heading into Oxford again *and* primarily because yesterday was the first day I felt like I was contributing to the huge effort colleagues, volunteers, everyone has been putting in.

The hub is the west Oxford Community Centre on the Botley Road. My role has primarily been to open the building up during the shift for myself and my colleague to work there. It is a weird experience, having to sit a fair distance apart, to be washing hands, cleaning surfaces. Another colleague from the council comes in and cleans the spaces each day. The manager of the centre regularly comes in, as does the coordinator of both the central and west hub. There is also a café and the staff there are coming in to prepare food for those who need it (I believe!). There is a sports hall which has a few boxes of essential supplies for those who need it in an emergency.

When I first started in the hub I was a little unsure of what was expected of me. I wanted to help but there is also that feeling of being completely inadequate for the task at hand. I am not a local, I am not able to provide healthcare advice, advice on benefits and so on. I am also not really that great at talking to people on the phone – if I'm honest, I'd actually rather email than ever call anyone. It is a step out of my comfort zone. Some of the work I had been doing for the hub was mainly admin set up, creating a tracking spreadsheet for the referrals that come in and also sticking lists of the most vulnerable people in the city together, those who the call centre has been unable to get through to.

But yesterday I started to call some of those people who have been referred as well as using the Oxford Together system of Asana referrals to help coordinate the volunteer response. I spoke to, I think, around 6-7 people yesterday to try and help with their situation. I'll try and tell you a little bit about the type of thing I was talking to them about. I spoke to an elderly lady who had been referred by a friend. Her friend was worried about her getting food in, particularly as this lady had been identified as needing shielding. I called and was pleased to hear how she had already arranged for a friend from Waitrose to support her, I left her with the number for further help if she needed it. She was very complimentary of the service we were giving and I felt a bit like an imposter as she was my first call! I called another lady who was feeling upset, particularly in the mornings. Again, completely unequipped we had a bit of a chat about the types of things she liked to do before the lock down, about cooking and helping her friends. I inputted her information into the Oxford Together form for regular phone calls. She also had our contact details and regular contact with health care professionals for her own medication. She was lovely to speak to. Another gentleman required some advice on universal credit, again something I am completely ill prepared to do. However, I could direct him to the Citizens Advice Bureau for help, check he was ok for supplies of food and anything else.

There were more with a range of needs. Another man was worried about running out of hearing aid batteries, but then reassured me had enough. He did however need food (with only half a chicken in the fridge!) so we filled in the form for the local community foodbank delivery service. All the people I spoke to were so grateful. And everyone I spoke to genuinely needed to be spoken to, even if they didn't need any further help. I worry that helping people with more complex issues will arise, something I am even more inadequately equipped to deal with. However, the main source of comfort for me is that there *are* organisations that are out there to help. Mental health charities, the NHS, food banks, volunteers with Oxford Together and more. I am trying to get a better understanding of what is there to be able to redirect people. And of course excellent people within the Council. I asked a colleague to knock on the door of a referred person who wasn't picking up phone calls. He managed to check on him and he was fine. It is great to have people on the ground when you are really worried about someone. I believe the Council is acting as that first line to redirect or immediately intervene if necessary.

Let's see who I speak to today!

Sunday 19/04/2020

I am just about to come off and finish my first Sunday shift, monitoring the inboxes for both the west and central hub. Five minutes before 6pm and I haven't had a single referral come through. This should be a real positive. But I think I have worked myself up again, worried about what might drop into the inbox. Again feeling like I might not be able to deal with it. I did call up one person to check on them and then found out that they had a volunteer assigned to support them already, which was good. But again, the *current* clunkiness of the system and my own inexperience meant that I had missed that, doing things in the wrong order. Anyway, sorted.

It has actually given me a bit of time to catch up with my real job! Which has been good. It has given me pause to consider how the rest of the week might pan out, but I don't really know. I will be in the hub again tomorrow with a colleague from the Museum. Which also makes me consider how bizarre this situation is. I usually go to work in the same place as this person, we share an office. But to think that two members of the Museum of Oxford team, plus another who works virtually for the hub as well is surely very unusual? There are two of us in the hub, two members of Council staff and *both* are Museum of Oxford workers. How odd!?! Are there any other instances of this happening across the country I wonder? Museum staff at their local authority being 'repurposed' in this way?

And then I think about what this will mean when we come out of the other side of all this. Will I have a better appreciation of the city's residents? I think so. I've communicated with a completely different range of people than I usually would. My role isn't community engagement in the Museum. I have met lots of people (volunteers, visitors, schools etc.) but quite probably never the most vulnerable in the city. I guess what I will get out of this is some kind of connection I previously didn't have. But it also makes me worried that what I am working hard to create in my 'day' job isn't going to truly resonate with those people I find myself talking to due to the pandemic.

Thursday 23/04/2020

Clearly, I am pretty awful at keeping an up to date accounts of things. I guess part of the reason this week is that things started at a rip-roaring pace and have now calmed down. As we moved to a more integrated system, Monday and Tuesday were really about catching up. I actually am finding it more difficult now to recount the people I spoke to. However, the difficulties they were facing were similar. Many worried about money, food, supplies. Also confusion around the guidance from the government.

This brings me to, what I should emphasise, a very personal opinion on the handling of the crisis. It isn't about assigning blame, but I had a bit of an argument on a Whatsapp group with friends earlier today about it. It is this. The guidance is confused. PHE guidance on keeping 2 metres from someone is fine to say, but in a shop this is regularly impossible. Why is it ok for someone to go for a run for an hour around a park, constantly breathing out, more frequently, but not ok for someone to go and have a sun bathe for the same period of time?

I realise this is a bit of a tangent. And it is the balance of what is essential to go out and do versus what isn't (which is also subjective). But I think this ties into a lot of what I have been hearing. People are scared. People are worried about what they have been told to do and the ambiguity of it. I feel many of those people I do talk to *could* go to get their prescriptions, they could go to the shops. But they are worried about doing so. Mental health is regularly mentioned and the fallout from this pandemic is going to be that more people are unwell, isolated, anxious, depressed. I feel it when I am in a shop. The first thing I want to do now is to be out of that place.

There are lots of examples of the immediate impacts of Covid-19 on people's physical health and financial situation, but the ongoing mental health impact is going to be colossal. I just hope more people can be understanding of each other, even when someone makes what we perceive to be the wrong decision. It is hard. It is hard on everyone.