

Annalise Baker

Annalise is Oakleaf's Client Services Manager, responsible for the day-to-day management of the charity's client-facing staff (of which there are currently 7, plus an additional 8 part-time), and ensuring high-quality service provision for our hundreds of clients managing their mental ill-health. A huge task before the pandemic, since Covid-19 Annalise has worked tirelessly to not only ensure continued service provision from day one of lockdown in March 2020, but also has facilitated new, innovative ways of increasing the support available and managed a huge increase in need from clients.

Oakleaf has provided vocational training and wider support to adults with mental health needs in Surrey for 24 years. In addition to mental ill-health many clients also suffer from low confidence, poverty and extreme social isolation, often alienated from family and friends.

Oakleaf aims to help clients secure the skills, confidence and training needed to achieve their goals, with a focus on returning to the workplace. To do this, we deliver work-related training and employment support, wellbeing activities, 1:1 emotional support and counselling. In the financial year 2019/20 we supported 582 people across Surrey, and support 350-400 individuals in any one week. Oakleaf clients suffer from a wide variety of mental illnesses including schizophrenia, bi-polar and depression, although we do not require a formal diagnosis to access support. Oakleaf also hosts the Guildford Safe

Haven, an evening service available 365 days a year for those close to or experiencing a mental health crisis, in partnership with another local charity and SABP/NHS.

Above and beyond

Annalise has worked at Oakleaf since September 2015 and has been Client Services Manager for two years this May. Pre-pandemic this role carried immense pressure, responsible for the department supporting up to 400 clients at any one time in their management and recovery from mental ill-health. Since Covid-19 Annalise has been on the front line of successfully adapting Oakleaf's services to be delivered remotely, managed the huge increase in need and poor mental wellbeing within our client base, created innovative ways of supporting clients, and has looked after the wellbeing of her 7-person front-line team—including recruitment and training of new staff.

As venues started cancelling activities and the first lockdown loomed, Annalise worked with her team to move our first wellbeing activity online—an hour of mindfulness via Zoom on the 24th March —and invited all current Oakleaf clients via email. The session was popular, and during that first week of lockdown we held at least one activity every day including a general support group and fitness classes, despite having never delivered support remotely. While we closed Oakleaf in-person, virtual support has been available every single day of the pandemic thanks to Annalise and her team.

As demand for our services rose, this virtual support element grew to five or six activities every day of the working week. To date we have held 42 distinct virtual wellbeing activities via Zoom, ranging from creative (art, choir, poetry, book club), to physical (fitness, Tai Chi, yoga), to therapeutic (mindfulness, anxiety management, positivity hour, NLP) and to support groups (women's, men's, LGBT+). We delivered 293 separate virtual wellbeing activity sessions in the first four months of Covid-19, and between April 2020 and March 2021 we had 5,988 attendances to these activities, which is 900 more than the previous 12 months. All our virtual wellbeing activities are free of charge for clients. Even as we re-open in person activities, we will continue to offer a virtual programme.

Perhaps most importantly, in the first week of lockdown Annalise took charge of contacting every single active Oakleaf client, of which there were 327 in March 2020. She created a spreadsheet where all clients were divided up between the team, to contact—call, text, email, and finally letter—in the first few weeks of lockdown. This is in addition to fielding the many calls and emails from worried, distressed and unwell clients. Annalise and her team worked incredibly long hours at the start of the pandemic to reassure and support clients on an individual basis. When many other services cancelled their activities and did not go online for some time, clients expressed a lack of hope and many presented in crisis.

To add difficulty, Annalise developed symptoms of Covid-19 a week before the first lockdown, so quarantined and worked from home for the first time during

this difficult period. A new mobile phone and number were procured and communicated out to clients, and a rota was set up to ensure the main phone line was covered.

What began as an emergency response, calling clients to determine how to best support them remotely, developed into a new standalone service of ‘Check in and Chat’ calls which Annalise and her team have continued throughout the pandemic regardless of the level of restrictions. Between April 2020 and March 2021, 2,357 total check in calls were made to individual clients. In addition to providing emotional support and reducing loneliness and isolation—often the call was the only the client received all week—these calls helped clients navigate new pandemic-related systems such as learning how to use Zoom and accessing benefits while most services were shut. Both at the start of the pandemic and now, any client in need of immediate support can receive a call or meeting to reassure, ensure safety, provide support and plan next steps. Despite increased workload this ‘drop everything and help’ approach ensures clients feel safe, valued and supported and represents Annalise’s ethos.

As 2020 progressed, Annalise ensured Oakleaf was flexible in its service delivery, creating schedules only two weeks in advance and moving activities in-person where possible (re-opening Oakleaf for the first time on 17th August). As we moved into winter and the January lockdown, the mental health of Oakleaf clients declined overall. The third lockdown, dark and cold days, prolonged isolation and no end in sight produced the highest levels of

low mood, suicidal ideation and anxiety ever seen by Annalise and her team. Check in calls became longer, crisis became more frequent and members of the Client Services team required additional support themselves, which Annalise provided.

In addition, throughout the pandemic Annalise managed the Guildford Safe Haven service in conjunction with our two other community partners, local charity Catalyst and Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. This included coordinating a new system of operating, which Annalise suggested—restricting access to crisis only and a limit of 6 people to ensure social distancing. Annalise manages 8 additional part-time Safe Haven Support Workers, and in the past year this has included training staff on the Virtual Safe Haven, a secondary option to attending in-person. The Guildford Safe Haven has not closed any night since the pandemic began.

The recruitment Annalise was responsible for over the past year also is important to mention. In the summer Oakleaf secured funding for a new role, Virtual Wellbeing Coordinator to support the new virtual activities, and in spring 2021 we secured three years of funding from The National Lottery Community Fund to provide a new programme of personalised employment support for clients entitled 'Pathways to Work, which included recruitment of two new Employment Advisors. This is in addition to recruiting for an admin maternity cover and three bank Safe Haven Support Workers to ensure cover for illness and quarantining.

Now, 14 months on, Annalise oversees a larger service provision than ever before including both in-person and virtual support. We feel she deserves recognition for her incredible dedication, hard work, courage and compassion to Oakleaf and its clients during such a difficult time period.

Impact

From our bi-annual client survey in January 2021, we were thrilled to hear that 95% of clients agreed Oakleaf helped them feel less isolated during the pandemic, and 92% agreed Oakleaf helped them improve their mental wellbeing.

Quotes from our Summer 2020 and Winter 2021 client surveys, representing the support Annalise oversees:

“I’ve received excellent support from Annalise, especially when I have struggled, she is invaluable.”

“Oakleaf helped me cope with when I couldn’t see any light.”

“Oakleaf has made me feel less abandoned and isolated during this time. The weekly calls have hugely helped get me through. Counselling was incredibly helpful with mental health and personal relationships.”

“I had only just started with Oakleaf when the lockdown commenced, so as you can imagine it left me stranded and very isolated. I am doing a range of

different courses through Oakleaf and I am thankful for all their time, kindness, help and support. Every class and member of staff has shown so much commitment to help and understand every one of us, including myself. These classes have also given me a reason to get out of bed and provided me with a real drive and daily structure.” – John, current Oakleaf client

“When I had a wobble after improving month on month Oakleaf jumped in & put a weekly plan in place talking on a 121 basis until my anxiety & worry was back under control.”

Quote from Heather, Oakleaf Virtual Wellbeing Coordinator:

“I started working with Oakleaf in July 2020 – right in the midst of the pandemic. It has been great to be part of such an enthusiastic and hard working team. Annalise is the fantastic leader of our team, who leads with kindness, compassion and empathy. She always makes sure that there is time to discuss any concerns that you have, this goes for anyone in the team and of course our clients. She keeps the Client Services team moving forward throughout lockdown, for example creating my role as Virtual Wellbeing Coordinator, and then keeping up to date with restrictions easing to make sure clients can get back to in person activities as soon as possible.”

Quote from Kelvin, member of the Oakleaf Client Services team:

“Annalise continues to be an amazing and supportive manager to the client services team. Her passion, care and love for Oakleaf’s clients is second to none.”

Quote from Russell Lewis, Oakleaf client:

“The team were all really understanding and supportive when I was going through a very difficult time. Even since I left, the team have continued to contact me throughout these lockdowns to check that I am okay; their kindness and dedication to helping people has really changed my life. I continue to use the skills I learned at Oakleaf to manage my mental health on a daily basis and as a result of my experience at Oakleaf, I decided to apply to college. I am now in my second year and training to be a therapeutic counsellor so that I can help people the same way that Oakleaf helped me. I cannot thank Oakleaf enough for the services that they provided for me and continue to provide for people who desperately need connection and support.”

Sustained impact

The most significant measure of our success is the impact we have on the lives of our clients. Between April 2019 and March 2020, when Annalise was Client Services Manager, we welcomed 582 clients to our services and support activities, and 68 clients moved on from us into meaningful employment (including full or part-time roles, paid or voluntary). When Oakleaf first became a charity in 1997, we supported just 40 clients.

We are delighted when clients return to work with improved wellbeing, as this is our ultimate goal. Clients join us in difficult personal circumstances, but many can move back to the workplace or towards more constructive lives. Between April 2019 and March 2020, 96% of our clients either maintained or improved the management of their mental health, as reported through our Recovery Star evaluation system.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our clients, reflecting what has been seen nationally. In June 2020, Mind reported on a survey of 16,000 people during the first lockdown, revealing that 65% of adults over 25 & 75% of young people aged 13-24 with existing mental health problems reported worse mental health. Mind and others predict a prolonged worsening of wellbeing and increased numbers of people experiencing longer-term mental health problems.

Nonetheless, by staying in touch with and providing support for our clients through the lockdowns and various restrictions over the past 14 months, Annalise, her team and Oakleaf's training departments have had a hugely positive impact. They used the following mediums to communicate and provide support: virtual (phone, email, text, letter, Zoom, MS Teams); creative in-person solutions (activities such as karate and mindfulness outdoors in the empty car park; large Perspex screens in counselling rooms to facilitate safe sessions; free counselling room hire for a private space for clients to hold their virtual sessions; loaning laptops to clients who needed them).

As mentioned above, 95% of clients in our January 2021 survey agreed Oakleaf helped them feel less isolated during the pandemic, and 92% agreed Oakleaf helped improve their mental wellbeing. Additionally, 87% agreed Oakleaf activities had helped them feel more confident. For those who took part in Zoom wellbeing activities, 96% found them helpful and 85% found them very helpful. For those who received 'Check in and Chat' phone calls, 100% found them helpful and 68% found them very helpful. We will continue to provide these virtual services post-pandemic, in addition to face-to-face support.