



YOUR MENTAL HEALTH: HELP IS CLOSE AT HAND

Joint Members' Editor **Tim Allen** spoke to Post Office Ltd (PO), Voice of the Postmaster (VotP) and the NFSP about the Wellbeing Initiative collaboration which aims to help postmasters protect their mental health and wellbeing, and to highlight where support resources can be found.



Sara Barlow

"So, I was in this lift in the PO offices in Chesterfield a while ago," said Sara Barlow, Secretary of VotP and NFSP member, "and there was a poster offering physiotherapy to PO employees and I thought, where's our piece of this? We generate all the income, and we get nothing. The Wellbeing Initiative is part of the process of changing that because, as well as being of benefit to postmasters it shows we are moving forward in our relationships. The Wellbeing Initiative is a correlation of everything VotP, NFSP and PO did separately and will bring them all together on a tile in Branch Hub that will be ready for World Mental Health Day on 10 October. It will cover everything from armed robbery through to bereavement, mental health, and more."

Sara, a Welfare Officer and postmaster at Rainhill Main in Merseyside, is one of the three special people I had the opportunity to interview for this article on postmaster wellbeing and mental health. She; Christine Donnelly, of the NFSP and postmaster at Great Milton

in Oxfordshire; and Mark Eldridge, Postmaster Experience Director at PO and a current postmaster in Norfolk, all spoke to me about resources, help and collaboration between PO, the two member organisations and individual postmasters, on a subject that can quite literally be the difference between life and death. It's a difficult subject, not just because we are all unique individuals but because mental health is one of those things we often bottle up, hide or simply don't want to talk about. We have produced hundreds of articles about remuneration, strategic reviews, banking, Pick Up Drop Off, and loss of government services over the years, but how important are these weighed against your mental health?

"If the outcome is that we help just one person out of a difficult situation, that will be a success," said Mark.

Looking for help on Mental Health



Christine Donnelly

issues is, it seems, a matter of looking at resources that can help. Some of these resources are coping mechanisms internal to ourselves and some come from external agencies where specialists can be found. Signposting is the key to knowing where we can go for help when we simply aren't coping.

"Postmasters are a pretty resilient bunch", said Christine, and she's right, we have to be, but it doesn't mean we don't need help. Overwork, stress and ignoring tell-tail signs often equate into not looking

after yourself. "The more you fail to look after yourself the worse things will become", added Christine. Obvious as this is we often ignore or overlook the obvious, so please do ask yourself if you are doing the things you should be.

"Mental Health is

important, and Calum Greenhow, NFSP Chief Executive Officer, had this idea for someone in the NFSP to specialise in care for customers and colleagues", said Christine. "I leapt on it as an area of interest I had.

"Mental health welfare isn't just about the crisis it's about the little things that help you deal with life like yoga, exercise and mindfulness. If you can get this right, you may never progress to the point where you find yourself unable to cope."

Mark is the Postmaster Experience Director for PO, as well as a serving postmaster in rural Norfolk who has just taken on his second branch as well as an outreach. He came from a corporate retail and supermarket

"The more you fail to look after yourself the worse things will become"

chain background where he once had the responsibility of running 200 field managers but becoming a postmaster was still a shock. "You don't truly know how to run a shop until you've done it with your own money," he said. His passion for serving postmasters burns brightly as he enthusiastically told (Joint Members' Editor) Jon Bumphrey and I about the Wellness project that has brought together a large number of people from the NFSP, VotP, individual postmasters and multiple PO departments into one working group. "The objective is to pool our knowledge and resources into a single repository where postmasters and their staff can find the information they need. Branch Hub will be the key tool, but we are also using peer-to-peer support, briefings, articles, wallet cards with emergency contact numbers, and the membership groups to get the message out that cohesive, collaborative help exists. We have built a team to ensure that that the resource is maintained and developed as a normal process of business into the future."

With World Mental Health Day coming up on 10 October, I wanted to begin to explore the spectrum of mental health issues. Was there any pattern to when serious stress issues arise for postmasters?

Sara said: "Every month, when Rem Statements come out and the hope



Mark Eldridge

there might be enough is met by the reality that there isn't enough there to pay the bills, and when news breaks and emotions flood up, the Inquiry and Phase 7 will continue to keep emotions on the surface."

Christine added:

"Unexpected Special Delivery communications from PO can be a trigger. Services being taken away unless we up our game, all add to the underlying pressure of being a postmaster."

What can be done to help protect postmasters' mental health?

Mark said: "We want to maximise our chances of being able to help. We will be making phone calls to postmasters who, for example, have had a robbery to check how they are coping, not just immediately after the incident but later, too, when the immediate shock has subsided.

Where we can, we will then be passing contact details to the NFSP

so that they can follow up. We haven't done this in the past. On top of this, Branch Hub is going to be a gateway to resources and information on any mental health issue be that from PO, government, Samaritans, NFSP or VotP."

"It's not just you is something I say a lot", said Sara. "This is very important. Whether it's the stress of a transaction correction, a big loss or a burglary, there's always someone else who has experienced it and is willing to share their experience. Some people are happy to talk in a group and that gives them strength, others need to talk privately, and we will take them offline and give them all the time they need to do that.

"Whilst postmasters are not employees, PO has things they can offer to support postmasters. Even Grapevine could do better with follow-up calls when the immediate impact of a robbery has been dealt with, but the emotional trauma remains.

"The Wellbeing Initiative should correct some of these past problems and the new Wellbeing Tile on Branch Hub will be able to point you to the right things. If you don't use that then Branch Focus and the NFSP magazine will have some signposts."

Christine added: "It's important to talk to someone who knows what they are talking about.

"The NFSP has access to helplines and some trained Mental Health first aiders. No officer of the NFSP will try to give advice but they will listen, and they will sign-post having listened, for example a Mental Health first

"We are getting the message out that cohesive, collaborative help exists"

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aider has been trained in responding to mental health crisis. Sue Jude, NED for Wales/Cymru, and NFSP's Wendy Burke and Lisa Harmsworth have these skills. I'd say to start with the NFSP website, where you will find our Mental Wellbeing Toolkit, resources, links, and helplines but also just phoning the NFSP on 01273 452324 will be all you need to do to be directed to someone who can help you. Also, there's the Branch Secretary for your area and they will also be keen to give as much help as they can by phone, by email or even a visit. If you're just trying to stay on top of things go to a Branch meeting, you'd be amazed at the positivity and quality of advice you can get from a chat over a cup of coffee with other postmasters"

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Pressures of leadership

Sara commented: "We are all business owners working with human beings who have sickness and family issues and even one member of staff going off for any length of time can have a huge impact on a small business. We will signpost to guidance, be that government or the NFSP. Postmasters are badly paid, we all know that, but it leads to the situation where we have skilled and clever staff in highly responsible jobs who are on minimum wage. We really want to pay them more, but we just can't. It's through good leadership that our staff do feel valued and that's the only way we can do it. There's a constant life / work struggle where you are trying to do everything. Remember to put the phone down and do something else".

Christine: "Isolation is the problem here. The postmaster is at the top of the pyramid making decisions that impact other people's lives BUT postmasters tend to be outgoing and have personality traits that help us to deal with issues and difficult situations.

"Talking to other postmasters, attending the NFSP Annual Conference, and particularly Branch



Meetings and meeting over a coffee can be really helpful".

When things get worse

"After the ITV drama (*Mr Bates vs The Post Office*) everything went a bit dark, things came back to the surface," Sara said. "I had one postmaster I talked out of suicide, I had another using a food bank who was working 40 hours a week. We were on the phone 24/7 and inundated with calls. Professional guidance is absolutely essential. We will always signpost towards it but sometimes people just want someone who will listen to them and that's what we do too".

Bankruptcy and severe Mental Health issues

I asked VotP and the NFSP what should you do if you are struggling to cope either financially or mentally? What support is out there?

Christine said: "The last thing you should do is simply hope things will get better. The impact to your staff and your home might be devastating.

"Feelings of responsibility to the community and worry about letting others down often keeps people going for far longer than they would if they were only thinking about themselves. If you seek professional

help at the right time, you have a much better chance of achieving a good outcome. If your retail is too weak, speak to the NFSP retail team who will dive into options for improvement with you. Your situation will get better, or worse, it won't stay the same, so being clear about which way it's going and taking the best action you can is tremendously important."

Sara added: "I had one postmaster who was at breaking point and who wanted to close the door but he managed to get the advice, help and support he needed and he managed to turn it around and now has a second branch! Another had a huge issue with a massive unresolved loss, and we helped to get him a PO Audit and within a couple of hours everything was resolved. There is support and some stress is for nothing.

"The perception that audits are terrifying and a bad thing isn't necessarily the case. There are some brilliant and positive auditors who give great advice and tips as they go, as well as some who, I'm afraid, do leave you feeling intimidated and who it seems are simply trying to find problems and catch you out. If you have a good relationship with your Area Manager, you should definitely talk with them."

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**“Get help.
Whatever the
problem is
don't allow yourself
to think you're on
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Conclusions

I was left with the clear conclusion that all three of my interviewees felt that the Wellness Initiative had been and would continue to be a success. The long list of contributors Mark was able to reel off was incredible, along with the sense, from Sara and Christine, as to just how important the Wellness Initiative has been for both the objective of building a cohesive repository of mental health resource but also finding the reward that comes from people with different starting positions working well together.

And what of the messages? “Get Help. Whatever the problem is don't allow yourself to think you're on your own,” rang out clearly, along with a mutual belief that the Branch Hub Wellness Tile and all the other little things, that add up to a lot, will create a lasting resource to help postmasters through the toughest of times.

Where can postmasters go to find support?

- ▶ Branch Hub Wellness Tile (coming) – Signposting to the specific resources you need will be a key feature of the Tile
- ▶ Your Area Manager
- ▶ The NFSP Website: www.nfsp.org.uk
- ▶ NFSP WhatsApp groups and Facebook group, see page 29 for more information
- ▶ NFSP Branch, find out when your next regional meeting is
- ▶ Get involved in next year's NFSP Annual Conference
- ▶ NFSP Helpline 01273 452324
- ▶ NFSP Benevolent fund, see page 29 for more information
- ▶ VotP chat forums
- ▶ Your GP
- ▶ Your accountant
- ▶ The Samaritans
- ▶ Local Authority (LA) Mental Health helplines (most LAs have them)
- ▶ Horizon Inquiry: The Inquiry offers free, confidential, emotional and psychological support services to witnesses, their supporters and participants in the Inquiry, through **PAM Wellness: 0800 098 3790.**