

## The Archway Foundation Storytelling Project Report - March 2021

### Summary

This report shares the learning from the Archway Storytelling Project. From November to December 2020 we used a storytelling evaluation methodology to collect six stories from people who had attended one or more of Archway's supportive social groups before the Covid-19 pandemic and who were now being supported remotely by regular telephone support, receipt of *The Bright Side* fortnightly newsletter, and other media such as text and email according to individual need. Given that the majority of Archway Friends are not digitally connected, we post *The Bright Side* to 280 Friends (and a few volunteers not on email) and email it to volunteers. The newsletter is a tangible way of keeping in touch, the aim is to provide a bit of fun in difficult times, to communicate the latest government guidance on keeping safe and to provide contact details for other sources of help. Much of the content is driven by reader's requests and contributions and it includes quizzes, word searches and step-by-step instructions on simple craft activities.

The aim of the project was to capture something of the actual experience of Archway Friends during the pandemic by enabling them to tell their own story of their involvement with Archway in their own way and thereby to evidence the impact of Archway's support during this exceptional time. What did the support offered by Archway actually mean to people during the pandemic and what difference did it make in their lives?

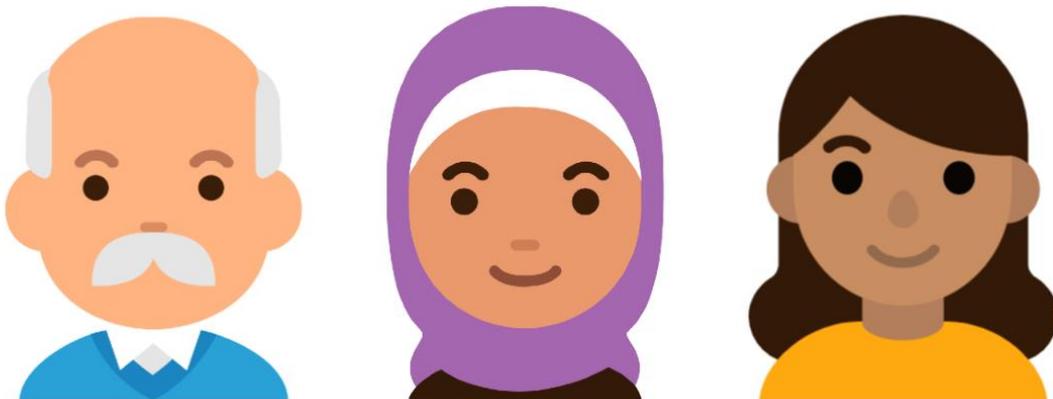
The learning comes from reflection on the stories during a discussion session in February 2021. The session included the story collectors, the Archway staff team and members of the Archway Covid-19 strategy group including Archway trustees. We hope that the learning from this small project will help to inform the work of Archway going forward. We also hope that, in a small way, the stories can give a voice to the people that Archway serves. One storyteller said:

***'I have to say Archway, despite all that's going on with the virus and everything, they are doing their utmost to keep in contact with members.***

***The staff and volunteers are still working hard, and we have not been neglected at all despite all what's going on and I appreciate it so much.'***

## Introduction

Before the pandemic, the core of Archway's work was the provision of supported social contact in a group setting, a service for Young Adults, and an Individual Support Service. The organisation comprises a small, mostly part-time staff team supported by a large cohort of trained and supervised volunteers and a dedicated board of trustees. The arrival of Covid-19 struck at the heart of Archway's work of enabling people living with loneliness, social isolation and complex health and social needs to connect with others in a group or individual setting.



Archway proved to be very nimble as an organisation and very quickly staff moved to working from home and the service adapted the core work to telephone support including the recruitment, deployment and training of volunteers to support this. In the summer of 2020, following the first lockdown, things were moving very fast in response to the pandemic and we recognised the need to capture what we were learning so that our response could be as effective as possible and so that we could take forward what we were learning into future work. We wanted to do this in a way that was consonant with the values at the core of Archway's approach: valuing each individual; effective listening; empathy and compassion. The Storytelling Evaluation Methodology, as used by Arts at the Old Fire Station in collaboration with Oxford Together<sup>1</sup> was an approach consonant with the ethos of Archway. It is a qualitative approach that complements the ongoing collection of quantitative data and other evaluation methods already used by Archway.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordtogetherstories.com/read-the-report>

## **Collecting and editing the stories**

The social group coordinators and the coordinator for the Individual Support Service were asked to identify and approach people they knew who might be willing to tell their story of involvement with Archway through the pandemic. Six people from across the social groups agreed to participate. Due to personal circumstances, we were unable to identify someone from the individual support service at the time but we are now about to attempt this again so that we collect stories to compare across the services.

The process was discussed with each of the six storytellers. They were sent an information sheet and consent for the edited final stories to be shared was gained.

Three story collectors were recruited and trained and had a recorded conversation with the storytellers by phone. The training stressed that these were relaxed conversations rather than interviews so that the tellers felt able to relate their experience in their own way. However, the focus of the conversations was not to be on the past, although that might come into the picture at times, but on the experience of Archway's support during the pandemic and how it had made a difference to people. The transcriptions were edited into 1-2 page stories that aimed to:

- Keep the storyteller's 'voice' by using their own words
- Accurately reflect the storyteller's insights into the impact of Archway's involvement
- Capture the reader's attention

The stories were then sent to the storytellers for final approval before being shared publicly.

## **The experience of story telling**

It is important to note that the experience of telling the stories was valued and had meaning in its own right for the majority of storytellers. Several participants saw it as a way of helping Archway, of 'giving something back' and of saying 'thank you' for the support that they had received. It was also valued as a space in which to make sense of and to reflect with a sympathetic listener on the experience of a very difficult time.

## **Learning from the stories: discussion session**

Archway staff and members of the Covid-19 strategy group were kept informed throughout the process. When the stories had been edited, they were invited to a discussion session having been sent the stories to read in advance. The purpose of the discussion was to draw out the themes and the learning from the stories and to begin to consider how they could inform the work of Archway going forward.

## **The Impact of Archway support**

What struck people from reading the stories was the level of need they showed. Some people's social isolation meant that the support offered by Archway has not been a welcome optional extra but literally 'a life line'. Archway's commitment to regular calls is also important giving people a structure during a time when days often seemed all the same. One person described the beginning of telephone support thus:

***'I got a phone call and I didn't realise that it would keep going. So, every Tuesday I've been spoken to. It's a lifeline, it really is.'***

One person found it particularly difficult to reach out to make any kind of social contact and so the fact that Archway took the initiative to call was very important. They recognised that if the telephone support volunteer had not called,

***'It would have been very difficult cos I'm just socially awkward and I just don't call anybody unless they call me.'***

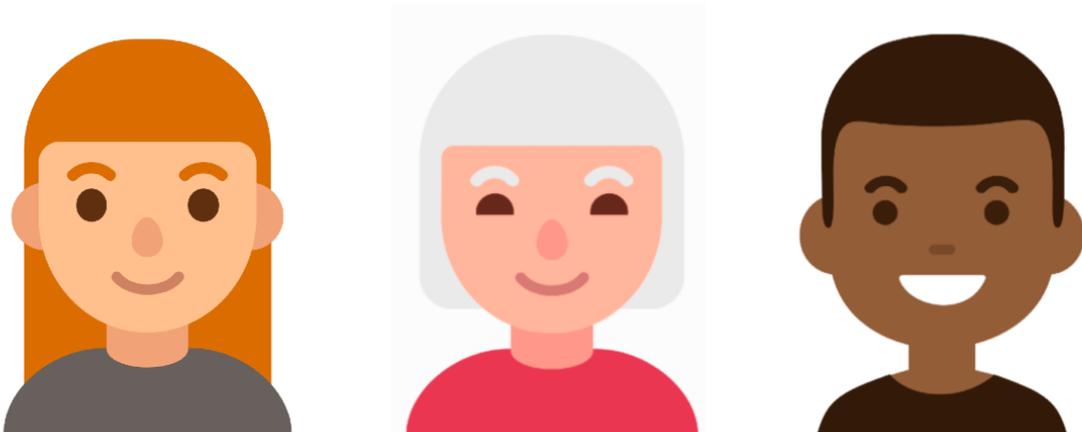
Most people really looked forward to the calls as a bright spot in their week. One person compared the anticipation of a call to looking forward to a holiday that has been booked.

People missed the social connection provided by the supportive social groups and looked forward to a time when social interaction in groups might be possible again. However, they also appreciated and enjoyed the conversations they had on the phone and the relationships with the volunteers that developed over the weeks. They valued the fact that these were genuine conversations, not just someone

checking in to see that they were all right. They felt that they could talk about all sorts of different things and appreciated the fact that people were willing to spend their time talking with them. One person said,

***‘... it has been reassuring. They’ve been really nice, they’ve rung each week and they’ve really talked to me.’***

People who had attended social groups in the past and had been connected with Archway for some time, used the calls as an opportunity to ask about friends they knew and to keep in touch with what was happening with Archway. Receiving *The Bright Side* also played an important part in enabling people to continue to feel connected and part of a community bigger than themselves. People talked about friendships they had made through Archway and asked after members of staff and volunteers that they knew.



## **Learnings from the storytelling project**

### **1. The support provided by Archway can be a lifeline for people**

One comment in the discussion was that, ‘these are the real stories’ of what contact with Archway means to people and what it has meant specifically during the pandemic year. By allowing people to tell their story about Archway in their own way and in their own voice, the stories provide both insight into people’s experience and a description of how people with complex needs have coped during a period of unprecedented isolation and stress. The narratives show that for some, Archway’s support has not been just a welcome addition to their lives but in fact ‘a mechanism for coping’ during the pandemic.

## **2. The support that Archway provides is about more than loneliness**

The discussion highlighted that the term ‘loneliness’ is often used in an undifferentiated way. It can range from an everyday feeling that everybody experiences at some time to an acute and prolonged experience that has a huge and continuing impact on every aspect of a person’s life. Some of the people Archway supports have found ways to manage living with long-term loneliness whilst for others, it has deeply marked their physical, mental, material and social health. The pandemic has exacerbated this pre-existing condition especially as many of the people involved with Archway live on the edge of communities with few connections. The stories show that for people supported by Archway, loneliness is not a transient experience that can be ‘fixed’ by offering certain interventions but is rather a condition that people live with requiring skilled, compassionate and ongoing support.

The social interaction that Archway has always provided in the form of supportive social groups can be understood in this context. It is a place where people for whom loneliness is a condition of their lives, and who inevitably have complex needs, find the skilled support, understanding and acceptance that enables them to interact with others as part of being able to live with loneliness. As one storyteller says:

***‘Although we can’t actually meet up, it’s just the weekly phone call is another thing. I mean I feel so privileged to have that and I mean I can’t find the right words to express. It’s the only place, organisation or whatever you want to call it, that I’ve gone to and - usually if I haven’t been somewhere, say for two or three weeks, and because I suffer with depression and anxiety, I probably wouldn’t go back - but I never get that feeling at Archway because they are always so pleased to see you again and they are so caring. I’ve never known anything like it before.’***

### **3. Archway provides a sense of community**

The stories show that people feel part of something bigger through their involvement with Archway and that this may have been important in mitigating feelings of isolation. People appreciated the constancy of their contact with Archway, even if they found it difficult at times to respond to calls. They also enjoyed and valued *The Bright Side* newsletter that helped people to feel that they were in touch with what was happening in the organisation. In addition, people who had been involved with Archway for a long time often asked about people they knew.

### **4. Relationships of trust and respect are the foundations of the work**

The fact that people trusted Archway enough to tell their stories to the collectors was fundamental to the project. This relates to the values of the organisation and the fact that it has proven to be trustworthy over four decades. People felt safe with the organisation. People felt able to trust that they themselves and the information they provided would be treated with care and respect.

### **5. Training, support and supervision are fundamental**

The relationships of trust that underpin all Archway's work are built on high levels of training, support and supervision for volunteers and staff.

### **6. The importance of flexibility**

The Archway team was able to stay in contact with people and to continue to respond to people's needs because it has been flexible. Flexibility enabled the team to change its way of working very quickly and to develop a telephone support service with attendant training when in person contact was no longer possible.

## **Conclusion: what can we take forward from the project?**

### **1. Communicating the work of Archway**

The stories collected through this approach will be valuable as a means of helping outside organisations and individuals to understand the nature and complexity of Archway's work. They can offer insight into the context in which people live and the impact of the support that Archway offers.

### **2. Stories could be used to help funders broaden their brief**

This may be particularly relevant in relation to the discussion about the nature of loneliness and of Archway's specialist support above. They could help Archway to articulate its unique approach within the current plethora of discourses of loneliness.

### **3. Stories can be used to inform the wider public of the work**

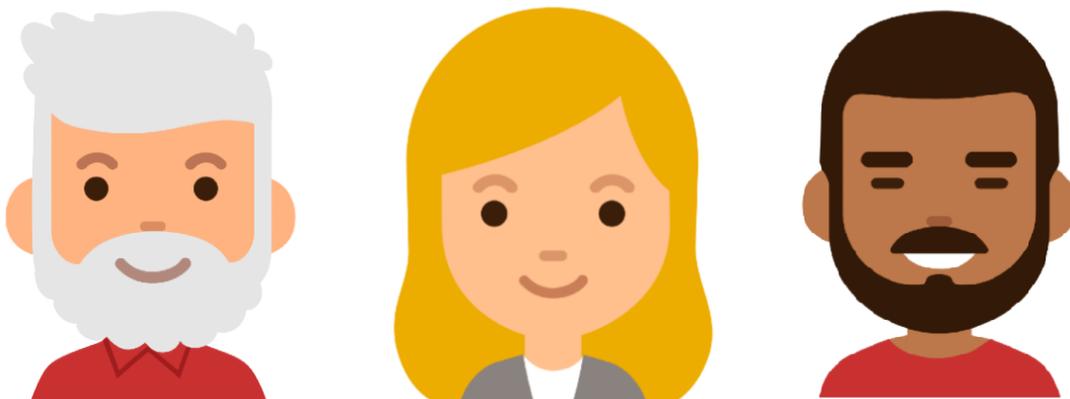
Stories could be used in publications, presentations and on the website to inform a wide audience.

### **4. Stories can be used in training and recruitment of volunteers**

### **5. Stories can be used in the forthcoming 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary publicity/events**

### **6. We can use this process to collect further stories**

Now that the process has been tested, we can use it to collect stories from the Individual Support Service and in other contexts.



## **Thanks**

The success of this project is due to the generosity of staff, story collectors, storytellers and trustees in being willing to contribute to the project. As ever at Archway, it is the working together as a team that has made it possible. Thanks are due to everyone who has taken part but particularly to the Archway Friends who have been willing to trust us with their stories.

**Report written by Victoria Slater**

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**25 March 2021**