



# Total Wellbeing Luton

In Luton, a specialist team of exercise trainers organise tailored support for people with multiple conditions who want to improve their physical and emotional health. There is a menu of options, from a range of partners, including specialised exercise classes and rehabilitation as well as things like weight loss programmes, talking therapies and gardening. The Multiple Conditions Guidebook profiled the Total Wellbeing Luton Service as a [case study](#) in 2019.

**In Autumn 2020 we spoke with Sarah Simmonds, Total Wellbeing Luton's Health Specialist Manager for long-term conditions to understand what impact the past year has had on their programme and the 500 people living with multiple conditions it supports.**

**How have things changed for your service with the COVID-19 pandemic?**

As a wellbeing centre with a gym we had to follow the government guidelines for gyms more generally and completely close in the first lockdown. Then, because Luton was hit with a second spike in early summer it was mid-August before we were able to open again. This meant we were closed for nearly five months. We had to furlough the majority of our employees, making us very short-staffed.

**Did you manage to offer any alternatives during the period of lockdown?**

We did what we could virtually. We used our [Total Wellbeing Facebook page](#) and set up a [Total Wellbeing Luton YouTube channel](#) where we posted videos every week on different aspects of fitness for people with health conditions as well as daily live sessions from our trainers about fitness more generally. We hosted regular [webinars](#) to provide wellbeing support on topics like sleep and managing worry. We offered coffee mornings for our clients on Zoom. We also contacted people over the phone and directed them to the support we knew was available online from our partners. In August, as soon as the Government said it was safe to do outdoor training we started to put on specialised training sessions for our clients.

**What impact did you see on your clients with multiple conditions?**

We saw, and continue to see, a lot of anxiety and fear. Obviously because most of our clients are in the high risk category they were nervous of attending centres like ours, even when we started offering outdoor exercise sessions. On the plus side many of our clients started walking and cycling so whilst they are not coming to the centre they are still being physically active.

We work with a lot of older people and not everyone has the technology or ability to access things like YouTube, Webex and Zoom. Some of them got left in the dark and there was nothing we could do. Where we could we provided support through the phone, often with a family member who could talk them through it, but it was a bit of a struggle.

The other impact we have seen is that some people have not been able to access their normal treatment and care for their health condition, so they have gone downhill, some of them to a point where they are not well enough to come back to our service. This is obviously very distressing for people, especially when it is for things like cancer, where delays in treatment can literally be life-threatening.

**Is there anything that you feel could have helped you during this time?**

It is a difficult balance for the Government, but I do think they should have opened up wellbeing centres earlier on. The health and wellbeing of people is just so important. For weeks pubs were open, but gyms were not. From our perspective we have seen how the closure of gyms and services like ours has affected so many people. And not just physically, but also people's mental and emotional health. We worked really hard to put things in place to allow people to return to the centre safely, but after such a long time of being closed people were understandably nervous.

*“Many people with multiple conditions, especially cancer and respiratory illness, are still too scared to return to centres like ours.”*

**How do you think the programme will be affected in the longer term?**

We are now halfway through our five-year contract but we are effectively starting again. Many of our existing clients dropped off the programme during lockdown, and we only have 50 per cent of them back. For example, in March we had 45 people on the programme seeking physical activity to support their mental health, in August we only had 21. Many people with multiple conditions, especially cancer and respiratory illness, are still too scared to return to centres like ours. We worry that they will never return and therefore not benefit from the additional practical and emotional support we offer improve health and wellbeing. We are looking into an online only option for people who are too worried to return.

Our model is based on referrals from healthcare professionals and these have dropped off a cliff. We are working closely with the respiratory teams, including for post-COVID rehabilitation, but they are not yet ready for the support we offer. Our approach is also based on working with others and lots of other services locally still have not opened. For example, all the council's dementia services are not opening until January at the earliest. Where we can we are trying to fill these gaps and provide additional support ourselves but it's not easy.

**In the short term is there any learning you think might be helpful for people living with multiple conditions?**

One thing that all this has made us realise is that we can do a lot more online. Our live sessions with an instructor have worked really well. And that's something we are going to carry on doing. We have found this has worked especially well for people that have children or are working at home. This was a gap in our area but 30-40 people signed in every day. I think if there are further lockdowns we will push the online thing more – and particularly see how we can increase access and tailor it to our clients with health conditions, including through chair-based activity. First time round we did a huge amount of preparation for people physically returning to the centre. We were expecting an influx, but it did not happen. In the future we will avoid spending money on preparing for a rush of people coming through the door and push the online thing a lot more.

Another thing we have noticed is that COVID-19 is driving officials and professionals to focus a lot more on prevention. There are a lot more discussions locally about how to find ways to increase support to people to maintain a healthy weight, stop smoking and be more active for example. This could have a long-term impact – both in terms of managing existing multiple health conditions, but also in helping prevent them developing in the first place.



We have noticed that many individuals have changed their outlook. People have realised that they can quite easily look after their health and wellbeing, outside in nature. Now this is not necessarily great for us as an institution, but a lot of people are enjoying their time cycling or walking and exploring new places around Luton. This is helping their physical health and mental health, which in the grand scheme of things is really positive.

*“COVID-19 is driving officials and professionals to focus a lot more on prevention.”*

One thing that we still need to focus on is helping GPs understand what is out there in the community, including our service. For example, we see the demand for mental health support from people with multiple conditions is going up at quite a rate. We know exercise has been proven to be as effective as some anti-depressants. At the same time we also know some people benefit from support and advice to become more physically active, especially if they have multiple conditions and they are not sure what they can do. Yet levels of referrals from primary care are lower than we would hope for. We need to find a way to let all the local GPs know we are here, so they can refer their patients with multiple conditions to us.

## Spotlight on inequalities

Luton has a diverse population with a significant Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community. In the first years of the programme Total Wellbeing Luton worked hard to try and engage the whole community. The team attended community events and festivals and gave talks at different venues, like mosques, about the programme.

However this did not result in brilliant uptake from the BAME community. Since staff started to return from furlough this has again been an area of focus with outreach events taking place in October. There are plans for this to continue as and when the situation allows.



## Bertie's Story

**In Luton 37,000 people have a long-term condition, which means nearly one in five people are at greater risk from COVID-19. To understand the impact of the first lockdown and closure of the Wellbeing Centre on people with multiple conditions in early October we heard from Bertie, who has respiratory conditions.**

For months Bertie was unable to go to the gym, which he usually did three times a week. Bertie really noticed an impact on health and wellbeing but whilst he was keen to get back, he also had concerns about safety when the centre reopened after the first lockdown. “My biggest concern was that there would be loads of people in the gym, bringing the virus in with them. But since I have been back the way they have laid everything out has been brilliant. There’s not too many people and it’s very clean. My advice to other people like me would be to get back here as fast as you can to improve your mental health and wellbeing.”