



Day Centre Research Forum, 18th February 2021

'Keeping company with an uninvited guest: Reinstating a daycare service during Covid-19'

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After extensive and challenging planning, I have reopened our small daycare service during a pandemic. In this presentation, I examine how to balance the risks involved with the safety and well-being of our guests and share my experience of delivering care whilst adhering to shifting government rules and regulations.

Albany Oasis is a small, senior daycare service located in the town of Southport, on Merseyside. We have been open and welcoming guests since September 2016. Prior to Covid 19, we were able to accommodate up to 12 guests per day. The majority of our guests have a diagnosis of dementia.

As a small business, we employ 3 permanent staff and 1 bank staff. I am the owner/manager of the service and my background is 30 years' experience of working in the care sector before qualifying as manager in October 2020.

I live, with my family, on the upper floor of the daycare premises.

This is how and why I reopened my daycare service, in the company of an uninvited guest.

The reason I wanted to reopen the service was simply, for the welfare of our guests, and for the benefit of their carers. Oh, and also for the staff who, quite frankly, were all going a bit bonkers trapped in their own homes with their own families!

During that first lockdown, I heard painful stories of how many of our guests and carers were struggling with practical tasks, isolation, loneliness and the sheer relentlessness of the weight of caring for another, literally, single-handedly with little or no respite. Uppermost in many peoples' minds was anxiety about contracting the virus, along with concerns about if and when our service would open again and whether they would still be able to attend. Would it be the same as it was? How would it be different? Might it feel Strange? What about staying safe? These are important concerns for a person with dementia.

Carers, of course, had many questions. What might daycare look like after covid? Would their loved ones remember attending previously? Would they recognise the staff and their friends after all those weeks apart? Everybody was looking to me for answers.

No pressure then! Where was I supposed to begin?

In those initial 18 weeks of lockdown, as well as keeping in constant contact with our regular guests, to feel helpful, I dropped off activity packs, I made visors and masks to assist key workers, volunteered as a coordinator for our local WhatSapp group, and I ate a lot of cake!

I designed and planted out a new veggie garden in that glorious sunshine, clapped for carers every week and I ate more cake.

And while I was eating all this cake, I spent many hours researching, trying to make sense of all the mind boggling rules, the confusing guidance and the moving goalposts, to establish a viable way of reopening our service. Like many people, I felt as if I were going around in circles, looking for what was right, what wasn't right and everything else in between!

Firstly, it made sense to look to what the local council were up to with their own day services right? Wrong!

Nothing! Not a sausage from our local council. No guidance. No advice. Just a small notice on their website explaining that council run day services had been closed until further notice. Very Helpful indeed!

Obviously, our guests weren't the only ones struggling at home. This was a problem for everybody. But where does one look when the council aren't even offering advice. Who do I ask ?

I can remember feeling lost, disheartened, floundering around looking for answers and finding nothing substantial to take us forward.

So many questions needed answering.

- How do we manage the risks of Covid 19 safely? What if guests don't want to return? What happens if we have an outbreak of Covid 19?
- How about the added financial burdens? The staff-how would they feel about returning to work?
- What about PPE?
- What if there's a shortage of cake?

Being a newly qualified manager didn't help me. I was only just getting to grips with how to run the service effectively and now this most unwelcome, uninvited guest (covid 19) turns up to the party - what a headache!

Strangely, the hero of the hour turned out to be 130 miles away in Worcestershire. In May and June 2020, Worcestershire Council's website issued advice for those considering reopening building-based day care services. The website provided a checklist of things to consider and advice on risk assessments. Although Worcestershire council themselves were not considering reopening their own services, they did state-and I quote;

Decisions around re-opening and appropriate risk assessments remain the responsibility of providers and will need to take into account the most up to date government guidance and rules around social distancing. Ultimately this is a decision for each provider based on thorough risk assessment informed by government guidance.

Now this looked promising! In roughly 16 weeks of research, this was the first piece of helpful information I had stumbled across. With this new information, I felt a glimmer of hope. Could this be the breakthrough I was looking for? I was spurred on. A conversation with the other directors was needed and a zoom call was set up for the 10th July.

We decided that, with a little more research and all necessary procedures in place, we would reopen our doors on Monday 27th July 2020.

With just over a fortnight until re opening, all I really had to go on was government guidance and my own common sense-not much to shout about in that department!

I decided that I would have to go it alone so to speak.

I went onto autopilot, looking back now, it all seems a bit of a blur but I know I made a list. Being a 'make a list for everything' person anyway, this was the easy bit.

1st stop, notifying our guests to decide who wanted to return, and who would continue to shield as guidance recommended. I embarked upon long conversations with carers, answering many queries about our new ways of working. Everybody would have to be individually risk assessed to establish the new needs of guests, and to prioritise those who would be returning to the service. Next, I informed the staff of our reopening date and scheduled a covid training day for the following week.

After much 'hurrah, cheers, relief and grateful thanks all round, I knew we had made the right decision to reopen.

I was onto risk assessments. This was a mammoth task. From the physical environment through to activities and everything else in-between, it took me around ten days, working flat out to plan, liase with other directors, write out, print and laminate these new assessments. Alongside this was the revising and updating of our standard policies and procedures such as staff sickness and absence. I devised 10 new covid related risk assessments in total. Still, I continue to update policies and procedures and revisit risk assessments as Government guidance dictates.

Now for the physical environment and to rearrange the furniture. For this, I roped in some manpower, well, I say manpower, what I really mean is my husband and son. Following guidance, all soft items had to be removed. Cushions and throws, ornaments, books and anything that maybe a 'touch' point had to be squirreled away. As well as this, certain activities had to be boxed up. No more bean bags or tennis or beach balls. This wasn't so bad, at least I would save a few light bulbs by removing this lot! Teddies, soft toys, even the resident 'dementia companion' cat all packed away for storage.

'Where do you think we're going to put it all?' Asked my other half 'There's so much stuff!' There was only one thing for it.

Much to his horror, it would all have to be resigned to his much coveted man cave: the cellar. Oh the cries of protestation. I cannot tell you the moaning I endured from him at this time. Reflectively, this was the probably the worst part of the process - everything else was a breeze by comparison!

So it began, everything was carted off and stacked away-neatly I might add-and now to reconfigure the space.

A jointly devised risk assessment concluded that the environment could accommodate 10 people in total, as opposed to the original capacity of 12 guests. This number would have to include the staff.

For our guests, seven armchairs and side tables were placed strategically, according to the distancing guidelines, and two upright chairs were put in for staff use.

We are lucky at Albany Oasis to have two rooms that we utilise for daycare, a quiet lounge and a large conservatory. All of our guests prefer to use the conservatory because it's a big, light space overlooking the garden and, although we could accommodate seven guests in this area, 3 chairs were also placed in the quiet lounge, at the required distance, so that, if necessary, the groups could be split.

Good! Now we were getting somewhere. Everything, so far, looked like it was doable. There was, however, one thing that was bugging me. It was always my vision for our service to be original in its design. It had to be a home from home, A naturally bright, holistic environment where people could relax and enjoy time with friends.

Looking at this new layout, stripped of all its homely comforts, the whole place looked sad, sterile, and contrary to the cosy, atmospheric community it had once been. What could I do to improve things? How could I make it appear welcoming once again? The answer came to me while I was turning over the beds in the new veggie patch. Of course-PLANTS! What better way to fill the space? Why didn't it occur to me before? It's a conservatory for goodness sake!

An online search told me most of what I already know about the great benefits of plants. You may be familiar with Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory or ART for short. This is a theory that was developed by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan in the late 1980s and early 90s, and examines how we can all benefit from nature, both indoors and out. Many academic studies, such as A publication by The American Institute for Science in 2017, confirm that, particularly for older adults and those living with dementia, greenery and plants can enhance, stimulate and increase positive emotions and can offer opportunities for rewarding activities such as indoor gardening which, I might add, has been reported to be effective for improving sleep, agitation and cognition.

In 2015, the International Journal of Molecular Sciences published an article to support the beneficial role of plant microbes and particulate matter, in indoor environments.

It is now understood that some plants can play a role in absorbing certain toxins, reducing air pollution and particulate matter. Now this was by no means an ultimate barrier to Covid, the uninvited guest, but it couldn't do any harm to incorporate as much greenery as possible within the environment.

Every pot and houseplant I owned, and some that I scrounged, were gathered up and positioned about the place. Little plants, big plants, tall and short. Loads of them. What a difference. Now it looked welcoming.

I had already ordered three new hand sanitizer points, paper towel dispensers and a PPE station. Once these arrived, we were able to locate suitable positions for each and they were installed. In addition, several bottles of hand sanitizer were distributed around the building. The PPE station was fitted outside of the bathrooms. Masks, gloves and aprons arrived and the station was kitted out, ready for use.

In the bathrooms, mirrors were removed to prevent unnecessary touching of the face and paper towel dispensers installed.

Located in the central lobby, a cleaning station has now been installed. This consists of a box containing all necessary cleaning products, anti-bacterial wipes and J cloths.

There are also rubber gloves with the staff names written on. This box is situated next to a laundry bin in which to place used cleaning cloths. A mop, brush and dustpan and brush are hung in this area, for use by staff. The cleaning risk assessment is displayed next to the cleaning station.

Signage has been printed out, laminated and displayed around the whole environment, this includes 2 metre distancing signs, hand sanitizer signs, 'catch it bin it kill it' signs, wash your hands, how to wash your hands, now wash your hands, keep your distance, don't eat the cake signs-that last one is displayed in the kitchen for the staff...

Talking of the kitchen, that was a whole new ball game!

This was another area which would require reconfiguration. Again, after consultation, we opted for a drinks and snack station, and the cake tin, to be set up just inside the kitchen door.

The kettle and tea and coffee making facilities would have to be used by staff, as well as them having easy access to the fridge and dishwasher. Luckily, both of these were already suitably positioned along one wall so we didn't need to do much of a reshuffle. Marker tape was placed on the kitchen floor, to designate how the staff should move around this area. More hand sanitizer placed alongside soap and paper towels at the hand wash basin and guidance notices displayed on the wall

Just the dining area to sort out now. This didn't pose too much of a problem as we already used 2, big extendable tables at lunchtime. For us to use this zone safely, we now extend both dining tables to their full capacity, and rather than 8 people, there is capacity now for up to 4 persons per table.

We use disposable napkins and all of our food is plated up in the kitchen, by a designated member of staff, and served to guests once everybody is seated. Salt and pepper pots have been swapped for individual paper sachets and we now serve condiments and sauces straight onto plates in the kitchen to avoid any handling of unnecessary items. Everyone's hands are sanitised before and after eating.

With the physical environment now sorted out, I had to think about how we could keep our guests entertained during their time with us.

Before the unwelcome arrival of Covid 19, Albany Oasis had been a hive of activity. With everything from regular armchair exercise sessions, singing and dancing afternoons, attendance from local nursery school children, visiting dogs and their owners, a magician, a harpist and on one occasion, the arrival of two miniature Shetland ponies in the garden! All very much enjoyed by our guests and staff but sadly, no longer permitted.

How could I compensate for the loss of all these activities? I had to get my thinking cap on for this task.

I took a flexible approach. Although this was summertime, in the UK, as we know, there's never any guarantee of good weather. It was also important to be able to adjust to changing guidelines.

As the crucial issue was to keep us all safe, using the outside environment, where possible, was high on the list of recommended guidelines.

More online research took me to an really good, UK based website titled 'Dementia Adventure' This is a site geared specifically towards time in nature for people living with dementia, and offers many resources and free training for professionals and carers alike. I am looking forward to discovering more about their work and have enlisted for my first, training session in March.

I set about planning many activities around our outdoor setting, being able to utilise the garden was a bonus and tied into the whole holistic, natural approach I talked about earlier. Activities such as easy gardening tasks, filling up bird baths and feeders, garden and nature reminiscence, outdoor dining and little tidying up jobs were all worked into the planner. With careful supervision, games such as garden bowls, croquet and golf putting could be enjoyed outdoors.

This would mean it would be a lot easier to stick to social distancing whilst allowing all of us to enjoy the outside space.

On account of these activities being weather dependent, a plan B was needed for indoor entertainment.

Ordinarily, all of our resources are housed in a large cupboard, situated in the lobby. This cupboard now proved invaluable as a storage area. I was able to arrange this space according to guidelines.

It is now configured so that the right side of the cupboard contains carefully selected activities that can be used during the day. Once we've finished with them, these items are placed into the left side of the cupboard where we can leave them for the 72 hours or, more often than not, a week.

Items such as laminated quiz cards to hand out-these are brilliant as they can be cleaned straight after use-reminisce packs for staff to handle, files and folders containing activities suitable for our whiteboard games aswell as mini, wipe clean whiteboards that our guests can handle individually.

Colouring books, pens, crafts, jigsaws, bingo and the suchlike are all kept in this cupboard

Any items that cannot be cleaned straight away are put in the left side of the cupboard-its my first job on a Monday morning to put everything back into the right hand side, ready to use again.

Thinking outside the box, I researched activities that we now enjoy using the medium of technology. The onset of the pandemic has seen virtual activities soar through the roof and the opportunities for entertainment are practically endless.

Although we do have a SMART TV installed at the premises, Its not something we use very often. Now however, we could turn this to our advantage. Here was an opportunity for us to learn new skills and the chance to embrace different, and often challenging, ways of working. After months of this new method being implemented I am still working on technologically training the staff !

With some initial help from our tech savvy daughter, we set everything up to enable us to use various apps, websites and programmes directly from the TV.

We generally tune into Vimeo and Youtube and are now able to access almost everything from quiz's to relaxation and armchair exercise sessions online.

Alongside this, an old smartphone was hooked up to a cheap bluetooth speaker in order for us to connect to apps like:

{ [HYPERLINK "http://www.bbsmusicmemories.co.uk/"](http://www.bbsmusicmemories.co.uk/) }

{ [HYPERLINK "http://www.radioechoes.com/"](http://www.radioechoes.com/) }

{ [HYPERLINK "http://www.mdfr.com/"](http://www.mdfr.com/) }

www.youtube.com

www.colmanweb.co.uk (Name that tune)

Plus many more.

The plan was coming together.

With only a few more days to go, our staff arrived, for training. This was the first time, and the only opportunity I had to implement our new, socially distanced, covid safe measures before reopening. This was practice day and although they didn't know it, the staff were my guinea pigs.

I went through all the new risk assessments, the amendments to working practices, I discussed the new working model and how we would continue to care for our guests, whilst attempting to keep everybody safe.

I listened to, and answered lots of questions, worries and fears that the girls had. We walked around the building so that staff could get a feel for the new layouts, and understand the differences between previous working methods. I spoke the about new pressures to workloads such as a twice daily cleaning routine, aswell as now cleaning the loos after each use, and the guidance that we would now have to comply with.

I wanted to really be certain that the staff felt happy and safe, returning to work in these strange times.

Over time, I myself had some insight and had been able to digest lots of information surrounding new working practices, for the staff, this was all change, and a daunting prospect. It was up to me to try and put their minds at ease and subsequent feedback tells me that I did a good job of reassuring everybody at this time.

The big day arrived and I was ready.

I had managed everything practical that I had set out to do, in just two weeks and when I opened our doors again on the 27th July 2020, I could have cried!

I was terrified! All of the questions I initially had returned....all of the 'what if's? how? what? when? where? And the dread of the uninvited guest knocking on the door. It's one thing putting all of the practical mechanisms in place, it's quite another to be able to carry them through confidently.

The weight of responsibility was all on my shoulders and that's a great load to carry. My anxiety was tempered once our guests and staff arrived. It was just such a relief to be able to be welcoming people back and to be of service to once again.

Initially, we put temperature checks in place. Anybody that came into the building was temperature checked as an added precaution but it is now considered that these checks can be problematic and inaccurate so we dispensed with this late last year. There are 3 testing sites located in Southport, 2 of these are surge testing sites for the new variant of covid. We also have door to door testing kits to certain areas in the town.

All the staff, and my own family, are tested weekly at these sites.

Many of the guests that use our service are otherwise at home alone or with one other person. Most, if not all of them don't go out anywhere except to come to us and consider themselves to be in a 'bubble' with the other people here at the centre.

Of course, things don't always go to plan and we are still ironing out problems as they arise.

We have to be constantly mindful of the fact that most of the people that we care for are living with dementia and, in most cases, don't have the same depth of understanding of Covid 19 that we do

We know, for instance, that when Vera arrives, she automatically wants to hug everybody, give her friends a kiss and sit down next to them for a good old chat and

our gentlemen, all being very polite and well mannered, will automatically offer their hand to shake.

Usually a quick 'Oh you know what Vera? I've got a terrible cold and I don't want to pass it on to anybody so just to be safe we're all splitting up a bit today. You sit there and ill sit here'

Or 'We can't have a cuddle this morning lilly, I've just had the lurgy and there's nothing worse than the lurgy is there? I wouldn't want you to catch anything horrible- lets have some tea and cake shall we?'

In the case of Bob, who usually bursts through the doors singing 'Good morning, Good morning' at the top of his voice, we have to pre-empt this behaviour by making sure we get there first with 'Bob, can we be a bit quiet this morning, Alan's having a snooze over there-he didn't have a very good night you see? Maybe we can have a bit of a sing song later'

Carrying out certain activities has been difficult at times.

We do use the big pull out tables for activities and every guest has to have their own, individual paintbrush, pot of glue or paint box and if we play say a game of snakes and ladders, aswell as sticking to their own game pieces, everyone has their own dice. Before and after activities, everyone's hands are sanitized.

Although these practical issues been the real challenge, we've devised some plans to get around some of our most natural, human behaviours. By using tactful, mindful language, and sometimes a few very teeny white lies, we are able to carefully manage the risks of covid.

When it is impossible to mitigate-by mitigate, I mean using good ventilation where possible, not sharing the same air space as another person or conversing side on rather than face to face- When we cannot socially distance, and staff have to wear PPE, we have mostly overcome this by explaining to guests that this is just a uniform. This is an idea I got from a lady who I took part in a webinar with back in October last year, just like they may have worn a uniform in their own jobs, or if they were part of a group or club. We may look a bit funny but it's necessary to keep us all safe, and we don't mind if you want to laugh at us!

All of these little, tactful methods have helped and enabled us to navigate the Covid minefield.

All in all, the whole process of re-opening daycare has been an enormous task and a huge learning curve for me and everybody else involved.

We have not only had to learn so much more about risk management, but how to work in difficult circumstances, with each day throwing up challenges that we are all still learning from.

If we look at things a different way, there have been positive outcomes. Our guests have all been able to enjoy daycare once again, and carers have definitely benefited from the much needed respite that our service provides. Staff, and myself have acquired lots of new skills-well, we're still working on the technology side of things. Albany Oasis is now a completely new model in light of Covid but the virus has taught us that by working together, albeit apart, we can still continue to provide our valuable service-just in a very different way.

To date, all of our guests and most staff have received the 1st vaccination for Covid and through all the ongoing lockdowns, tier systems, and Southport recently becoming the North West hotspot for the new Variant of Covid, we have successfully managed to remain open and to keep the uninvited guest from gate crashing our party. I think this calls for a little celebration.

Cake anyone?