



# Aching Arms

Chair's report 2019 -2020

## **Letter from the Chair**

2019-20 was a uniquely challenging year where we were all affected by Covid-19. Despite these challenges, the year has been incredibly positive for Aching Arms. I am full of admiration for the resilience shown by our staff, volunteers and supporters in keeping our mission moving without skipping a beat.

Under the leadership of our founder and CEO Leanne Turner and with the incredible commitment of the staff, the charity has navigated this challenging year with ingenuity and teamwork. Despite the Covid19 pandemic and Government Lockdown, Aching Arms has continued to thrive this year.

We have continued strong on our mission to support bereaved parents by working with more hospitals to include our comfort bears in their bereavement pathway and conducting bereavement training. It is a sign of the team's resilience and ingenuity that we've not only continued on our mission this year but also enhanced our service. One example of that is the launch of 'Supporting Arms' which is a service to offer enhanced support to all those who contact us including longer ago bereaved parents and their families.

We've also made great strides in our efforts to managing our Charity with rigour and governance. Our systems for storing and using data effectively are continuing to improve, our strategic Business Plan has been updated. Community fundraising has reached into new events, new regions and now has better record keeping and communication with fundraisers.

We have been actively participating across various networks within the baby loss sector. We are now members of the Pregnancy and Babies Charity Network, Baby Loss Awareness Week Alliance, and the Essex Bereavement Network.

## **HOSPITALS AND REACH**

We now work with 158 hospitals across all nations of the United Kingdom. Despite the Covid crisis in which no conferences were held where a lot of new hospitals hear about us, our links with leading hospitals in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales continued to grow. We added 14 new hospitals to our network. We saw more Early Pregnancy Units and Gynecology units engage with us to understand how Aching Arms bears can help women who experience an early loss.

In the pandemic, we not only maintained but also elevated the communication with the hospitals. We continually checked-in with the hospitals to see if they needed more bears and sent them thank-you cards. We received some lovely messages about the thank you cards, and hospitals were very grateful for the continued service of delivering bears.

## **COMFORT BEARS**

4040 comfort bears were donated to health care settings and 1561 were given directly to bereaved families upon request in the last 12 month period.

Despite the postal service being shut from March until July, due to the Covid restrictions, there was still a significant increase in postal bears being sent to families. We continue to receive positive feedback from families when they receive their bears and heartfelt requests

from the families on their request forms. *“They brought tears to our eyes when they arrived. We will treasure them always and the little ones and their families who have kindly gifted them to us.”* This is a touching reminder of not only the impact of receiving a postal bear, but also the virtual link felt between families.

During the height of the lockdown restrictions, we used a courier service to deliver bears to the hospitals. We maintained good email communication with the hospitals and requested that they shared their bears with their EPU/Gynae wards to try and increase the number of families receiving bears in hospitals.

## **SUPPORT NETWORK**

There is evidence that the Covid19 Government Lockdown during March – July had a negative impact on recently bereaved women and their partners. During the Covid19 lockdown the NHS frontline were and still are, under incredible pressure, Aching Arms has supported the NHS by helping to reduce the feeling of isolation following a baby bereavement and stepped-up services to reassure midwives and nurses that we are able to help the parents they are not able to right now. This is especially important as face-to-face support groups/family visits/bereavement clinical visits were not possible. With this in mind, we were successful in securing grant funding to extend our support services to parents. This service is called ‘Supporting Arms’ which is an enhanced telephone support service that was launched on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020.

This service has been very well received. We’ve had several calls - approximately of one hour long with a few of them being repeat callers. The content of these calls has varied from just wanting a listening ear to wanting suggestions on celebrating anniversaries or funerals.

We have received a lot of positive feedback following our calls, most comments fall within two themes, the first being able to relate to the caller for example *“It’s just really really hard and I felt you could relate to that”*, *“We understand each other, we share such a bond over our babies’*

The second theme is around feeling less alone *“you learn when you cry yourself to sleep that there is someone to hold your hand’*. Part of our reasoning behind starting the support service was to ‘extend the hand of friendship’ so it is beautiful that this is the feeling that families are getting from our support.

This year, we also offered our first virtual Mindfulness Session (for the public) and a virtual team meeting with our volunteers. Both were well attended and should be considered for continuation over the next year.

For next year, we’ll build on these new services and also plan to launch a live chat function on our revamped website.

## **EDUCATION**

Twelve awareness training sessions took place from September 2019-September 2020. All sessions received positive evaluations and have strengthened our ties with health professionals in each setting. There were a number of cancellations to the Covid19 Lockdown, however we have begun virtual training and will focus on building this. We are

collaborating with a film director to ensure our training is professional and still communicates the personal stories of loss that are so appreciated by health professionals.

The workplace bereavement training pilot with Zurich Insurance UK was a success. Three face to face workshops took place and the feedback from attendees was incredibly positive. Here are just three of the comments from Zurich People Managers who attended.

*Thank you so much for running the course, for sharing your stories and helping put this into context for me.*

*The stories resonated very personally with me and I found the course very useful. Great awareness of differences in miscarriage, neonatal, still born etc. and which policies apply.*

*The personal stories and voiceovers at the beginning were particularly powerful*

Going forward, as part of our Corporate Fundraising Strategy, we are working to develop our own finalized version in Webinar Format.

## **FUNDRAISING**

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### **Community Fundraising**

The fundraising landscape completely changed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst our only option during the first few months of lockdown was to be reactive, our small charity team pulled together to adapt to this change with creativity, and determination.

We've made significant effort in the last 12 months; we've made significant progress in our fundraising efforts. Our fundraising coordinator has established the systems and protocols to make fundraising for Aching Arms simple and fun. We now use social media more effectively to create successful new ways for fundraisers to support Aching Arms.

Following the lockdown in March 2020, our team created new campaigns like Virtual Forget Me Not Tea Parties, Ten for Ten 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary raffle and our CEO's beautiful 'Say Their Name' tribute. As the ongoing government restrictions continue, we've made the effort to be proactive in adapting to the changing world around us. We've worked toward embracing new ways of community fundraising. This meant we've focussed heavily on virtual events and digital fundraising using social media platforms (facebook and Instagram, etc), direct campaigns, a regular giving campaign, celebration and in memory giving.

These new campaigns developed during the pandemic have been well-received well supported by donors and will now become annual events in our fundraising calendar. We will introduce a new twist each time to keep the campaigns fresh and interesting, and keep donors engaged.

In the months to come, we will aim to:

- **Develop existing donor relations** - more regular comms, more targeted comms.

- **Enhance donor experience** - clear, concise helpful info on website and in fundraising packs. More- timely comms with donors. Collect feedback after campaigns and act to continually improve.
- **Extend our reach** - families that may not be aware of us but will find comfort in us and go on to support us.

## **Corporate Fundraising**

We have made positive steps with building relationships with corporate partners this year. We have collaborated with Theatre re on their tour of BIRTH. Aching Arms volunteers attended 2 of their performances that went ahead before the Government Lockdown and accepted donations and spoke to those who needed support. During Baby Loss Awareness Week in 2020 the collaboration continued with an online discussion. This raised awareness of our charity beyond our existing followers.

Zurich Insurance UK granted us in the region of £12,000 thanks to their Covid19 grants programme. This is the fourth time they have supported us but by far the largest amount they have granted us.

We also secured a £5000 grant from the Brentwood Covid19 Business Grant programme for charities and local business Guided Learning donated £300 to Aching Arms, a percentage of the proceeds from their tutoring service whilst schools were closed. And finally, local Brentwood business, Chicken and Frog Bookshop has provided us with an affordable storage space for the next 2 years.

## **HUMAN RESOURCES**

### **Staff**

The hiring decisions made last year has ensured we now have a strong team in place with deep expertise in their specialisation. This team was enhanced this year by the addition of Lindsay Oliver as the Client Care Manager.

Lindsay has put a lot of focus on improving our communication with bereaved families and hospitals. She has established effective leadership of the Volunteer Postal team. Another addition this year has been the introduction of Erica Stewart as Client Care Support.

In the last 12 months Aching Arms contracted the services of several new professionals. Kelly Bater for her HR expertise, Roberta Jeffs as Administrator to the Fundraising Coordinator and Erica Stewart as Client Support to work with our Client Care Manager. As of the 1<sup>st</sup> August Sharon Knox was employed as our part time Charity Merchandiser. In the few weeks she has been in her role, Sharon has created a vision for merchandise that is already proving successful. In 2019/20 our staff team and contractors have all established themselves in their roles and shown themselves to be a positive and passionate team.

Again, this year, Neal Long Director of Touchdown Services provided Aching Arms with invaluable mentoring, business planning and strategy expertise. Neal is very much a member of the Aching Arms team and going forward, he will focus on corporate fundraising, an area we plan to prioritize in the next 12 months.

Lynne Johnston has again been integral in managing 3 of our social media platforms. Lynne works collaboratively with every member of the staff team to ensure our messaging is clear and sensitive. Lynne also has provided graphic design services, including the Forget Me Not Heart and Christmas Bauble fundraisers, these have both generated fantastic donations. Without the dedication and expertise Lynne provides to Aching Arms our connections with

parents, supporters and our community would not be as well respected as they are and we would not have such high follower numbers.

## **Volunteers**

We have a very strong and committed volunteer base of around 140 people. Most of our volunteers have experienced the loss of a baby and wish to reach out to others so they too can find comfort from an Aching Arms Bear. Volunteers have various roles, most of which require them to prepare, personalise and deliver our comfort bears either to their local hospital or post directly to bereaved parents who have requested one.

Since the beginning of August 2019, we have had 24 new volunteers join us. Most are new hospital volunteers, but some are postal, project support and media. We have had 5 volunteers step down, mainly due to personal reasons/ change of circumstances. We continue to receive emails regularly from people who would like to volunteer for us, mainly wanting to prepare and deliver bears. Some of them request for us to keep their details on file in case a position at their local hospital becomes free, and so we currently have 46 names on our 'volunteer interest' list.

Communication with volunteers increased during the pandemic, ensuring they were kept up to date on any changes and government guidelines that may affect how they did their role. We made sure all Covid19 Government Guidance was followed to keep our volunteers safe.

We continue to ensure our volunteers feel like a part of the Aching Arms team despite being located in all four nations of the UK. We have a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator who oversees both the wellbeing of the UK wide team and supports them to perform their roles to the best of their ability. We undertake an annual survey of our volunteers and year on year have had very positive feedback. We personally respond to any areas identified for improvement.

Our volunteers are an essential part of our charity and we simply couldn't support as many families as we do without them.

## **Health Professionals**

The overall results of the 20 Health Professionals survey shows a very positive picture of how well respected Aching Arms is by those working with us. 45 hospitals responded to the annual survey, compared to 29 in 2019. This response rate is lower at 30% compared to 41% in 2019 but considering midwives and nurses in the NHS are dealing with new ways of working and extra pressures due to the Covid 19 pandemic this overall response from hospitals is extremely positive. Summed up by this comment,

*"The Aching Arms bears provide a physical comfort for parents. I was supporting a bereaved mum at home a few weeks after her baby passed on the neonatal unit. She became a little upset just as her young daughter entered the room. Her daughter said don't worry mummy I will go and get your cuddle bear and she ran upstairs and came back in with the Aching Arms bear which she then gave to her mum. Her mum said it was a great source of comfort to her when she was upset, being able to hold the bear."*

## **MERCHANDISE**

This year has been a very positive one with regards to merchandise. We've made some progress towards adding our own shop onto the website to streamline sales, added a huge range of new merchandise including the beautiful East of India items, and have further products already in the pipeline for later in the year. With the increased support from Lynne,

our regular social media presence has meant an increase in sales. We have very positive feedback and are now labelled as a 'Top Seller' on Ebay.

We have ambitious plans for the coming year. We plan to have our online shop up and running on the website. We also plan to add more official AA items, launch BLAW craft videos, create a care pack for a friend after loss. We'll also increase the social media visibility of our online shop so as to increase awareness of our merchandise.

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**RESEARCH**

Aching Arms have been actively supporting a research project being carried out by a doctoral student at Canterbury Christ Church University. She is researching baby loss and bereavement support pathways for families from Black Asian and other Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Recruitment is currently ongoing.

Our trustee Dr. Anna Clancy is supervising a research project being carried out by a trainee clinical psychologist at Lancaster University. This project will be fully funded by the University and the research question will focus on the experiences of fathers whose baby died during pregnancy or at birth and whether the offer of transitional objects, such as Aching Arms bears, helped them. As supervisor, Anna is supporting with writing the ethics application, preparing interview materials, recruitment and providing feedback on the final write up. It is anticipated that the project will be completed in 2022 and the trainee is aiming to get it published in a peer reviewed journal. Recruitment will likely take place in late 2021.

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**TOWARDS 2021**

As I write this in early 2021, the pandemic is still not behind us. While the outlook is now more optimistic, there are still uncertainties in the road ahead. However, I have full confidence in the team, volunteers and board of Aching Arms that we will continue to thrive and serve our communities.

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Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sundeep Kaur

Chairperson

Aching Arms

Registered Charity: 1153296

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