

Dear Donna,

I write this letter to you, to honour the love and the care you bring to Tameside & Glossop and to acknowledge your courage in the choice you make everyday to be in relationship to the distress of those around you.

I want to start by recognising that your choice to be in relationship with the fear, pain and complexity of people's mental distress is not the easy one. It has meant you bringing so much of yourself to your work, indeed it has meant that the division between life and work - that so many of us try and protect - is often just not there for you. But it has given you power to bring light, joy and hope to so many people around you, something that many in our mental health systems do not feel they achieve for those they seek to help and support.

I want to appreciate this is not the choice that we generally make in our mental health systems in the UK. In fact, we have created a complex system that feels so dominant and inevitable, that making the choices that you make everyday seems neither possible, indeed imaginable for many.

I have faced many moments in my own life when I have wanted to disconnect from the struggle and despair of those around me, even those closest to me. In my encounters with the mental health system, I have felt like I have been asked to pass off my responsibility, to place the emotional health of those around me in the hands of a professional, to give ourselves to someone whose job it is to fix us.

Everyday, you choose to welcome everyone at your door, unlike others who only let those that fit the criteria enter. You chose to see the whole person, when asked to place people into categories. You choose to listen, when told to diagnose. You choose to trust yours and each person's own insight and expertise, whilst being told these matter less than others. You choose to hold a responsibility for people's chance to lead a better life, when all that is asked of you is to do your bit and meet what you are funded to achieve. You choose to respond relationally - in relationship to people and their distress - in a system that has been built over decades to respond mechanistically - like a machine that processes and prescribes.

These choices you make everyday have been the life and energy of Living Well in Tameside & Glossop, shaping and forming it from the outset of your collective journey. Through this you have been nurturing the context for people to make choices to be in relationship with one another everyday. This has not been easy.

You have felt the hopelessness of those around you when facing a mechanistic system that seems stuck, that can feel impossible to change. I want to honour the choice you have made to foster hope in yourself and those around you and to maintain a commitment to the possibility you see and feel when we nurture our relationships.

Thank you, Jo Harrington

SENIOR ASSOCIATE, INNOVATION UNIT