

Meet Our Team:

Valerie Unsworth – Nurse Consultant

What is your professional background?

I am a nurse with a Masters Degree in Public Health and a Bachelors Degree in Infection Prevention and Control. My career started in hospital intensive care where I nursed very sick patients. I really enjoyed this, but it also made me want to work to prevent illness in the first place. So that's what started me on my journey through hospital infection control work and then into Public Health!

How do you respond to an outbreak?

The first thing is that we need to know that we have an outbreak. Early detection of outbreaks is very important, we can't do anything if we don't know about it! We do that through collecting information about number of cases and rates of diseases.

When we know about an outbreak we can introduce 'control measures' which might include social distancing and better hand hygiene. We'll also make sure the right people are tested and, if they are positive, asked them self-isolate at home along with any people they have had close contact with.

All this must happen quickly and often before we have the whole picture. It can be quite frantic and very rushed!

What has been most difficult challenge for you during the pandemic so far?

There's been a few! I live alone and so it's been very difficult for me at times. I really miss the camaraderie and the fun of the workplace. It's been a weird time for everyone I think – sometimes, especially in the early days, I had to pinch myself to see if this was really happening.



My workload has been really busy. I've worked weekends, evenings and long hours. This weekend I had Friday off and that was my first three-day break since Christmas! (It was wonderful!)

I also worry that I'm missing things. My work has been virtually all COVID-19 since February and I know that I'm not giving the attention to other parts of my job (like flu, vulnerable adults or sexual health) that I did before. Fortunately, I work with an amazing group of people who I can rely on.

Finally, I have found what has happened in care homes very difficult. Staff in care homes have done an amazing job trying to keep their residents safe. But it's been very difficult for them and there have been outbreaks and sadly deaths. That's very hard to deal with, knowing that people are dying alone without being able to be visited by their loved ones.

Have there been any positive experiences?

I might be quite strange but I've always enjoyed infectious diseases! I find them fascinating and I really like the detective work of figuring out how an outbreak started. So, while I really worry about the impact COVID-19 has on people and their families, part of me has found the challenge a very fulfilling experience and certainly something I've learned a lot from.

I also work with an amazing Public Health team. I've enjoyed creating a training programme to skill up colleagues in health protection work and to help them support the COVID response. I'm quite proud of that and it was pulled together very quickly.

Also, since lockdown started I have taken up running. I have a training app which involves me being chased by zombies which is always fun. Finally, I'm so glad that I work at Sandwell with supportive, professional and funny colleagues. That's been a real high.

As an expert on COVID-19, what's your advice to the people of Sandwell?

We all need to keep ourselves, our friends and our communities safe. Keeping up to date with national guidance is really important. We need to know what prevention measures are so we can follow them.

But I'd say the most important thing right now is to not become complacent. COVID hasn't gone away. We all need to maintain social distancing, not gather together and to follow the public health guidance. That will keep us safe and it will also keep our family, our friends and our communities safe.