

Covid-19: Reacting to a crisis



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Overview of Ageless Thanet

Ageless Thanet is a National Lottery Community Fund project, part of the Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better programme. In 2015 we were awarded £3 million to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the 50+ community in Thanet.

The project is split into four key areas, Wellbeing Activities, Planning for Later Life, Active Citizenship, and Age-Friendly Business Scheme.

As part of our Wellbeing Activities we have provided free activities for Thanet's over 50s, including Belly Dancing, Art Classes, Tai Chi, Photography, Ballet, Walking Netball, to name but a few. Our sixth year is all about sustainability, so we have started charging for some of our activities.

Our Life Planners work with people who are facing a particularly difficult time, whether that is due to ill health, redundancy, difficulty adjusting to retirement, or financial issues, anything life-changing that could put them at risk of becoming lonely or isolated.

Active Citizenship organise our volunteering programme, working with volunteers who want to make Thanet a great place to grow older. We have volunteer governance panel members, those who attend public engagement events with us, as well as those who wish to provide a peer-led activity.

Through our Age-Friendly Business Scheme we are working with local businesses who are meeting the needs of Thanet's older people. In return they offer a discount or incentive to anyone with one of our Ageless Thanet Reward Cards.

What are our key objectives?



Reduce loneliness



Reduce isolation



Improve mental wellbeing



Improve physical health



Put older people at the heart of what we do



Challenge negative stereotypes of ageing



Make Thanet a great place to grow older

Covid-19 Timeline



16th March

Ageless Thanet Club is cancelled due to venue closure as a result of Covid-19



18th March

In preparation for lockdown, we begin to share tutorials on how to get people online



23rd March

Government announces full lockdown
We cancel implementation of charging model for the Ageless Thanet Reward Card



5th May

Staff start delivery through Zoom



17th March

Staff begin to work from home

All activities cancelled

Telephone Befriending begins



20th March

Government announces that all leisure facilities had to close, resulting in the closure of the Ageless Thanet Feelgood Factory



27th April

Launch of Volunteer Shopping Collection and Delivery Service



13th May

Lockdown has been eased so that we can go out for exercise multiple times a day, sit in parks or beaches and meet one other person from a different household

Covid-19 Timeline



22nd May

Volunteers begin delivering befriending calls



25th-29th May

First online Wellbeing Week



10th June

First online Wellbeing Activity



15th June

Letter posted out to all Reward Cardholders



26th June

Government announces that Community venues can reopen.

We can now investigate the possibility of starting face-to-face activities again



27th May

Flier promoting the project is distributed in food parcels in a bid to reach the most isolated



11th June

Government announces that people can meet outside in groups of 6.

Tai Chi outside to begin on 24th June



17th June

First volunteer-led activity takes place online



4th July

Government relaxes lockdown further for general population. Lots of businesses can now reopen.

What did we do?

This report outlines what we did in reaction to Covid-19, and highlights each area of the project's key learning, and it was written at the beginning of July 2020, approximately 100 days into UK's lockdown. We will add to this report later in the year to discuss our learning about recovering from the impact of Covid-19.

Thanet has high levels of deprivation, and continues to be ranked as the most deprived local authority area in Kent (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019), and the 34th most deprived local authority nationally. There is a relationship between high levels of deprivation and poor health outcomes, with males living in the least deprived areas living on average 9.4 years longer than those living the most deprived areas (The King's Fund, 2020). It is not surprising therefore, that Cliftonville West (ranked by the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 as being in the bottom 10% for levels of medical deprivation in the country), has seen more deaths from Covid-19 than all other areas of Thanet (ONS).

In the week before lockdown we established our office number as a helpline, encouraging anyone who was worried to give us a call. Even if we were not able to directly help them, we knew that we would be able to signpost them to other local organisations who could.

Unsurprisingly we received a lot of phone calls from people who were concerned that due to shielding, they would not be able to do their food shopping or collect their prescriptions. We worked closely with partners to support a Thanet and East Kent wide initiative, led by Social Enterprise Kent's social prescribing service, Connect Well East Kent.

The Connect Well social prescribing team have 2 staff covering the whole of East Kent (Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone, Ashford, Thanet). They took over 12,000 calls in April alone. The Active Citizenship team worked closely with our social prescribing team. In total we have organised or delivered a total of 996 food and prescription deliveries in Thanet.



**We have organised
or delivered
996
food parcels and
prescriptions in Thanet**

Active Citizenship - Volunteering

These difficult times have affected us all differently, which is something that we have seen within our volunteering side of the project. We've seen more people than ever sign up to volunteer, keen to do their part for the community, yet, quite understandably some of our regular volunteers have felt overwhelmed and needed to take a step back. Pandemic or not, we have always taken a flexible approach to volunteering, with volunteers more than welcome to give as much or as little time, as and when they want to.

There is also a big difference between hosting an activity in person, compared with running it online. Initially we found that the majority of our volunteers who run activities weren't keen on moving to online sessions. There were a number of reasons for this. Some said they did not feel confident enough using technology to run their activity on Zoom, there were fears over "messaging it up" or making mistakes, while others felt self-conscious about being the focal point of the session. There was also a feeling among some people that this would be a temporary measure, and face-to-face activities would be able to resume as normal within a month or so, and therefore didn't feel like they wanted to make the move to online activities. Some volunteer-led groups decided that moving their group to Zoom wasn't for them, and preferred to keep in touch with each other via a WhatsApp group which they set up at the beginning on lockdown.

As time went on and things started to calm down a bit, we were able to spend more time with volunteers to help them feel more confident using Zoom. Our volunteers are now running a fortnightly quiz, a coffee and chat get-together, and a musician's forum to discuss how to safely bring back live music to the local area. We have planned language and knitting sessions too.

During Volunteers' Week we would usually host a get-together of all our volunteers to say Thank You and to celebrate all of their achievements. However, as a result of lockdown it was necessary to host it online this year. The event prompted some great conversations, allowing volunteers to continue to get involved in shaping what the project offers. We have continued to hold our governance panel meetings during lockdown via Microsoft Teams, as it is really important to us that we put older people at the heart of what we do, and involve them in the decision making process.

Key Learning:

- We thought that it would be a relatively smooth transition to move our volunteer-led activities online, but it took a lot more time than we thought.
- Not having the option to show people how to use online tools meant that it took longer to set up virtual sessions. Sometimes it was both staff, participants and volunteers who needed to learn how to use it.
- Using Zoom means it becomes easier to offer evening activities, as you don't have to factor in opening/closing a venue or staff time.
- With 'popping into the office' no longer an option, we set up a weekly online drop-in to support our volunteers. All our volunteers know that there is someone online to chat through any concerns or other issues they may have.

Telephone Befriending

With the removal of all face to face activities, including our IT drop in clinics, we were very concerned about the widening of any existing digital divide, and the isolation that not being able to communicate virtually would quickly bring to some of our 50+ residents.

We set up our Telephone Befriending Service because it was really important to us that those who were not online weren't forgotten and could still feel connected. We had not provided a befriending service as part of Ageless Thanet before and approached Red Zebra Community Solutions (a previous partner on the project), who had set up a similar service a couple of years ago, for support and advice to enable us to start the service quickly.

So the service could start immediately a member of staff initially took on the befriending calls, whilst we recruited volunteers. A large number of those on our weekly befriending calls list had a moderate degree of complexity, regularly discussing difficult subjects such as mental health battles, self-harm and eating disorders. We didn't feel comfortable transferring their weekly call to a volunteer, who could feel overwhelmed by this. It was decided that the member of staff would continue to call those who were considered 'complex', therefore allowing our volunteers to start helping most callers quickly. This also meant that the volunteers didn't have to undergo extensive training and could feel useful immediately and that callers didn't have to wait to be contacted.

**Our staff and volunteers
have made over**

267

befriending calls



The service has been extremely valuable for those who are most at risk of loneliness and isolation during the Covid-19 crisis. Here is an example of how one person has appreciated it:

Mrs X, who had a weekly call with Ageless Thanet team member Pam Hulance, was becoming increasingly worried about her adult son who has additional needs for whom she is the sole carer. One of the complications of Mrs X's son's condition is such that he needs special attention when he eats as he can quickly choke, and therefore constant supervision is required. Mrs X was not well herself, and suspected she would at some point in the near future need a trip to hospital as her condition was worsening. Pam helped put emergency plans in place (including liaising with Kent County Council's social care and safeguarding teams, and other voluntary sector partners including East Kent Mencap), so when the time came for her to have a stay in hospital, she knew that her son would be cared for.

Our volunteers continue to play a key role in Ageless Thanet, both in leading activities and developing our response to the current situation. As a result of benefiting from calls themselves, we have seen befriended sign up to become volunteer callers.

Feedback has shown that people are still feeling very frightened and are unsure venturing out and about again, so we know that there will still be a need for the Telephone Befriending Service and our online activities once lockdown has been fully lifted.

We are also dispelling the myth that telephone befriending is just for people with 'high needs/poor health or mobility concerns or those with mental health issues or anxieties etc. Nor is it solely for people living on their own, rather, you 'don't have to be alone to be lonely'. Also, we are now finding that people who weren't sure they needed someone to talk to at first back in March, may have not considered how long they might be isolated – so we have been revisiting all those we introduced to the programme at the start too.

Key Learning:

- We did not anticipate the number of people requesting a weekly call would present with complex issues, such as being recently bereaved and mental health conditions. We did not feel that we could ask a volunteer to make these calls, as we had only been able to offer minimal training.
- Flexibility is key. In some instances you may need to make an additional call in a few days to see how the person is doing if they are struggling.
- Having an emergency contact for the befriended is very important. You need to have a method of contacting a friend or relative to make sure a person is OK, in case they don't answer the phone. Particularly in these stressful times it is easy to forget things, so being able to check with a relative whether they have heard from the person that day can often result in the police not needing to be called to conduct a welfare check.

Life Planning

Our Life Planners (Citizens Advice Thanet) have been working remotely, conducting advice sessions with clients over the telephone. This has created some barriers for clients who either do not have access to technology, or are unable to use it.

Life Planning clients are often vulnerable, facing difficult challenges and situations which Covid-19 has exacerbated. Mental wellbeing has been impacted, often fuelling pre-existing feelings of anxiety and depression.

Financial stability has also been threatened through redundancies, reduced hours at work, and an increase in waiting times for benefit applications.

Accessing further support has also been challenging due to organisations being overwhelmed with demand, or operating at a reduced capacity.

To support their most vulnerable clients, the Life Planners are offering an additional weekly phone call to offer encouragement, support and keep morale up. Clients have said that it helps just knowing that a Life Planner is there at the end of the phone to help when needed.



Key Learning:

- It has proved quite challenging to offer the full Life Planning service to clients who do not have access to technology. For those who have access to technology, but not the skills to use it, we have offered step by step support over the phone.
- It has been very important to maintain relationships with other organisations during lockdown. This helps to avoid confusion about what service we are providing, as well as offering new opportunities. As a result we were able to have a flier about the project included in local food parcels.
- Despite saving time from not needing to travel to home visits, certain factors have proved time consuming. For example, needing to find new activities for people to get involved in online, and having to talk through how to email documents for those who are less familiar with technology.

Wellbeing Activities

As a result of suspending all face-to-face activities, it was necessary to temporarily close the Ageless Thanet Feelgood Factory and cancel all Wellbeing Activities. As time went on, and the initial panic calmed, we trialed two online activities. Whilst uptake of our online activities was initially quite low, with the yoga activity unable to go ahead, those that took part in the photography course thoroughly enjoyed it.

“ I am actually excited about it as I keep thinking about how to take my next pictures and practice what I have learnt. Looking forward to the next one. ”

Online photopgraphy participant

Once people from different households were allowed to meet outside, we started offering Tai Chi in the open air in groups of five (plus facilitator). As everyone adjusts to 'the new normal', we plan to offer a combination of online and face-to-face activities to accommodate those who are eager to get back to our activities, and those who are anxious about socialising with others.

The Ageless Thanet Feelgood Factory is a community hub, which serves as an area for people to meet and take part in activities, as well as hosting Toning Tables. These are power-assisted equipment designed for low-impact exercise, ideal for those who have joint/mobility issues. The Feelgood Factory is a lifeline for many people, and we are receiving regular calls inquiring about when it can reopen. Whilst online activities is a good substitute, they are no comparison to the community that has been built within the Feelgood Factory.

Key Learning:

- We have been posting taster videos of previous activities to give people something to look forward to once restrictions have been lifted. These have been received well with people posting positive comments and expressing an interest.
- Whilst we have promoted the online activities using methods we know work well, we have only had low numbers of people sign up. It's important to remember that when starting something new it can take a while for people to find out and decide to get involved.
- Outdoor Tai Chi proved to be very popular. The five places were filled by people who had signed up to the Tai Chi activity that was cancelled due to lockdown. They commented that they were pleased to be able to get back to this form of exercise and that lockdown had negatively impacted their wellbeing.

Age-Friendly Business Scheme

As a result of the outbreak of Covid-19, we had to make some tough decisions around postponing the implementation of the charging model for the Ageless Thanet Reward Card. We felt that it wasn't ethical to start charging for the card, when there was the inevitability of businesses having to close (whether temporarily or permanently), as well as lots of people becoming financially worse off. We decided that we would spend the remainder of the sixth year of the project supporting the businesses to recover and helping our Reward Cardholders to adjust to "the new normal".

As well as staying in touch with our Reward Cardholders by email, in June we also sent them a letter to inform them that we would not be implementing the charge for the card, and to make sure that they were aware of what support we could offer. We also included a postcard for them to send to family or friends, or simply to brighten up their fridge. This prompted many of them to get in touch to update their email addresses. We have approximately 9,000 people on our database, so where possible it is preferable to be able to contact them via email, as postage is costly.

We held our first online Wellbeing week in May, followed by another in July. This was to enable our businesses to offer something 'fun' and enjoyable for our cardholders and stay connected with them. It had the added benefit of in upskilling the businesses in delivering online sessions.

Our business networking meetings moved online, and we set up a closed Facebook group for more ad-hoc networking as well as easier communication with the businesses. Once the group is up and running we will invite businesses to become part of the administration of the group, in turn feeding into our new sustainability and legacy plan. We hope that the measures we are taking will support those businesses to become more resilient, and continue supporting their community in the future.

We used this time to develop our relationship with the businesses and help them become more resilient. Our Age-Friendly Business Consultant worked with businesses on a one-to-one basis offering them support with adapting to doing business online, for example helping them develop their social media presence. We have also been able to offer the businesses free online training on a huge range of topics including how they could be ready to reopen once it was safe to do so.

Key Learning:

- It's OK to stop what you had planned and refocus to meet current needs. Because of our experience of using the Ageing Better 'Test and Learn' ethos for the previous five years, we felt confident in using this time to refocus this area of the project. It was a huge decision to cancel the introduction of the charging model, something that we had been working towards for a long time, but it was the right thing to do.
- The pandemic encouraged businesses to step out of their comfort zone and use social media and other online platforms for the first time. Businesses have been encouraged and supported to use Eventbrite, Facebook Live and Zoom for the second Wellbeing Week in July. We have already seen an increase in engagement from Reward Card Holders for these events.

We hope that it is useful to see how we responded to the Covid-19 crisis. It has been a huge learning curve for everyone involved, and whilst we hope that we won't have to experience anything similar again, we certainly feel that we have come out of these unprecedented times more resilient.

Bibliography

The King's Fund. 2020. What are Health Inequalities [online], Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/what-are-health-inequalities>. [Accessed 17th June 2020].

Find out more...



If you would like to find out more about the Ageless Thanet project, please get in touch -

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SEK Social Enterprise Kent

Social Enterprise Kent, the lead organisation of the Ageless Thanet project, is a Community Interest Company (CIC), registered with, and regulated by, the CIC Regulator. We have been in operation for over 30 years, with the overarching vision of "Improving Lives, Supporting Communities".

Our key aims:

To provide support for people, particularly in areas of deprivation or for those most disadvantaged, to gain skills and employment

To support the creation, organisation and management of social enterprises and small enterprises; and to develop a way of making this sustainable

To support in the regeneration of deprived areas in Kent, by creating jobs and skills

If you would like to find out more about SEK, we would love to hear from you -

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