

Week 3 of the Covid 19 Lockdown: Building Community Support from the Grass Roots.

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I am a local Councillor for the Selsdon area (population 20,000 – (7,000 70+)) of Croydon, my day job involves managing a charity (Selsdon Contact) that looks after elderly and vulnerable residents living in the local area. The main aim of our charity is to help people remain independent in their own homes for as long as possible My days are usually taken up making sure that our regular shopping bus is picking up ‘neighbours in need’ and taking them to the local supermarket or making sure our army of volunteer befrienders are visiting the correct addresses, ensuring that outings and coffee mornings are organised and advising and supporting our team of 270 amazing volunteers.

On the 13th March, I could see the clouds of Covid 19 gathering, I started cancelling the shopping bus, coffee morning, outings as these were all events where over 70s gathered. I contacted our IT providers to discuss how we could continue providing a befriending service remotely to the 320 clients who use our services and sat down and thought about how we were going to support our community through the upcoming storm.....

At the same time Jaz Potter a community worker from a local Church was thinking much the same thing. Jaz set up a Facebook group ‘Coronavirus Selsdon Support’. This group quickly grew to 500 members. Each new member wanted to volunteer and had different ideas on how they could help.

Below is a summary of what we have learnt and achieved in the first three weeks of lockdown:-

WhatsApp and Facebook are great tools if you want to help your neighbours or the street you live in but to help a wider area you need more structure in place?

The Facebook page generated a lot of interest and now has 922 members it has a corresponding WhatsApp group – 106 members and birthed a webpage Selsdoncovid19.co.uk. From the initial interest a working group was gathered that comprised the local churches, charities and businesses.

A plan was agreed that in week one of lockdown Selsdon Contact would identify its most vulnerable clients and the group would ask for food donations from the public. Selsdon Sainsbury agreed to put collection points in their store and Contact phoned all their clients and gave them a rating: -

Red = No access to family living close by and no access to Internet

Amber = Access to either family living close by or access to the Internet

Green = Family living close by and access to the Internet

This exercise identified 140 clients that needed a general bag of shopping in the first week. It was agreed that the bags would be free for each client, but a note would be put in bags asking for donations to be made to Contact if the recipients wished to. We were able to use the financial controls and structures of an established charity to collect and bank donations. In the first week, using a mix of existing volunteers and new recruits we were able to deliver 140 shopping bags to our most vulnerable residents.

Review what you are doing regularly?

After week 1 - Jaz and I sat down and reviewed the first week of operation. We identified the following issues.

- Donations of food from the public had not matched the amount of food that was needed for our clients.
- The Trustees of Contact had to subsidise the project by £800 in the first week to be able to purchase food for the clients. However, as the week went on cash donations started to come in from the public, these donations came to £915 by the end of the first week.
- As the week had gone on it was getting increasingly difficult to buy items in bulk for the food bags. We had attempted to purchase items from local supermarkets and wholesalers (Macro).
- The number of clients needing help during the week had increased to around 350 people.
- We had enquiries from about 1,000 residents who wanted to help our effort but were not being used by the current project.
- The Local Council stated that they were going to set up a food delivery hub in Selsdon library, subsequently the Council changed their plans and no hub has been set up in the local area.
- Croydon Neighbourhood Care (CNCA) had ceased running their DBS checking service so we had no way of checking the new volunteers against safeguarding guidelines.
- The Local authority had advised us to plan for the worst and assume that both clients and volunteers would become sick.
- Bashford Butchers (a local business) had agreed to donate 140 meat packs to deliver to our clients the following week.

Adapt your plan as you go

- Due to these issues we decided to adapt our plans for the coming weeks. We would continue to deliver 140 food bags to our most vulnerable clients for another week.
- At the same time, we would transition to a street champion model of working
 - Our (DBS checked) experienced volunteers would be the main point of contact for our expanding client list of 350 residents. Each volunteer would phone around 19 clients /week to check on their needs and have a chat.
 - We would aim to have a couple of street champions in place for every road in Selsdon. If the phone calls resulted in practical tasks that needed undertaken these would be covered by the new street champions.
 - The experienced (DBS) volunteers would be phoning clients regularly to check that tasks were completed, and clients were happy.
 - Any financial transactions would still be made through Selsdon Contact with proper financial controls and audit trail.
- By the end of the second week we had identified 'Street Champions' to cover most of the roads in Selsdon.
- We had delivered a further 140 bags of food to the most vulnerable residents.
- 15 experienced (DBS) volunteers were able to work remotely and access Contacts client files from home (many thanks must go to our IT supplier QDOS Computer consulting based in Purley- who have done a lot of pro-bono work to set this up).
- A new website was launched selsdoncovid19.co.uk this gave residents information about street champions and local services.

- As news about our service was published more donations came in, including a £500 cheque from the Selsdon Residents Association.
- The local fire brigade got in touch and offered to help us with deliveries and prescription collections.
- Volunteers started hosting a weekly virtual pub quiz for the local area.

Week 3 – The latest update

- Last week 350 vulnerable residents got a befriending call from a volunteer at Contact. This led to hundreds of actions being undertaken by local street champions.
- Cllr. Stuart Milson agreed to pay for a leaflet (see attached) to go through every door letting people know the name and contact details for their 'Street Champion'. These leaflets have now been delivered to every household by volunteers.
- The leaflets are already having a positive impact - re-assuring residents that a safety net is in place and building community cohesion.
- Croydon High School (local secondary school) asked to get involved with the project and will open their kitchen, their catering staff will cook and chill 150 meals for us at a cost of £2 a meal. These will be then be delivered to our most vulnerable residents by volunteers. Croydon High have agreed to do this every week until the lock down ends.
- The local rotary club have donated £1,200 to cover the cost of these meals for the next four weeks.

Conclusion

Although we are living through very challenging times and facing the reality of friends and family getting ill and dying in a way we have never seen before. The current environment is also creating a new sense of community cohesion and support. The crime rate is dropping and at the same time we are seeing countless examples of individuals stepping forward and volunteering to help their neighbours. On Easter Sunday the Prime Minister said the following words about the NHS:-

“That is why we will defeat this coronavirus and defeat it together. We will win because our NHS is the beating heart of this country. It is the best of this country. It is unconquerable. It is powered by love.”

From the evidence I have seen over the last three weeks, it is not only the NHS that is powered by love. In a strange way the coronavirus is showing us that the foundations of our communities, towns and cities are powered by that same love.