

## **Report from the Local Community Volunteers, 26th April 2021**

Last March already seems like a different time, even if so many aspects of life remain impacted. Back then it felt as if clear national advice and support were slow in coming and by mid-March 2020 many people were seriously worried about how they could stay safe and cope practically. My daily commute to London ceased and I felt that I could perhaps be of use in helping with our local pandemic response, which was much discussed in our house as I am married to Graham Lee, Councillor responsible for the Parish Emergency Response. A quickly convened meeting with Clare and we had a plan.

We needed to know who in the parish might need support and who would be willing to be part of a volunteer team to provide it. Very simple really. And it was likely that a good number of those who might need support would be not be digitally active. So a simple flyer was dropped to every address - that's around 1300 households. The surgery also contacted their vulnerable list and the pharmacy referred callers to us as their delivery service quickly became overwhelmed.

Very quickly the dedicated helpline phone started to ring, with both offers of help, and requests for support. All volunteers were screened by the Parish Council to ensure full safeguarding and anti fraud compliance.

Interventions to support those registered with the helpline included shopping, prescriptions, wellbeing check in phone calls and the creation and delivery of a cheery Volunteer Newsletter delivered regularly to the smaller group who were shielding and more widely through the village via the Community Facebook page, HPC and local stores.

We also devised a programme of initiatives to provide a little variety in lockdown and beyond, with an opportunity for a little safe doorstep contact. These included the delivery of tulips kindly donated by Herstmonceux Castle, MayDay cakes donated by The Little Bake Shop, the 'time for tea and a chat' bank holiday weekend initiative, and more recently more cakes (always popular) and plants, first from Rivermead and then Boreham St Nurseries, to cheer up the windowsill.

More random tasks included connecting people up who lost contact, helping with correct addresses for food parcels, recycling, and letter writing.

We also took referrals from Wealden DC as their community hub here.

In the last 13 months around 600 individual interventions have been made by around 20 volunteers.

Just before Christmas a seasonal newsletter was delivered to the whole village full of updates and cheer and accompanied by a parish council newsletter and a Christmas card which the VIC took the lead on, selecting 6 class winners from the wonderful cards drawn at the primary school. A great success and something the village hopes to continue in the future – both newsletters and cards.

As things have eased we have reassessed and agreed with HPC that the phone line will continue to be manned and the emergency response capacity is there, semi dormant but ready to be reactivated if required. Four feet of snow might seem like a simpler emergency for next time perhaps.

In two specific ways we go forward stronger I think. Firstly a lot of individual connections have been made with a good number of residents who still feel lonely or isolated regardless of the opening up. Many volunteers are now in regular touch helping out these folk who may lack neighbours and family, and will struggle to get fully back to their pre-pandemic lives. This is less about volunteering and more about new friendships in a small rural community.

In addition in recent months all the voluntary groups in the village have come together and pooled knowledge and capacity to offer support to an enlarged group. In this way an additional layer of resilience, a safety net if you like, should now be in place here and we will all work to sustain it so no local person feels unsupported or forgotten.

My thanks to Clare for her energy in getting this effort going, to a great team of volunteers without whom nothing would have been possible, to my husband for his support and guidance as the phone started to ring a lot, and to many local residents who had to cope patiently with our amateur attempts at mass shopping!

Pippa Cross  
Co-ordinator