

Portfolio Holders COVID 19 Briefing July 2020
Community Grants and Community Development

Exeter Community Wellbeing

Exeter City Council and Wellbeing Exeter have been working together to provide practical help and support for local people to get through the coronavirus pandemic. We set up **Exeter Community Wellbeing** to assist individuals and community groups to help and support each other at this challenging time.

The service has made over 2,875 connections through the hotline with many more at neighbourhood level. Tens of thousands of leaflets have gone through doors, frequent shout outs on the radio, social media and in the local news as well as sharing of the helpline details across GP practices, local groups, not for profits and volunteer networks, have all contributed to making sure everyone gets access to the right support.

The council hotline team have dealt with a wide range of calls from local residents who are on the NHS Shielding List, members of family calling from across the UK worried about parents, relatives & individuals that want to volunteer. Calls have ranged from individuals needing food, medication, issues with housing & amenities so not only have the team having to liaise and refer to our fantastic Wellbeing Exeter and the Exeter Community Team working behind the scenes but also liaising with departments within our own & other local councils.

Whilst our offer is a “light touch match-making service” and we are not sending volunteers into people’s homes, we have been very mindful about personal safety issues for everyone involved. We have put together a range of guides and top tips for volunteers and groups to cover key safeguarding issues including: handling money for shopping; making safe deliveries; first aid responses; social distancing etc. We also built a rota of liveried delivery vehicles (ours and partners) to provide added reassurance to the most vulnerable people living alone to help them feel as safe and secure as we can.

We have heard astonishing stories through the Exeter Community Wellbeing network which we have been sharing in weekly blogs and through our social media outlets. Our Wellbeing Exeter Community Builders continue to support local networks in their endeavours to help each other.

The **Wellbeing Support Fund**, which aims to help individuals who find themselves in financial difficulty due to the Coronavirus outbreak and can’t access funds through other initiatives, has now dealt with 174 cases with the majority being directed to existing support within council (e.g. council tax, benefits, and food bank vouchers). 60 awards have been made totalling around £7,000. The scheme is funded by Devon County Council, you can learn more about it on the Council website. The majority of financial hardship requests are for help with utility bills, white goods repairs and rent arrears. We are able to support the majority of people with help with food through the Food Bank and/or local larder schemes as well as a voucher scheme we have negotiated with supermarkets. We also have a voucher scheme for emergency white good replacements such as washing machines and fridges.

During peak times we were taking between 70 and 80 calls a day on the hot line and Council staff were re-deployed from non-essential services to manage the phone lines

and they have (and continue to do) an amazing job responding to a wide variety of needs and concerns. On top of the incoming calls the team have also been undertaking daily outbound calls to people whose details come through from central government, the NHS and Devon County Council through the **NHS Shielding Programme**.

There are around 3,728 people in the NHS Shielding scheme in Exeter with 840 in receipt of weekly food parcels. As the national programme is tapering off we have been assisting vulnerable people to find sustainable solutions to access delivery of food including access to 900 priority shopping slots we have negotiated with local supermarkets.

We have now fully integrated the Exeter Community Wellbeing helpline into the Customer Contact Centre and this is now operating as “business as usual” taking between 5-10 calls a day with call handlers now trained up to cover the community issues from COVID. We can scale this up by re-deploying other staff into the team should the need arise.

There continues to be weekly updates between the teams involved in Exeter Community Wellbeing which includes Wellbeing Exeter partner agencies, City Community Trust and the city council.

Households across Exeter that are on the NHS Shielded group will have received a letter from Government to let them know that the support will stop in terms of free food parcels by the end of July. We will be writing to these residents to let them know that there will be ongoing support available through the city council and Exeter Community Wellbeing service

We will continue to offer a range of practical help for people who are on the **NHS Shielded List**, people living alone and self-isolating, or those caring for someone and needing a bit of help and support whilst self-isolating. We can continue to offer help with an introduction to local neighbourhood or community group for support with things like:

- Collecting food and essential items such as prescriptions
- A conversation if you feel lonely or isolated
- Help for new customers to register for priority supermarket slots
- Referrals to Exeter Foodbank for urgent food supplies for those in need
- Small one-off grants for immediate short term help for people in urgent need with little or no access to money as a result of the pandemic
- Signposting to Government and NHS coronavirus advice and guidance
- Support to look after or improve health and wellbeing

Exeter Connect

Exeter Community Initiatives were awarded the contract to run the new Voluntary Sector Support Service for Exeter in December 2019. The service is now called ‘Exeter Connect’

- 2 Service Managers (job-share) started in post at the start of April 2020 (lockdown started 23 March). Plans to recruit two development workers were on hold during the COVID period: plans are now underway to start recruitment in the next few weeks.
- Exeter Connect will provide free, independent and professional practical support to existing and new community organisations in the city and help groups develop and become self-sustaining. The service will promote improved inclusivity and community connectivity across the city.
- Exeter Connect have supported the Exeter Community Wellbeing work over the past few months helping in the matching of volunteers to COVID community

response groups (Local Area Teams), and helping to provide support for groups. Specific projects to support the COVID response including:

- Updating the Volunteer Information Pack produced through Exeter Community Wellbeing. This has been given to individuals and Local Area Teams which gives clear guidance on a range of issues for group co-ordinators including safeguarding. These packs have been well received and will continue to be developed.
- Co-ordinating individual Local Area Team reports which include data on activity, successes and celebrating innovation, challenges and unforeseen issues.
- Facilitating discussions on the future of the Local Area Teams with the recognition there is the potential of a 'second wave' of COVID-19 later in the year.

As the contract develops Exeter Connect will have a key role in providing information and advice to community groups on where and how to access funds and how to fund raise: this is a critical part of their role in enabling group's to become sustainable. They can also offer to 'hold' funding for community groups that are in their early stages of development and don't as yet have their own bank account. They can offer this on a case by case basis going forward.

Plans to launch Exeter Connect will focus on celebrating the work of the informal local area teams, promoting the positive message of community connection. This will be a way to introduce Exeter Connect and the mission to support local VCSE organisations become self-sustaining. The website and branding is currently under development.

Citizen Advice Exeter

Citizen Advice Exeter were appointed by the Council in October 2019 to provide a city wide Independent Information Advice and Advocacy Service. The purpose of the service is to:

- Ensure free, independent, confidential and impartial advice, information and advocacy is available to help people resolve the problems they face.
- Help address the widening inequality gap for Exeter communities in terms of health, income, employment and access to services
- Work alongside the Council's Housing Needs Team to support customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are experiencing financial and budgeting difficulties

Since October Citizen Advice Exeter have been providing these services from their offices behind the civic centre. Since the start of COVID they have re-established their service on line and by phone with staff and volunteers working from their own homes.

Advice Trends April 2019 – March 2020

Client enquiries: Helped 11,324 clients directly with their advice and information needs. Welfare benefits Overall, there has been a 27.6% increase in welfare benefit enquiries.

The main changes being:

- 27.6% increase about attendance allowance
- 22.8% increase about council tax benefit/local support
- 14.8% increase about DLA/Personal Independence Allowance
- Also dealt with 4,164 new enquires about Universal Credit.

Debt: There has been 6% increase in debt enquiries. The main changes being:

- 27.2% increase about private rent arrears
- 22.8% increase about fuel debt

Employment: There has been a 4.7% decrease in employment enquiries. The main changes being:

- 28.9% decrease about self-employment
- 9.7% decrease about pay and entitlements
- 1% decrease about dispute resolution

Housing: There has been a 13.7% increase in housing enquiries. The main changes being:

- 57.5% increase about threatened homelessness
- 19.7% increase about owner occupier property
- 14.3% increase about actual homelessness

Ward profiles of the data are available

Future Plans:

- Training for Well Being Exeter Community Enablers and Connectors: CAB are exploring delivering 'modular' on-line style training – 1hr bite size training sessions to 4 – 6 individuals
- Promotional Events / Pop up Information and Advice Session: Potential venues have been identified in the wards with the highest levels of inequalities, to hold 'clinics'. Due to COVID19 Citizen Advice have been unable to continue with this style of promotional work but a significant promotion of on line resources have been taking place via social media platforms.
- Working in Partnership with AGE UK: plans to support AGE UK at their monthly coffee morning in St Stephen's Church on Exeter High Street been postponed due to COVID19 and social distancing regulations. There are plans to do some joint working around Scams Awareness later in the year.

The contract includes a requirement for the CAB Court team to identify clients who are at risk of homelessness and refer them to the Council to offer support to prevent this. Referral systems are being reviewed due to COVID restrictions. Citizen Advice have taken part in the Exeter Community Wellbeing partnership response to COVID. It has been really valuable to have a close working relationship, so that call handlers can make quick referrals for people who could benefit from financial help and support.

COVID-19 Community Grants Fund

The Exeter COVID-19 Community Action Fund was set up at the outset of the COVID pandemic to help community groups and organisations as they step up to help those people most affected by the pandemic. The fund is supported by Exeter City Council and a generous £100,000 contribution from the Exeter Chiefs Foundation.

The initial fund offered up to £3,000 to community organisations who were facing a loss of income. The Governments Business Grant became available in May at which point the £3,000 grant was stopped. The Fund is still open to support groups and organisations with a one-off grant of up to £1,000 to support projects for community led activities that will:

- meet urgent needs within the community
- cover transport costs for getting vital supplies to people isolated at home
- help people to stay connected and informed
- help people maintain and support mental health and wellbeing

To date £107,509 has been awarded to 70 applicants (24 refused)

