

## From social meet-ups to social distancing: how women are being supported to stay connected

Women of Willowbrae: Edinburgh

How a community group took a creative approach to supporting their neighbourhood and maintaining connections during COVID-19

*“Moving from being a social group to a community action group supporting mental health and well-being has been really positive for lots of people locally.”*

Rachel King, Women of Willowbrae



### What was the community need?

The importance of supporting mental health has come to the fore during the COVID-19 response. Established mental health support mechanisms within third and community sectors have been challenged in meeting the emerging needs of those who experience mental health issues. This is also true for people who are vulnerable or isolated during the lockdown period.

Feeling supported within local community is evidenced to support mental wellbeing. However the lockdown created circumstances in which many people felt anxious and unable to move freely even within their own neighbourhoods. This then undermined their sense of connectivity and inclusion.

The Women of Willowbrae (WoW) recognised the need to support the mental health of people living in the local community. This included being creative in supporting women who were unable to leave their homes to stay connected and ensuring women felt they were contributing to the support on offer.



### Background to the community group

The WoW are a community group established in the East of Edinburgh to support women by reducing social isolation. It is coordinated through a WhatsApp group and has around 120 women in its membership.

Over the past eight years the group coordinators have organised regular social meet ups for local women. When someone new moves to the area they are invited to join and to come along to the social events. This has included bowling, evenings in local bars, daytime get-togethers and other trips and excursions. Members often dip in and out of the meet ups.

Members of the group range in age from their 20s to 70s and include women with a range of health issues, including dementia. Some members have formed smaller groups to socialise with based on common interests after meeting women across the larger group, for example a new mum's group.

Insights into how community organisations are responding to new community needs during COVID-19

## How was this different?

WoW moved from being a social media-based social group, organising regular meet ups for local women, to being a community action group. Their aim was to build and sustain a connected neighbourhood during lockdown, including a focus on vulnerable older people.

WoW coordinators sent out weekly updates and requests for support to around 120 members who then distributed requests further. Members volunteered in a range of ways, for example by being a safe and known person to run errands or check on neighbours. This activity was requested through the use of the good neighbour cards.

WoW worked with the local supermarket to coordinate the distribution of 'good neighbour cards'. This led to many local vulnerable people having help with shopping. People have been able to source locally available produce and foods which may have been absent from larger supermarkets.

Supported by WoW, children in the community have been active in creating games that can be played by other children on walks around the community. There are chalk games in the streets and rope swings in the parkland.

## What was the response from the community?

*"I have been able to shop weekly for my neighbour who is unable to leave her home as she is shielding. We didn't have a connection before lockdown but now talk several times a week."* Chris, Willowbrae

*"My children drew pictures of rainbows for a neighbour as I had asked what she needed, we feel more in touch now."* Jessie, Willowbrae

## Key insights: Rachel King, Coordinator, Women of Willowbrae

"COVID-19 has allowed WoW to become a resource for wellbeing. We are supporting women, individuals and families across Willowbrae, sharing information and being inclusive across ages and places to best support the local community. This was possible due to existing strong local connections and to the support of local settings (supermarket). People also were willing to be creative in their approaches to understanding how to harness the time and energy of local women.

Local women have reported feeling pride and connectivity within their community and being more actively supportive and connected to their neighbours. For example, one woman is now regularly supporting an older neighbour who has not been able to leave her house for months due to health problems.

Vulnerable individuals, often older people, have been able to ask and receive help from people from their street or neighbourhood. They have been in regular touch with someone they often didn't know previously with a greater sense of neighbourly connection.

WoW will be continuing to use this newly developed model within the community for the future."

If you are interested in exploring something similar in your area or to find out more, please get in touch.

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