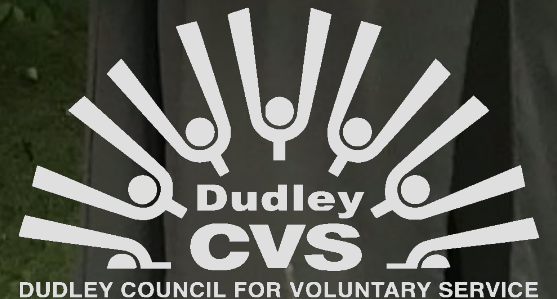


The COVID-19 Pandemic

A community response
in Dudley borough

Dudley CVS
October 2020



Going into lockdown...

A UK lockdown, in response to rapidly rising levels of COVID-19 disease, began on 23 March 2020. The Government instructed businesses, schools and other organisations to close or scale back their activities. People were also told that where it was possible they should stay at home and avoid contact with others.

The Dudley Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) response to the pandemic and lockdown centred on working closely with Dudley Council, healthcare and voluntary sector organisations.

Healthwatch Dudley has a statutory remit to listen to people about health and social care matters and ensure they are heard, in order to influence decisions on the design or changes to health and care services. The Healthwatch team contributed to the work of getting people's views on their experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic period, getting help with food and medication deliveries and access to health and care information and services.

Plans were quickly drawn up to start to provide help for shielding and vulnerable individuals. Dudley Council for Voluntary Service volunteers were a fundamental part of the operation to get food and medication to people who were distancing at home.

Our sample group:

To get some idea of how volunteers had been supporting people and making a difference, telephone calls were made to a sample group of 47 people who had been getting help with food or medication deliveries during the lockdown period.

We asked:

- How volunteers had helped
- What challenges they had faced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- What challenges they faced as lockdown was eased

In addition to people who helped through support groups around the borough such as the Stourbridge COVID-19 Group or people who contacted the Black Country Food Bank directly for help...

618 people registered
with Dudley CVS to help
with food and medication
deliveries

984 people received
help from one of our
volunteers

Images in this report feature some of
the amazing volunteers who helped

This report includes feedback from this sample group who received the following support:

- 40 people were helped with shopping deliveries
- 16 people with medication deliveries
- 2 people received befriending

Other help received included posting letters, being taken to a hospital appointment and simply being there to chat.

How volunteers helped

In the main, volunteers helped older shielding or vulnerable people with food and medication deliveries. It was difficult, especially in the first few weeks after the national lockdown started, for them to get online shopping, where they had access to the internet. Many were unable to get help from neighbours and had no close family living nearby who could help.

“It has been the hardest five months, really hard and knowing that someone was helping me to get food was such a relief.”

“Without the support of CVS I would have gone shopping which would have put myself and my wife at risk.”

“I have a specific salt and dairy free diet and there were so many items that I tried to order online that were out of stock or unsuitable.”

“Volunteers travelled to various shops to make sure that I had the right shopping. It took away my anxiety about not have the right food or any food at all.”



Volunteers were also working with GP practices to collect prescriptions, which helped pharmacies that were unable to make home deliveries, ensuring shielding and vulnerable people got the medication they needed.

“Volunteers collected my prescription and saved me from putting myself at risk.”

“Both myself and my wife were shielding, so having someone fetch our medicines has been a great help. It has meant that myself and my wife have been able to keep safe.”

People we talked to were often anxious or afraid, for their health and their wellbeing. They had been told to stay at home and avoid contact with others to protect themselves. Managing day-to-day could be especially difficult for those living alone or with no family living nearby.

“Volunteers have made a lot of difference to me and my daughter. She was worrying how she was going to get food to me because she has a heart condition and was shielding and she lives a long way away.”

“Volunteers have helped me a great deal. I am totally on my own and have cancer and COPD so was struggling as couldn't leave the house.”

“Just knowing there is someone there for me made me feel less lonely. My husband has dementia and is in a care home so volunteers have made a big difference because I am on my own.”



Summary

- Volunteer help with food and medication deliveries reduced anxiety and risk for people who were shielding or vulnerable and advised to stay at home.
- Volunteer help was needed because people could not get online shopping slots, or their pharmacy was unable to deliver medication and they did not have family living close by, or could not rely on friends and neighbours for help.
- Volunteers were able to help people with particular dietary needs and were prepared to visit different shops to try to ensure they got what they needed.

Other pandemic challenges

Apart from concerns about getting food and medication people told us they were worried about catching COVID-19 and feeling lonely and cut off from others whilst staying at home.

"I have been anxious, frightened to death about getting COVID."

"I had a feeling of being cut off from everyone. It felt like we had done something wrong, we couldn't see family, apart from at the end of the drive, which was very hard."

"I suppose loneliness more than anything was an extra problem, not being able to go out. I usually go to a couple of Women's Guild meetings every week and I have really missed them."



Some people us they had problems getting in touch with the GP practice and sometimes the pharmacy, to get information or help on health and care matters.

“Getting in touch with the GP is impossible, nine times out of ten you can't get an appointment online and when you phone they say they can't guarantee one.”

“It was difficult to get through to the GP and chemist.”

Summary

- It could be difficult getting through to the GP practice.
- Sometimes, because of shortages, getting some items from shops was difficult.
- People felt lonely and isolated, with little or no contact with others for long periods of time and not able to meet with family or friends.
- It was not easy to shield and cope with a health condition, people were anxious and trying to stay as well as they could.
- People were afraid to go out, use public transport where they might encounter people not following guidance on physical distancing and using face masks.
- People were worried about getting help when access to healthcare services at the GP practice and hospital had been reduced.



UK lockdown measures began to be eased on 13 May as virus infection rates were falling. The 1.5 million vulnerable people who had been sent a letter or had a telephone call telling them to stay at home were told to continue to shield themselves.

Those aged over 70 who had been advised to stay at home were informed they could enjoy some more freedom but continue to minimise contact with people from other households.

Challenges as lockdown was eased

From the 1 August the 2.2 million people on the shielding list in England were no longer advised to shield, because virus infection rates continued to fall.

At this time, Dudley Council for Voluntary Service began to scale back volunteer help with food and medication deliveries to shielding and vulnerable people.

When we asked what the challenges might be as lockdown eases, for people who had been getting help, many indicated they remained fearful of the virus and what might happen in the future.

The latest Department of Health, shielding guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

“As long as this virus is still around we simply won’t take the risk. Things might have eased but it hasn't gone away.”

“Going out still scares me, in fact I am very frightened. I went shopping for the first time this week and people were very close to me, pushing and it made me feel nervous.”

“My anxiety level is still high, not knowing if there will be another lockdown.”



People remained wary of going out, going to the shops, using public transport, being in close contact with others and those not following government guidance on physical distancing and the wearing of face masks.

"I don't like going into big supermarkets due to risk."

"I am a bit scared to use buses, taxis or go in shops, some people are still not wearing masks."

"It's about keeping safe. I have started to go out a bit but only very early morning or late at night when there aren't many people about. A lot of people seem to be ignoring the rules which is very worrying."

People who are anxious about missed or delayed hospital appointments and how safe it is when they do go to the hospital.

"I'm apprehensive about my cancelled hospital appointments."

"Having to go to hospital for blood tests will be a challenge. It is the worst place I can be in my situation."

"Trying to get myself better and well again. Going out to hospital appointments scares me but it's something that I just have to do"

Summary

- There may be future issues getting online shopping slots.
- Things are different, the virus has not gone away, yet people are concerned they are being told it is safe to leave the house.



- There is continuing anxiety and mental health problems.
- There are worries about going to hospital and how safe it is.
- People are fearful of the future, the virus flaring up again and possible further lockdowns.
- People worry that it will take a long time for healthcare services to get back to where they were before the pandemic and continuing reduced access to services.
- There is continuing anxiety about going out, visiting shops, using public transport and mixing with others.

Stourbridge COVID-19 Group

Stourbridge Community Support and its COVID-19 group had more than 200 people signed up to help get supplies to people and ensure they were safe. At the height of its operations more than 150 people were receiving help.

How volunteers helped

Stourbridge volunteers worked to help ensure shielding and vulnerable people in their area got the food and medication they needed after a UK lockdown had been announced by the Government, to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://stourbridgecommunitysupport.org/>

For the purpose of this report additional calls were made to a sample group of people who received support from Stourbridge volunteers.

This included 13 people who were helped with shopping deliveries, three people who received befriending, a person who received medication deliveries and someone who was glad to be checked in on by a volunteer to make sure they were safe.



People getting help from volunteers with shopping deliveries shared how they were grateful and relieved they did not have to worry about getting what they needed to keep going.

"It's been a huge relief to me to know my mum can get the basics of food without having to leave her home."

"It has been fantastic. I have had my shopping done for me every couple of weeks."

At the same time, they welcomed having someone there that they could talk to. Volunteers were also able to keep in contact with people to check that they were safe and keeping well.

"A volunteer did shopping for me, which was great, because I wasn't able to get out. And a volunteer has been phoning me to see how I am regularly. These people have made lockdown bearable and quite manageable."

Other pandemic challenges

Apart from getting shopping and medication, it was being isolated and stuck at home and away from everyone that most affected individuals who were shielding and vulnerable.

"My son is shielding and I am disabled so getting out is a logistical impossibility. I have always looked after myself and my son so the sense of helplessness was really hard."

"It has been a problem not being able to leave the house and being restricted, not being able to have friends and family round."



Challenges as lockdown was eased

As lockdown measures began to ease people told us they still felt vulnerable and were not sure about how best to get back to going out.

“Being disabled, having to queue [for shopping] with spinal problems and getting to hospital due to limited bus services and social distancing measures.”

“I am still not able to get my own shopping without help.”

Conclusions:

The main findings from conversations with people getting help from Dudley Council for Voluntary Service and the Stourbridge COVID-19 group volunteers are:

- There was a quick response among partner organisations who worked together to fill a gap in the early days and weeks of lockdown to get food and medication to shielding and vulnerable people.
- Volunteers helped people to get what they needed and helped to reduce feelings of anxiety and worry about what was going to happen since food and medication deliveries happened on a weekly or as needed basis.
- People isolating and getting help welcomed the contact they had with volunteers, many were not able to see friends and had no family nearby.
- Volunteers were able to help with other matters and were there to befriend, have a chat, check on a person's safety and wellbeing and make referrals to other organisations that could provide different types of specialised support.
- People reported difficulties getting through on the telephone to GP practices and access to information and help on health and care matters.



- Loneliness and isolation are a problem for people, especially if they are on their own, who are shielding or vulnerable and confined to their home for a long period of time.
- With the easing of lockdown, people who have been shielding say they are still fearful of going out, being in close contact with others and people not following the guidance on physical distancing and the wearing of masks.
- People were saying the virus had not gone away and they feared it could flare up again and there might be further lockdowns.
- People continued to be wary and worried about their safety as lockdown measures were eased and they had to go outside of their home to, for example, shops or hospital appointments.
- There is concern about reduced access to health and care services and the implications for people's health and how long it would take for services to get back to a more normal state.



A volunteer's story...

"I had a telephone call this afternoon from the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham saying that someone was in there that had a message for me. I was naturally concerned because I wasn't aware of anyone I knew being there.

It turned out to be an elderly gentleman that I've been doing shopping for since the lockdown after being matched with him by Dudley CVS Volunteer Centre (who are doing a fabulous job in our community during this most difficult of times).

I had been given his name and number but no other information. I've been taking his shopping which I pay for, I ring him to tell him I'm on my way and he puts the money in an envelope - I ask if he's ok - he always says the same thing 'I am now I've seen you bless you for looking after me'.

Yesterday he fell downstairs in his maisonette and was found by his neighbours. When the nurse asked if there was anyone they could call I was the only person he could think of. I have only known him five weeks, barely had any conversation, his weekly phone call with his shopping list is always quite short, he always asks how I am and worries that I'm keeping safe.

So why after such a short time with such little contact was I his only 'friend' - what on earth did this poor man do before the lockdown? Who helped him? Who did he talk to? I offered to visit but they aren't accepting visitors -they couldn't even tell me his surname because I'm not a relative.

I felt so bad for him and so very sorry. After all this is over how am I suppose to walk away from him? There must be hundreds of people like him out there.

Please if you live by an elderly person or even someone living on there own - keep yourself safe - socially distance yourself - but knock on their door - drop a note through their letterbox and check that they are okay."

"One face, one voice could make all the difference to their day. My thoughts tonight are with a lonely old man who needs a friend...

I'm going to be that friend!"

**Dudley CVS's vision is for a
borough that has caring vibrant
and strong communities where
everyone can fulfil their potential**

**This report has been compiled by
Healthwatch Dudley for
Dudley Council for Voluntary Service**

7 Albion Street
Brierley Hill
DY5 3EE

01384 573381

info@dudleycvs.org.uk

<http://dudleycvsreview.org>

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Dudley