

Report to the South Area Council from the Better Together Service- Year 1

Introduction

The Better Together Service, commissioned by the South Area Council to support older people who are socially isolated, began in September 2019. Age UK Barnsley are the provider organisation and the team consists of two Social Inclusion Workers, a part-time Information and Advice Worker and management. This report is to highlight what has been achieved in the first 10 months of service. The service aims to support older people by addressing the source of isolation and putting interventions and solutions into place at an individual and community level. Unfortunately, in March, following the Covid lock down, the service had to change its focus as older people without support networks needed help to safely self-isolate and group activities had to close. There is a great deal of overlap between vulnerable, older people that are socially isolated and those that need to self-isolate and do not have support networks in place so when lockdown happened, we began Covid support at once using our community networks to reach older people.

One to One Work

Between September and March, staff have worked extremely hard to promote the service to isolated, older people. They have been out into the community talking to GP Practices, Social Prescribing, Chemists, Supermarkets, and local services. Up to lockdown, the service had worked with 54 individual older people to develop and implement a plan to become less isolated. 14 of these people had been given a Good Neighbour Volunteer to befriend them and either visit them at home or support them to access community activities. Other service users were working with staff on getting out to community activities, local facilities or accessing services. We referred people on to a range of services including medical services, dementia services and volunteering opportunities. The service is successful in reducing social isolation shown by the significant improvements in service user scores through our accredited Wellbeing and Loneliness Questionnaires, excellent feedback from service users and successful case studies which are part of the quarterly reports.

Since lockdown, we have supported, 115 vulnerable, older people, without support networks, to stay safely at home in the South Area. Feedback refers to the service as a “life saver” and “Godsend.” We have carried out shopping, medication deliveries and provided regular befriending/contact calls. In addition, we have provided Wellbeing Parcels to each person with £45 value of groceries and an activity pack of puzzles. This ensured that everyone had the essentials they needed plus a few treats. We also supplied V E Day Tea packages to make up for the group afternoon tea that could not be held that day.

Volunteers

50 volunteers have helped to provide this service so far. Some have volunteered each week and some occasionally. Several of the volunteers run Age UK Barnsley or U3A groups in the area and 24 have joined because of the Covid situation. In total, they have provided 576 hours of support over the 10 months.



Information and Advice

The Information and Advice element of the Service has carried on right through the lockdown period although from March it has been a telephone/email service. It has been essential in helping older people to access services like repairs, disability aids, care services and incontinence aids. Since the start of this service, this part of the service has supported 56 older people in the South Area to claim £119,625 in benefits. This service can work with some of the most vulnerable, older people, including those with dementia, who would not be able to access community- based benefits clinics.

Groups and Events

By March, our partnership with Barnsley U3A had enabled us to set up a total of 9 new regular community activity groups in this area including Men in Sheds and the Parkside Group. A number of these groups are focused on physical activity including Barnsley U3A's Stepping Up to Fitness, Netball and Walking Cricket. We also held 18 Community Events including Afternoon Teas, Winter Warmth and Intergenerational Family History. We had also started to develop our Community Car Service and 24 supported car journeys had taken place.

Lockdown meant that all group activities had to close in March but we have found a range of ways to continue keeping people stimulated and involved. Only 35% of our service users are online at all so we needed to be imaginative. At present, we are part way through an 8-week home based activities cycle. Older people have been able to choose up to 3 activities from a choice of 10 which are: Gardening, Art, Pudding Club, Foodies, Craft, Exercise, Wildlife, Creative Writing, Reading and Puzzlers. Each activity has a start-up kit and an element of interaction and fun. For example, the Creative Writers receive a starter pack writing book and pens, they can share their work with others and win a prize for the best entry on a specific subject. Feedback has been excellent and shows how older people have felt their mood lifted by getting involved. We have also been carrying out other initiatives including a Pen Pals Project with Jump School and a Big Knit project with the Darfield based Stitches Group.

Future Plans

We are now entering a recovery phase after Covid. Our volunteers and staff are now able to visit older people face to face in an outside environment. We are supporting those older people who want to get out into the community again and helping with confidence building and mobility issues. We will be supporting those people whose mental health has been affected and those that are more vulnerable to falls due to self-isolating. We are currently working on risk assessments to re-open community activities and Community Car journeys and look forward to picking up the Age Friendly and Dementia Friendly work. However, should there be a second lockdown because of the virus, we are ready to revert to supporting vulnerable, older people at home.