

A Guide to getting started with a Covid-19 Volunteer Response group

Suffolk is caring county and we have great communities that are connected and offer richness to Suffolk life that benefits Health and Wellbeing. We are seeing so much more of this as a response to Covid-19 and Community Action Suffolk would like to support these emerging groups as we do with the Suffolk Good Neighbour Schemes.

These Good Neighbour Schemes are more formal, structured groups that follow good practice. Communities that are already blessed with a Good Neighbour Scheme are rallying around them to support them to meet the needs of those more vulnerable in their community.

Here are some important considerations for you before you start your activity:

The risk to yourself

The risk to others

The level of benefit

We have put together Toolkits to support community groups move towards a more formal structure. For 'pop-up' community groups that are not ready to move to this stage, please consider the following:

How to organise

The method of delivery – think about how you can avoid increasing levels of close social contact or creating gatherings. Traditionally most community projects involve bringing people together for meetings and events which could increase the level of transmission. This could be particularly problematic given many volunteers are older or in high risk groups. Use email, websites like Facebook or a traditional phone call. It's a great way to organise yourselves, check on people and reduce isolation but without increasing social contact.

At all times follow good hygiene and good infection control practice, principally this comes down to handwashing and good cleanliness.

Think about a volunteer visiting a consistent group of people rather than being randomly assigned. In the event of transmission, the effect is then contained to a small cluster who could then mutually support.

Training – Any volunteer should be clear on their role, any processes you develop and how to raise concerns. Use video conferences (skype, facetime), phone or email as an alternative to putting on a physical gathering. However, don't forget to train people even if fairly informally.

Safeguarding is the general term used to describe the methods of keeping children and vulnerable adults safe from harm such as abuse or exploitation. You need to consider carefully how you approach safeguarding. Approaches that are commonly used such as DBS checking, comprehensive interviewing and monitoring may not be feasible. To reduce risk, think about how you can avoid a one-to-one situation with a vulnerable person.

Risk and liability. There is the possibility that volunteers and organisations directing them are held liable for any actions that cause harm (this could be to the volunteer or the person being helped). You should carefully consider any risks associated with your activity and take steps to mitigate them. You should check if you have insurance cover for the activities you are undertaking. Whilst only vehicle insurance (volunteer drivers using their own vehicle should notify their insurers that they are involved in a car scheme on a not-for-profit basis) and employers liability insurance are mandatory, broader public liability insurance is highly recommended.

Given the two above factors think about whether your activity could be best done under the auspices of an existing organisation.

Ways to help

The need for supplies - It is likely if people are ill or self-isolating they will need supplies. Think about how you could do this in a low contact way – leaving shopping in the shed for example. Think about the best way to do this – whether facilitating a supermarket online order is better than going back and forth to the shops directly.

Encouraging people to keep mobile – exercise is one of the most beneficial things for overall health and being physically inactive can cause people's health to deteriorate rapidly. Think about how you can encourage people to stay active. A walk in the countryside is low risk or could someone benefit from that exercise DVD you got for Christmas.

Encouraging people to maintain contact – Loneliness and isolation are serious issues and there is also a need to check-up on whether people's health has deteriorated. Think about how to do this over the phone or online. Remember though, no one should feel forced to take part in any activity.

Ways to keep busy - Is now the time to crochet that tableau of the village, organise your photos, write that novel? Being isolated with nothing to do will likely increase people's levels of anxiety and at the best of times is not fun. Think about how you can encourage or create activities to keep people busy.

Please have a look through our Toolkits and resources to help you formalise your group and ensure good practice that will help you, your volunteers and your recipients keep safe and sound. We have included templates so you do not need to start from scratch.