

Holbeck Together Covid-19 Report: Anchoring a Community

Clouds on the horizon

It was January when we first began to hear news reports about a new respiratory disease that had appeared in China. Corona Virus Disease 2019 – soon abbreviated to Covid-19 – was highly contagious, and deadly, but Holbeck seemed a long way from Wuhan. By the end of that month, the first UK cases had been found in York. We began to consult our service users, talking to **125** of the most vulnerable in the week before the first lockdown was announced.

Holbeck Together were in a fortunate position to move staff to **remote delivery**, due to previous investments in a cloud-based computer system and Voipfone online telephone system. Where possible, staff adopted home working, and transferred all support, advice and advocacy services onto the phone.

It was clear that we would need to respond **fast and effectively** to the coming crisis. We knew already that the older, frail and isolated people who are a core part of Holbeck Together's user group would be disproportionately affected by the virus and by the likely social distancing, self-isolation and lockdown rules. We knew too that whatever lay ahead, the pandemic would only increase pressures on the community, and we could not afford to leave anyone behind.



The storm hits

The first wave arrived. With limited testing, case numbers were not clear at first, but by early July Leeds had officially recorded 3,500 cases. The virus hit Holbeck Together's own staff team, and we saw it sweep through



our community. Many were unwell, and many more needed to shield themselves at home. For families who lost employment, pressing need for food and other supplies was evident. Households where children could normally rely on a free school lunch suddenly needed help as schools closed. Older people who were already at risk of isolation and loneliness found themselves adrift without access to opportunities for social contact and services they would usually use – and worried about accessing health services. And for almost everyone, there was for a time a sense of helplessness and fear.

Muster and mobilise

It was clear to us that to be robust and resilient, activities now needed, where possible, to be:

- distributed (not reliant on a specific person to take place) and
- multi-channel (capable of delivery and access on- and/or off-line).

We worked to maximise both these resilience features by rapidly building on our existing networks for community involvement, collaboration and co-production, and through digital innovation.

Holbeck Together's position as a community anchor organisation meant that we were ideally placed to mobilise and support the **new wave of volunteers** that rose to meet the community's urgent challenges. So far, during the Covid crisis, our volunteers have given over **6,400 hours** of their time and skills to help the community in Holbeck, which has a cost-value of £55,808 in paid wages.

Tracey read our call for volunteers on Facebook, and put herself forward straight away. She had been working as a cleaner, but was made redundant due to Covid. 'I had some hours to kill due to lockdown and not having to do the school run. I jumped in there and called the office to offer my help.'

A couple of weeks later, Tracey set off on her first delivery round. 'At the beginning it was really important as a lot of people were shielding. It was a strange time - we had to wear Holbeck Together passes so people knew why we were out and about during the lockdown. We were given masks and hand sanitiser, and I wore gloves at the beginning as well. We keep our distance on the doorstep from people we are delivering to, so I wasn't worried.'

Although it took her some time to get used to the roads and the routes she was allocated, Tracey soon got into the swing of things. 'I now know where everyone lives just by looking at their names on the list so it's a lot quicker!' A lady who lives locally with her chihuahua has become a favourite on Tracey's delivery route: 'When I knock, the dog runs straight out. Once she wasn't at home and he didn't bark, so he obviously just does it to protect her! It's so sweet. I'm always happy to see her name on the list.'

Tracey has enjoyed the experience so much that she has been volunteering ever since. 'I started off doing three days a week, and now I do one - but I let the team know if they need extra help and do more days. It's lovely for people to see a friendly face and have a two minute chat - we could be the only people they're seeing that day. When you care for someone and they appreciate it, it makes you want to go out and do more. The best part is seeing the smile on their faces.'



Holbeck Together's **network of over 100 partner organisations** across the private, public and voluntary sectors enabled us to co-produce practical solutions fast:



Our response

Prior to the crisis, Holbeck Together had already begun planning to roll out an expanded home delivery meals service; 145 older people were accessing centre-based meals and we knew that demand for home delivery exceeded our capacity. With Covid-19 these plans were pressed into **immediate action**, working in partnership with FareShare, YourSpace, St Luke's, Sluglow, Freshfair, Fazenda, Mecca Bingo, Rethink Food, local supermarkets and fisheries. During the first 12 weeks of the **extended service** we grew our volunteer base from 21 regular volunteers to 54, providing 880 kitchen support volunteering hours and 426 delivery volunteering hours. The service delivered 2,370 freshly prepared meals to clients' homes during the same period. By July we were delivering over 200 meals each week. The service had two central aims: to ensure that the older people who normally used our drop-in meal services didn't go hungry, and that each older person had at least **one call at their door each day** when a meal is received at the doorstep, giving the delivery volunteer an opportunity for a light touch wellbeing check via a short chat, adhering to social distancing.



Tackling wider food need in Holbeck, we prepared and delivered an average of **150** weekly food parcels to families, working with Leeds City Council, West Yorkshire Fire Service and FareShare, though some weeks this figure was as high as **300**. Our Healthy Holidays project gave families weekly recipe food parcel packs, featuring **cookery challenges** each week including: tomato and bacon pasta bake; ham and mushroom calzone; and blueberry pancakes. The packs also suggested **healthy eating challenges** – eg #VegRockRainbow, encouraging families to aim for a 'rainbow' of different coloured food.

Our nutrition and recipe book was distributed to **25 families**, and **50** copies

of the recipe book developed by our partner St Vincent's. An online version of Holbeck Together's book is available free to download. Our chef, Julie, developed short Youtube videos to support families cooking the recipes featured in the packs, and we set up a HT Families WhatsApp peer support group for families to share their **experiences, triumphs and challenges** in cooking the recipes.

"The WhatsApp family group is something really simple, but has such a huge impact, it's really helped me personally. It's great to see what other families are up to and share ideas – makes me feel like I'm not on my own as a mum and that there are other people out there going through the same thing."

- Healthy Holidays project user

To help people manage their **mental health and wellbeing** while staying at home, we distributed over **600** age-specific activity packs for young people: with colouring sheets, word searches and games – such as planting and growing 'cress heads' and making cloud dough. **15** children enjoyed weekly socially-distanced

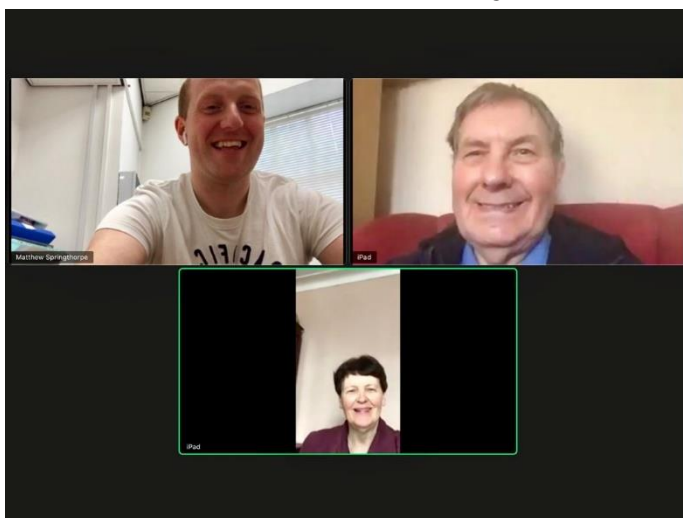


ping pong sessions using the PingPong4U at home resource packs we sent out. Once restrictions were eased we were able to introduce some **socially distanced outdoor activities** including: dancing with the team from DAZL Leeds and their Garden Groovers project; a Holbeck themed Scavenger Hunt around the area; active outdoor sessions with Reetwirlers Majorettes Group; and an 'End of Summer Holiday' party afternoon.

In September the 'Blue Team' – 12 young volunteers from Leeds United Foundation's NCS summer programme - coordinated an **Intergenerational Walkathon** with six older members of the community. The aim was to walk **500 steps** each along Holbeck Moor. During the challenge, the older people were interviewed by the teenagers to understand how they have coped with life in lockdown. Afterwards, the older participants told us they really enjoyed **stretching their legs** and getting out to chat to people. They said that it had made such a difference to their week and they didn't realise how much they needed to see people again. The girls did a fantastic job of distracting everyone from stiff joints or tired feet with their **warm conversations** and everyone left with a massive smile on their face.



Early in the crisis, we moved fast to get crucial social activities online via Zoom, and linked our members in to activities offered by other providers. From July, Holbeck Together was running **Zoom socials** three afternoons every week as well as online quizzes, games and activity sessions. We shifted our burgeoning charity shop selling low cost clothing, online. Particularly for older people, we found a **digital inclusion gap** that meant some could not access digital services. We worked with partners including Leeds United,



Lloyds Banking Group and 100% Digital Leeds to set up a **community devices library**, and organised 1:1 learning support for older people to access the internet from their homes, as well as socially distanced **Digital Café** sessions when restrictions allowed.

Winter 2020



As winter drew in, we knew we'd need to go above and beyond to combat the challenges our clients were facing. For our older community, we launched **additional services**, such as a series of themed meals, festive activity and creativity packs and the start of HT's new Covid-secure **free DVD library** service, operated in parallel with meal deliveries. Films from the extensive collection are borrowed for a week at a time, with order forms and DVDs collected and dropped off by the meal delivery driver.

In addition to the emergency food parcel service, in response to winter pressures and with support from the Leeds Community Foundation Stay Well This Winter fund, we

delivered **60 Winter warmer Hampers** to our older community members. The parcels included winter health information, a flask, reusable face masks, hand sanitiser, hand crocheted blankets, hand warmers, hats and scarf and a torch, and were lovingly packed by a team of **Leeds United volunteers**.

As Christmas approached, after a particularly challenging year, we wanted to make sure that everyone had something special to open on Christmas day. Our incredible team delivered **100 Christmas Morning Hampers** to our older clients. These were compiled from donations from TransUnion, Morrisons, Friends of Middleton Park, Engie, British Gas and The Becklin Centre at St. James' Hospital, and **lovingly packed by local volunteers** from the community. It's the personal touches that make Christmas special and hamper highlights included homemade Terry's Chocolate Orange flapjacks, made by the amazing team at TransUnion.





We delivered a range of options for our families over the festive period from themed recipe kits and activity packs to lots of extra touches to make the holidays feel special.

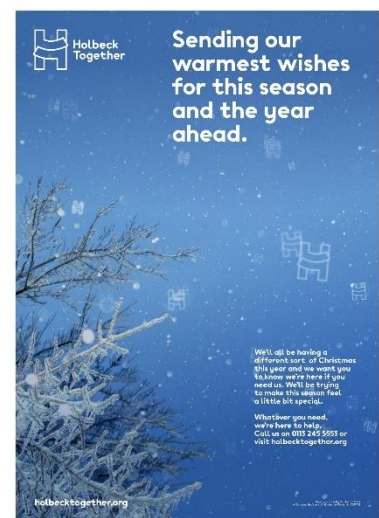
With the enthusiastic help of 13 volunteers from **Leeds United Junior Academy**, we were able to transform St Matthew's Community Centre into **Santa's grotto**, with trees, decorations, and of course the great man himself.

On the Saturday before Christmas, **46** children visited, leaving with a selection of Christmas **presents to open on Christmas day**, generously donated by Lloyds Banking Group.



Each family also received a **Christmas Eve Box**, tailor-made with each child in mind. The boxes included an activity pack with colouring pencils, glue and scissors; festive stationery; a Christmas Eve tray for Santa; chocolate and sweet treats; sensory toys for small children 1-3, make your own toys for 3-6 age group, and fluffy bed socks for older children 7 plus; knitted toys donated by a Holbeck Together client; Christmas mugs with hot choc and marshmallows; and a family reindeer game.

We ended the year by sending out **Season's Greetings cards** to everyone in Holbeck - all **5,300** addresses. It was a gesture of friendship during the festive season, but also included practical information about how people can access support should they need it.





Some numbers

Through the pandemic so far, with the help of an incredible network of partners and volunteers, Holbeck Together has provided:

- over **8,500** meals delivered to older people in their homes
- more than **1,500** meals to families affected by the impacts of Covid 19
- a volunteer to do shopping on behalf of someone who couldn't get out on nearly **200** occasions
- food relief through over **2,100** food parcels
- nutritious food and activities for **65** children through school holidays, lockdowns and beyond
- wellbeing support (includes: befriending calls, wellbeing checks, outreach support, crisis support, wellbeing packs) on more than **4,000** occasions
- **2,000** at home activity packs for our older community and young families
- weekly check-ins (5-10 minutes) for **60** isolated older people, exploring emotional welfare; immediate practical needs; any health worries

Building a positive legacy

The challenges that Holbeck Together has faced in the last year have provided valuable opportunities for **learning, evolution and growth**.

As an organisation we have cultivated **flexibility** – from much more fluidity between roles to flexible working options to support staff, and



from developing **innovative** ways to deliver traditional support, to keeping service delivery as agile as possible in a quickly changing landscape.

We learned early on that concerns around access to food and good sources of nutrition were at the forefront of everyone's mind, regardless of age. We put good **quality food** at the centre of our new services and built out from there.

We learned a tremendous amount through the implementation of our digital strategy, developed to address the '**digital divide**' in Holbeck, learning that will enable us to continue to work long-term with our older community but also people of all ages, to overcome the barriers to engagement.

Through the development of our Healthy Holidays programme we have learned valuable insights which have shaped our **wrap-around wellbeing support and advice** for families. We have also supported families who are struggling with home-schooling to access much needed devices and enabled families to connect through our WhatsApp group, where they are able to provide **peer-support** to one another. The limitations of the built environment have been particularly challenging to families who have many family members in confined spaces and who don't have gardens or access to green spaces. These concerns have shaped our service offer, with a focus on providing opportunities to get out of the house and connect with others digitally.

We could also see that without in-person social events, it would need many **more resources** than pre-covid to address the increasing isolation and feelings of loneliness that people were experiencing. That to properly deliver on our charitable objectives, we needed more – more resources, more hands on deck, and more partners to support our work.

Working '**in partnership**' has become more of a reality than ever. Since last March we have worked with local community members, clients, statutory services and other third sector groups to reach more people than ever.

By putting local people at the forefront of service design, we have more buy-in from the community, more 'hands on deck' to deliver expanding projects and can achieve greater impact with limited resources. This has been integral to working with the community on **sensitive issues** such as food poverty. Our weekly social supermarket provides free and 'pay as you feel', high quality, fresh food from St. Matthews Community Centre, as **an alternative approach** to a food bank.

By working with local residents, our volunteer team more than doubled, our befriending team more than quadrupled, and we were able to



significantly increase the number of daily contacts with the most isolated and vulnerable members of the community. Our older clients told us how **transformative** a daily doorstep contact was for them, so we ensured that all staff and volunteer stop off for a conversation and wellbeing check when delivering hot meals.

As the nominated user-group to utilise **St. Matthews** community centre, we have been able to use the space to coordinate a community response to the crisis, delivering remote support and advice services, providing a hot meals on wheels service, a social supermarket and crisis relief parcels and support. The centre has enabled the team to work safely, within guidelines to respond to unprecedented community need. The last year has demonstrated how flexibly the space can be utilised, highlighted its capacity to provide **vital services to the community**, and reinforced the urgent need for its transfer to community management and development.

Ensuring that we were **communicating the right messages** to the right people was crucial. We knew that we needed to produce clear information so that people knew what services were available, how they could access them and how they could help others if they were in the position to. We also wanted to make sure that all of our supporters understood the journey we were going on and how they could contribute. By allocating resources to this, we have been able to reach more people, develop more partnerships and **galvanise more support** from our funders and supporters.

The skills and knowledge that have been developed within the staff team, the strengthened relationships with clients and the wider community, the increased understanding about how challenges intersect for our community in this new landscape, the expanded network of volunteers and supporters, the endorsements from new and existing funders and corporate supporters, the development of St. Matthews and the improved communications strategy, are the **important and positive legacy** of a tumultuous 9 months. It is this legacy that puts Holbeck Together in a strong position to continue to support the community to achieving **lasting social change**.