



CoronaVirus Initiatives –

How the Belmont & South Cheam Residents' Association is helping its Members

Background

The Belmont & South Cheam Residents' Association (BSCRA) is a large residents' association in the southern part of the London Borough of Sutton. It covers a large part of the LBS Ward of Belmont and that part of the Ward of Cheam that is south of the railway line.

The Association has over 2,300 subscribing members representing over 80% of the households in its area. It has a network of over 100 Road Stewards that each look after a road (or part of a road for long roads) and provide the key link between the Association and its members.

The Association also has a comprehensive email distribution list that has over 2,100 contacts. We also have a website and a Facebook page.

Before the CoronaVirus outbreak we therefore had a good basis for contacting and hence helping our members.

How we are helping our members during the CoronaVirus outbreak

1 Keeping in contact with residents

- a) we are refining our email register and filling in gaps (e.g. by making phone calls) and resolving delivery failures. Building a list is hard, but keeping it up to date is harder.
- b) email is good for pushing out "reference material" but is not interactive. To promote more community involvement we are proactively encouraging residents to establish road based WhatsApp Groups. We had built some of these previously for crime awareness reporting, but with the current CoronaVirus outbreak we are encouraging residents to use these groups to identify where help is needed (often where the person needing help is a neighbour and not necessarily on WhatsApp themselves).
- c) We are also building a "Super Group" of all road WhatsApp groups so information can be distributed via WhatsApp in a pyramid distribution style.

2 Finding out who needs help

One of the biggest problems is finding out who needs help and who is not receiving it. The most needy cases are usually catered for by "professional" care services (e.g. GP, council or charity based). Many are also supported by family or friends. But in the current lock down situation, many of those who might have been able to help are themselves isolating.

A further complication is that those who may need help are most likely to be lacking in technology and so unable to receive email, participate in Facebook interactions, communicate using WhatsApp or use the internet for online shopping and banking. Those residents who are not on our email distribution list are most likely to be the ones most in need of the information we send out.

To try and identify households in need of help we are:

- a) asking all members to identify households near them who are at risk, vulnerable or self isolating
- b) asking all of our Road Stewards personally if they know of any households at risk
- c) where possible, ask the postmen
- d) check up with Sheltered Housing units to make sure that they are catered for

Where possible we are taking a "micro-cell" approach to helping our residents where the volunteer helper lives very close to the person needing to be helped. This means that it is highly likely that the person receiving the help will know the helper and therefore minimise the need for time consuming safeguarding checks.

3 Identify volunteers

- a) We have asked our members if they are willing and able to volunteer to help. We are clarifying what they are prepared to do (do shopping or just deliver shopping), phone calls etc. This will depend on whether they are self isolating themselves
- b) We hope to be able to tie up our volunteers with those who have volunteered to Sutton Community Action, although most of our volunteers will not be a wide ranging resource that can be re-assigned. They will just be looking after their neighbours.

4 Combating loneliness

Loneliness is a major concern because many elderly people live alone and cannot go out to socialise as they would normally. Even a little shopping trip has in the past given contact during the day; this is now not encouraged.

- a) We are encouraging our local contacts to call their neighbours regularly to check if they are alright and to have a general conversation.
- b) For some time the Association has been running weekly gatherings in the Belmont Village club for "senior" members of the community (no specific criteria). We give updates on what is going on, run quizzes, provide musical entertainment etc. The event is supported by Age UK (Sutton) who come to one meeting a month to answer questions,

This physical meeting has been forced to close during lock down, but we have reconvened the gathering using the Zoom video-conferencing service. The Association has its own "Zoom Room" and it is very easy for anyone to join in. Some members participate visually using tablets or laptops, others join by phone. The participation at these online gatherings is less than we get at the club, because not everyone has the necessary equipment, but those who do take part find it valuable.

5 How to help those who need help

In addition to arranging volunteer helpers we are also issuing self-help information on:

- a) hints and tips on how to get online shopping orders fulfilled.
- b) register of local shops and businesses who will deliver (or even prepare boxed orders).
- c) make sure people are aware of how to pay to minimise the use of scarce cash or feel the need to give someone their credit card!.

Increasingly we are finding that people are self isolating because they are over 70 and / or have relatively minor medical conditions which make them CoronaVirus vulnerable. These people are falling down the support crack because they are not on the formal government or local authority support list, but nevertheless are isolating themselves according to government advice. In the early weeks of lock down, people's store cupboards and freezers were enough to carry them through. However, as the weeks progress the store cupboards need to be replenished. Many of these are currently having difficulty getting groceries online and need help and advice.

6 Preventing Scams

Sadly in these difficult times there are unscrupulous people out there trying to take advantage of people's worries and concerns.

This can take the form of distraction burglary (e.g. caller pretends to be carrying out CV19 testing) but more likely these are internet or phone based scams.

We receive a lot of useful warnings from the police, from Action Fraud and from LBS Trading Standards that we pass on to our members in the hope that they will stay safe from scammers as well as infection.

There is no single "silver bullet" solution to making sure that everyone who needs help is identified. There are many central and local government initiatives in progress. However, if these are supplemented by local initiatives and residents are encouraged and empowered to look out for their neighbours, we hope and trust that everyone will receive the care and attention that they need.

Peter Matthey
Chair, Belmont & South Cheam Residents Association – April 2020