

A Shout Out for the Gt Somerford & Startley Street Champions

Now that things are slowly starting to get back to some kind of normality, it seemed a good time to reflect on the positives of the last few months, and in particular the experiences of the parish of Great Somerford and Startley.

We as a Parish Council had an Emergency Plan in place for a pandemic, but like many other organisations, this covered a flu-type event, rather than something as unforeseen as COVID19 and the resultant Lockdown. To make things even more complicated, more than half our Parish Councillors fell into the “Over 70” bracket, so were themselves compelled to self-isolate. We needed to identify who was vulnerable and who was self-isolating, but it was tricky to know how.

Quite early on, we learnt about a “Street Champions” scheme and decided this would be the best way forward. Between them, Great Somerford and Startley have 11 streets. The idea was to have one or more volunteers on each street, or section of a street, so we put out the call, and 25 people volunteered to become Street Champions. We were not alone - at the same time, the Fourways Stores asked for volunteers to deliver groceries to people who were self-isolating, and the Church was also busy making sure that none of its flock was forgotten.

The LINK charity made us aware that their volunteers were able to collect prescriptions for those who had been advised not to leave home. One of Link's key aims has been to coordinate requests and so minimise the number of trips to pharmacies, and to group collections in batches to help the pharmacies to cope with the increased demand they were experiencing.

A “Great Somerford & Startley COVID19 Support Group” page was set up on Facebook, in order to publish any helpful information or advice. 80 people signed up immediately: the most popular posts in terms of “likes” have been the ones on mental health, financial support and COVID19 guidance.

Each of the Street Champions then set about making sure that each of their immediate neighbours was okay – either by a phone call, or by slipping a note through their door, and they helped us do a mail drop to every house in the parish with advice about help available and the relevant contact numbers. In this way, we found that we had over 100 households in the parish whose members were either over 70, vulnerable or self-isolating, and were happy to make their details known to us.

In addition, the Street Champions also helped us identify more than 25 households that do not have a computer or access to the internet, so could not receive the Parish Information Emails or advice on Facebook and other social media. When the Signpost took the decision to go online as a result of the COVID19 situation, these households were able to receive printed copies, which were specially printed for them on the Somerfords Walter Powell printer, and delivered by the Street Champions. Subsequently, if the Street Champions knew of something important that was being communicated to the village online or via email, they would print off the notice themselves and deliver it.

We found initially that the majority of the vulnerable people that had been identified had family members or friends looking after them, but the Street Champions let them know that help was always there for them as a kind of “B Team”, if a person's own family and friends became ill or overwhelmed. More importantly, the Street Champions managed to find the people who did need help – some living alone, some whose families were far away, some with mild dementia who were struggling a bit with the situation, and many just a bit lonely in this new locked-in world.

Since no one could go out during Lockdown except for essentials, some of the Street Champions began phoning their neighbours regularly, to check they weren't too lonely. The Church, which was also unable to minister to its flock face-to-face, did the same, and was also able to refer vulnerable people on to us. And of course, a huge part of all this involved the Fourways Stores, and their team of volunteers, including a few teenagers, who would cycle around the local villages making deliveries. Similarly, as well as offering takeaways, the Volunteer Inn has also been delivering food to those who are self-isolating.

We made a few slips along the way – some houses got overlooked initially, others found themselves with more than one Street Champion. Some streets had lots of vulnerable people, others none at all. Some people had seen the leaflets offering help and prescription collections, but had not realised that they were eligible for such help. Some people threw the leaflets away after week one, but then needed prescriptions a few weeks later. At one point or another, even some of our Street Champions found themselves having to self-isolate, and of course, the Lockdown continued so much longer than any of us had imagined at the outset. But we have been incredibly lucky so far as a parish, in that only a tiny number of people became ill, and no one ended up in hospital.

And what was so great was that all the Street Champions and the other volunteers in the village carried on, week after week, basically just being kind - doing people's weekly shopping – a lot of it locally in the Fourways Stores, but also driving to Malmesbury or Chippenham and queuing up at the supermarkets too, as well as running errands, delivering magazines, sorting out urgent prescriptions and getting people onto the LINK service for repeats, and walking dogs for those who could not leave home at all. When we asked the Street Champions what they had been doing over the last three months, almost all of them said, gosh nothing much ... just shopped for so and so, made a few phone calls ... got some prescriptions ... but when we dug deeper, we found all sorts of small acts of kindness.

The Street Champions are all modest people and didn't want their names mentioned individually, so I'll just let you know of the sort of things we were told. One Street Champion would always put a small unexpected little gift into her weekly shopping deliveries, to cheer up the people she was helping. At Easter time, another popped Easter chocolate surprises through her elderly and vulnerable neighbour's letterboxes. For others, homemade cakes were quite a theme – one Street Champion managed to find out when people had a birthday during Lockdown, and would bake them a special cake. In another house, the Street Champion's children baked fairy cakes for an elderly neighbour's birthday.

And it worked both ways. One of the Street Champions explained how the vulnerable people in her patch were "incredibly resilient and charming". At an early stage of the Lockdown, one parishioner said "As an 80 year old 'youngster', with some mobility issues, I feel as if I've had to learn so many new skills in the last 3 weeks, that my brain is going into overload! Accessing on-line shopping (when I can get a slot!), on-line banking, (which I hate!) and negotiating Zoom so I can keep in touch with various groups have all proved challenging but, with help from family and friends, I've managed to do it! These things are all helping me to keep my independence which is so important to me. I am very grateful to all those who help in so many different ways, so keep up the good work - there will be better times ahead."

Several people baked cakes and biscuits for their helpers, in order to show their gratitude (especially to the volunteers who'd somehow managed to find self-raising flour during lockdown!), and others gave gifts, such as bottles of wine, or home-grown vegetables. One Street Champion said "In all it's been very pleasant – and I've got to know some nice people". Several elderly people have said how lucky they felt to be living in this parish, where people cared about them so much. And that was the great thing – that by each of the Street Champions and all the other volunteers doing what they all thought was just a little, they made such a difference to so many.