"We've always had inequalities, coronavirus has just widened this, particularly for BAME and lower socio-economic communities"

Birmingham and Solihull's life during coronavirus
By Shimul Haider: local delivery pilot manager

This story takes us to Birmingham and Solihull, where we have been holding a series of 'Big Chats' with resident groups, community leaders, key partners and delivery organisations. These sessions have been a great way of unearthing some of the emerging needs and the big issues and priorities that are facing our communities during coronavirus (COVID-19).

We are hearing that food poverty is a major concern, especially for people who have lost their income. The majority are in supported accommodation, some of whom feel forgotten about by the authorities. Basic needs such as food and housing are now major priorities. Food prices are also increasing, which is a worry. The free school meal voucher system is not working, forcing parents to rely on food banks to feed their children.

There were already huge inequalities across Birmingham and Solihull that we were trying to tackle through the 'Active Communities' pilot work, but what lockdown has done is widen this gap even further. We have had to re-focus our work very quickly since the start of lockdown on four pillars of food distribution, a befriending service, a virtual wellbeing offer and positive stories. What we found as lockdown progressed was that the inactivity challenge has got a whole lot harder.

As lockdown eases, other issues are also emerging. Some streets aren't seeing the widespread groundswell of love. Community tensions are heightening, with the council receiving greater volumes of complaints around neighbourhood disputes – some of which have worrying racial undertones to them. Mental health is also now a major concern, with calls to our befriending service having seen a spike in those feeling suicidal. We are also hearing that county lines are now re-emerging, putting our vulnerable young people at greater risk of being drawn into a life of crime.

But it’s not all doom and gloom. We’ve seen some inspiring examples of community activism – people/organisations parking their differences and coming together for a shared purpose. There were 400 volunteers supporting the relief effort and 70-plus food organisations that are now networked as a result of coronavirus. There is a prospect of a food co-operative to assist with the coronavirus recovery. And we’re also seeing a growing ‘sharing economy’, with popular demand for ‘share shacks’ (which are like a library of things), ‘sharing tables’ and ‘wear and share’ schemes.

Other examples of how Active Communities is linking the council with the community during recovery from lockdown are in Birmingham. They’re doing this around the Emergency Transport Plan – aiming to help residents maintain some of the local environmental benefits that lockdown led to. In Solihull, they’re working with communities as part of the council’s efforts to support people back into the local environment and to provide alternative activities for young people, to diffuse concerns around tension and gang issues. All great examples of the system working at its best and we need to now leverage this going forwards, bringing wider partners on board.

Local resident

“I am fed up seeing social media videos of people in their fancy houses, with big gardens and nice furniture, enjoying life in lockdown.

“The reality is very different for most people. Daily life is a struggle and we must not forget that.”

Learning reflection

There needs to be an appreciation and acknowledgement that the barriers to physical activity have just become greater for those who were already inactive. Re-engaging with this audience (particularly BAME / LSEG) will mean an even broader line of sight to physical activity, than previous (potentially more tenuous a line of sight) which will require our investment to be more flexible and agile in the coming year. The economic impact of the pandemic will be felt for many years to come.