

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Organisation: Museum of Oxford

Region: South East England

Introduction

This project evolved from awareness of both the possibilities and limits of another newsletter distributed during the crisis to users on our mailing list. This joint museums' newsletter (Museum of Oxford and University of Oxford Museums) was emailed to both museums' distribution groups with a hard copy version (without digital links) to those without internet access. These newsletters were also forwarded to many other groups including Oxford Over 50s, Barton Community Centre web page, Blackbird Leys groups etc. However, the distribution of these newsletters relied either on internet access or subscription to a mailing list, or other organisations forwarding it.

We wanted to reach older people who would not necessarily be receiving content from ourselves or other organisations. Therefore, we decided on direct distribution to older people in sheltered housing. To create a sense of connection with others, we decided to create newsletters with postcards to deliver to local older people. These would not have any digital links. The postcards were the impetus – to enable people to feel a sense of connection by sending one on to someone else or keeping it.



The 3 themed newsletters (VE Day & WW2, hobbies and crafts, and food, with similarly themed postcards) included local historical images with information about the images. The first newsletter and postcard were created and delivered within a few days; the other two had more content with suggestions of activities, seated exercise routines from a dancer and choreographer. The council teams delivered the newsletters to 200 older people.

Funders

This was funded by the Museum and shared time from Oxford City Council staff

Who is it for?

We wanted to reach older people who are isolated and likely to be shielding, who may not necessarily be connected to digital content, and may not be receiving information from organisations who rely on subscription via mailing list or previous engagement. As some of us were redeployed to the City Council emergency Community Hubs supporting vulnerable

people, it became very apparent that many older people were living in isolation before lockdown, that this had been exacerbated by the Coronavirus crisis, and that many of these older people were without the internet. They may also not have the confidence or skills to access digital content, or to use this to remain connected to others, and were not accessing any information or content that wasn't linked to practical Covid concerns.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

The key outcome was to help older people, particularly those without practical access to the internet, feel a sense of connection and belonging. This was partly to be achieved by having a postcard to keep, send on, leave outside the door or give to a neighbour. The newsletters were light touch with ideas for activities.

We had no agenda for specific outcomes as this was very much a programme to help people feel a sense of connection and belonging at a time of physical and emotional separation. We were keen not to load the project with a desired outcomes because that would have been more about us as an organisation, rather than the individual responses. Now that we can engage more easily (with fewer restrictions) we hope to build on this pilot project to work more closely with other partners in direct contact with older people in sheltered housing and those seeking support (practical or emotional from the Council's hubs and support lines) to continue to provide newsletters to build a relationship with older people who are not necessarily accessing other creative or community provision.

We are aware that it takes a long time to build up new connections and we are very keen not to abandon the project and people simply because the obvious crisis has passed – the crisis of isolation and loneliness for many older people is on-going and hidden and needs to be addressed.

Where is it happening?

Oxford City

Are you working in partnership?

We worked with the community hubs set up by Oxford City Council to distribute the newsletter and postcards to older people in sheltered housing. We then put the material on a shared drive for other hubs to use to print and distribute with food boxes as appropriate. We hope to work further with Oxford Together (a local volunteer led support organisation) to ensure distribution of information to those older people actively seeking support.

How many people took/are taking part?

We delivered three fortnightly newsletters directly distributed to approximately 200 older people in sheltered housing.

For how long has it been happening?

The first newsletter was distributed just before VE Day in the first week of May. With the redeployment of many Council staff returning to their roles, the direct distribution by drivers has stopped. However, we are now in conversation with the hubs that will be continuing beyond Covid and the charity Oxford Together with whom the council teamed up, to explore ways to continue to deliver material to older people in sheltered accommodation, or who are particularly isolated.

What were/are the main outputs?

We produced a newsletter with an accompanying post card that featured an image of an activity or event in Oxford within living memory. We suggested that recipients could send back their postcards to a council team, the museum, a friend or neighbour; we suggested people could send in their memories (by phone or post) for us to share but these outputs were deliberately light touch so there was no agenda with the delivery of the newsletter or postcard.

Evaluation & feedback:

We deliberately did not incorporate any evaluative tools into the programme beyond what organically came back to us either via postcards, feedback to delivery drivers. This pilot was about providing local people with something, without agenda. Verbal feedback was positive where received.

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Successes

- to be able to respond to a crisis in a very short space of time and be prepared to create something without requiring any specific outcomes but simply responding to clear need on the ground.
- collaboration with the community hub team and council teams to distribute the newsletters;
- building practical and active relationships with other teams

Challenges

- accepting that logistically we could not distribute to more than a selected sheltered housing area
- Unable to pre pay postage on the postcards so that it would make it easier for people to send them on (especially those shielding)
- Issue of how to continue to distribute material directly to people without their express consent – hindered by the restriction of visiting people directly. This also was a difficulty in picking up any contributions people may have wanted to share with us.
- Frustration that it was only practical to deliver 3 newsletters over 2 months due to staffing changes as crisis eased.

Further information

The Museum of Oxford tells the story of the city of Oxford and its people. We offer a lively and engaging programme of activities for schools, families, communities, adults, young people and older people, on site at Oxford Town Hall and in community venues such as community centres, older people's centres, local hospitals, pubs, and libraries. We work with local people to research and co-produce exhibitions and programmes about their own local communities, and share these in our museum and online at our new [Museum of Oxford's City Stories](#) website.

The Museum of Oxford is a small local authority museum with 3 full time; 7 part time staff, a total of 10 FTE.