

## **Amenity and Civic Societies respond to the Coronavirus pandemic**

### **Notes from the Zoom remote conference held on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

London Forum (LF) member societies were invited to participate in a Zoom conference call, aimed at establishing what societies are doing and could be doing to assist their communities through these uniquely difficult times. Societies were invited to email the Chair (LF Membership Secretary, Paul Thornton) ahead of the meeting with information about what they are doing; 15 – 20 did so. Some 30 societies joined the meeting. The Zoom platform worked well, and few, if any members experienced difficulties. An audio recording was made of the event.

Following an introduction about the purpose of the meeting and about Zoom protocol, a number of societies were invited to describe what they were doing in more detail. Participants had the opportunity to comment and ask questions about these contributions. The “room” was then thrown open to participants to talk about what their own societies are doing – and not doing. At the end, participants were invited to email the chair with any further thoughts they would like to share. Few did.

The notes below are not intended to be prescriptive. They are a summary of the various ideas that were presented during the meeting. Hopefully each member society will find something worthwhile and relevant to their own circumstances.

#### **Examples of how London Forum members are supporting their local community**

The bottom line is that the great majority of societies are providing useful information to their members and the community at large. Some are also providing hands-on support to vulnerable households, either independently or in collaboration with other civil society organisations and/or the local Council. Some have made a conscious decision not to do so because of the age profile of their membership and the need for safeguarding checks.

Despite the membership of many societies being elderly and in ‘at risk’ categories, it was noted that many are active, don’t think of themselves as vulnerable and feel able to support others.

Most societies are issuing information via social media – website, Twitter, Facebook, email and electronic newsletters (now usually via Mailchimp) and WhatsApp groups (where set-up). These in the main are providing local residents with information about how the local area (parks, foot-tunnels, riverside, stations etc.,) is affected by lock down, as well as information about the opening hours and services provided at food stores (do they deliver?), pharmacies, surgeries etc. It was noted that opening hours on Google Maps may not be up-to-date. One society is calling shops regularly to check opening hours, and is also including contact details for plumbers, electricians etc who are still working. Another is liaising with the local Business Improvement District to ensure that the information about businesses still operating is current. We should be aware of the need for consistency of information, and link in to well-verified local sources where possible.

Some (most?) societies that are unable to provide hands on support to vulnerable households nevertheless have a role to play in identifying those in need, and putting them in touch with sources of help. These include the local Councils, some of which have

mobilised impressively to help with the crisis, others less so. Southwark for example have set-up local hubs for undertaking checks on volunteers. Greenwich have set-up a volunteer database (Greenwich Covid19 data base). Often it will be church and faith groups, local charities (such as the Peel Institute in Clerkenwell and the Kew Neighbourhood Society), Community Service Volunteers and Age Concern, most of which are set up to deal with the safeguarding issues. Of course, we can also encourage those members of our societies who are able to provide hands-on help to volunteer through these organisations.

The problem of identifying those households most in need of help was discussed. One local residents' association has telephoned all members who are not on email, and who may not have responded to leaflets through the door. The numbers are generally quite small. The same society encourages people to check on a neighbour and on a neighbour's neighbour, especially those who "don't know what a smart phone is" as they will be missing out on social media support and often their key worry is how they will collect their prescription.

It is not just households who are struggling, many businesses are too. In Bermondsey with many small businesses, the local amenity and civic society is providing information on where they, too, can turn for help.

Some societies are paying attention to the mental well-being of their members by providing links to activities that keep people amused or healthy e.g. links to arts, films, plays etc. Others are pro-actively organising virtual events such as online quizzes.

Although many societies send out their newsletter by Mailchimp, others still prefer hard copy. One society which traditionally delivered via volunteers decided to use a professional delivery company as it was not appropriate to deliver via volunteers anymore.

A small number of well-resourced societies are taking a prominent role in hands-on support to the local community, coordinating the activities of the various voluntary organisations as well as running errands - delivering milk, talking on phone, collecting shopping or medicines etc.

We can play a vital role in protecting people from scammers by rapidly contacting all our members when wrong-doers are afoot.

It was felt societies needed to be careful not to unnecessarily replicate or overlap with what the Council or other national organisations doing. At same time we should recognise that sometimes a single road or small area supporting itself via leaflets or a WhatsApp group can be more timely and effective. Many mutual aid groups have sprung up on individual streets or a small group of streets.

There was also a plea to civic societies to encourage their members, who are often relatively well off, to contribute to local charities, such as food banks to help those in greater need.

Societies also need to risk assess their own organisation – Trustees particularly – to ensure that their work can continue should their number be depleted temporarily or permanently. It might be appropriate to implement emergency decision-making processes with a smaller quorum, for example. There was also discussion about moving all our processes online (this seems to be happening) – a subject for a future Zoom meeting.

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