

Community Business re COVID-19, Mutual Aid Theme – **Offline social connection (services, information & entertainment)** Host – **Sam Kinch, Heart of Hastings CLT** 7th April 2020

What is Heart of Hastings doing?

Heart of Hastings are a community Land Trust looking to address the housing crisis and gentrification on the south coast with 2 key objectives; to provide genuinely (locally) affordable housing to reduce displacement and to trial experimental approaches to job creation to alleviate poverty and worklessness for people with barriers to conventional employment. Most of my work at the land trust was around engagement and community development with heavy emphasis on bringing people together (physically) to work up new solutions and in doorstep outreach to work with local residents around their concerns. Since Corona I have had to stop work, or at least radically alter my tactics and objectives. The land trust is of course continuing its housing management but our other work is looking very different now, considering the likely economic and social impact of the pandemic. I've also now been furloughed.

With that in mind I've now been working together with an emergent local community group, Hastings Emergency Action Response team (HEART - the name is coincidence), now supported by our local voluntary sector network we've established a town-wide volunteer support hub of 900+ local resident volunteers being overseen by a part time team of 45+ volunteer coordinators.

This has taken a week to establish and is going live over the weekend. Our referrals will come from 3 main sources: direct from the community via a website form, onward referrals from our local authority Covid-19 support desk, or onward referrals from other voluntary or public sector orgs.

Our volunteers are expected to provide support around 3 key themes related to financial hardship, food/medical supply and mental health challenges as a result of isolation. As such our volunteers have been asked to focus on 4 key services: driving/deliveries, telephone befriending/emotional support, Dog/pet-sitting/walking, food/pharmaceutical supply. Using open source tools such as Google Drive software and Closed source software Zoom video calling and campaign/volunteer focussed Constituent Relationship Manager (CRM) Nation builder (usually licensed but currently offered free to groups addressing CV19) we've created a process whereby trained and DBS certified "Area/Volunteer Coordinators" can clock into a "Live" jobs board to view all incoming requests, to select jobs from the list and to then identify and contact appropriate volunteers in the area the call is from to handle the situation.

Working with our local foodbank we've identified that those currently most in need (those without food, the money to purchase any or the means to collect it) will be supported at least initially by the food bank with drivers provided from HEART's volunteer database. With this in mind it's expected that HEART's main workload will be in the supply of food to households who have the money to buy it but who may be in isolation or in an "at risk group" leaving them particularly vulnerable when leaving the house.

The opportunities, challenges and impact the network is facing-

Opportunities: The network that is being established will be vital in the coming months, not only to deal with the problem but also the inevitable economic hardships which are to follow. It's important that the network remains outward looking and retains its independence from public and statutory sector. From a community business perspective it's hard to picture the outcomes of the current situation but the need for restorative organisations in the coming months will be huge. From a community perspective the amount of new connections across social and economic backgrounds is astounding and this can only be a good thing for the town going forward.

Challenges: managing a network of volunteers this large is fraught with common risks but with the added difficulty of no face to face contact making training and "getting" volunteers difficult, a pressing urgency and the

vulnerability of the residents we're aiming to assist most. The ability to do more harm than good in a crisis situation is evident, but not an insurmountable challenge.

Impact: The initial network is very diverse which means a lot of new connections being formed. Once we're live and more active I'd imagine that further links and more localised support networks will be created (we have 466 volunteers phone befriends for example).

Risks, issues and unanswered questions

Risks:

- Making a bad situation worse. We've so far managed to find 45 area/volunteer coordinators with recent DBS checks and some experience of working with volunteers and safeguarding. We've yet to verify these DBS certificates though. Further, our large database of 900+ local people is entirely un-vetted and self-selecting. We have a major task in the next few days to begin vetting volunteers before sending them out to meet some of the more vulnerable members of the community.
- GDPR, we are struggling to know how to identify and "reach" those in our community with no access to internet or telephone. Local statutory agencies are investigating whether they can share data with us which would allow us to begin targeting households most likely to need help, equally if this data on vulnerable households is shared then it increases the safeguarding risk across the network.

How to stay safe and observe best practice in a decentralised, high pressure and highly unusual climate?

Useful links

<https://heart.nationbuilder.com/>

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc36nUmHL97GXGWx49wwt6j8OIKKq4ozEUhObgA-16rTKNBow/viewform>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/HastingsHEART/>

<https://www.facebook.com/isolation.station.hastings/videos/323678258590439/> - livestream video interview starts around 31:40

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