

## **UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON OUR COMMUNITIES**

Cllr Lynda Johnson, Charlton Kings Parish Council and lead for CK Health Connect Project and Youth Work

As we transition from the pandemic and now mix freely with family and friends, travel, and get involved with leisure activities, it would be easy to think that things are returning to normal for our communities. The reality, however, is that for many, COVID-19 created a legacy of social, economic, physical, and psychological challenges, which our communities are having to deal with, and which Parish Councils should be aware of, understand, and respond to with collective energy.

Charlton Kings Parish Council's CK Health Connect project has used a carefully constructed online questionnaire to engage with adult residents and young people to find out how they have experienced lockdown and what supports they need more of in the future. The questionnaire was a sensitive research tool for us during the pandemic, in which we strived to maintain contact with our residents. Their responses have given us a basis to shape our Council's future policy, share research findings with our local, regional, and national partners, and develop actions in related areas of operation.

In surveying adults and young people independently, we ensured that the questions were short, limited to a maximum of seven, and designed to invite reflection and comment. Social media assisted us immensely with exposure and take-up, and hard copies were readily available for those without digital access. Follow-up analysis of the anonymous responses identified many critical themes from the data, including:

- Widespread evidence, across all age groups, of the stress caused by not meeting people
- The need for equal access to digital devices and skills for our senior citizens
- The impact of school closures on parents and children and managing schoolwork
- Barriers to mental health support for young people, exceptionally long waiting lists for therapeutic services and lack of funding for school counsellors
- The need for expanded youth work locally

The data has also yielded several positive trends, such as an improved sense of the local environment, walking trails, and natural beauty. Many reported that

enjoying and exploring the outdoors and personal garden space had helped them through the lockdown. Also cited as positive and felt by many across Charlton Kings was the effective mobilisation of community volunteers and heightened levels of community spirit and local support overall. By contrast, young people focused very much on their personal feelings. They reported that what matters most to them in maintaining their health and well-being is: “Being with friends and family”, “Support and validation”, “Safety and security”, and participating in outdoor sporting activities. One poignant comment stated: “Thanks for asking”.

At a well-attended Community Open meeting at the end of 2021, we shared our research findings with the community and representatives from some of our partner organisations, including local schools, churches, medical practices, political representatives, and the police. We are now moving forward in partnership to highlight specific issues around mental health, digital exclusion, and youth services. Parish Councils can make a difference by working together with energy and vision.

For more information on the CK Health Connect Project, go to:  
<https://www.charltonkingsparishcouncil.gov.uk> or  
[ckhealthconnect@charltonkingsparishcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:ckhealthconnect@charltonkingsparishcouncil.gov.uk).

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