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Unequal Impacts – COVID-19 and older people

The pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for local organisations that support older people in our communities. We asked them about its impact…..

Lola McPartland, Gateshead Older People's Assembly

"The pandemic affected older people so significantly because the government advised all people over 70 to stay indoors regardless of how healthy they were at the time.

We worked hard to stay in touch with as many of our beneficiaries as possible and they told us they were struggling with two main issues - not being able to see their friends or keep up with their day to day routines.

The vast majority of what Gateshead Older People's Assembly does is around bringing older people together to socialise, exercise, and learn. The pandemic meant we could no longer deliver anything remotely resembling normal service as bringing people together simply wasn't an option."

What has that meant for your organisation?

"We had to embrace new ways of working! We are lucky to work with some fantastic instructors who were able to offer their classes online almost immediately. This was a lifeline for our beneficiaries with access to the internet. The problem, however, was that the vast majority of our beneficiaries are not digitally connected. We needed to find a way to reach them.

While only a small percentage of our beneficiaries use the internet, virtually all of them watch television. So, since June, we've been working with Tyne & Wear TV to produce Keeping Well at Home, a television programme designed to introduce strength and balance exercises over 50s can do in their own homes. On average, nearly 100,000 viewers tune in every day and we've received positive feedback from viewers all across the Tyne Tees region.

As lockdown eased, we were in the fortunate position of being able to move quickly to respond to our beneficiaries' demand for exercise classes. We updated our outdoor space and are now offering 16 socially-distanced classes each week including Tai Chi, Walking Football, Strength and Balance, and Keep Fit/Strong/Steady."

How did you adapt and what is life like for your beneficiaries right now?

“We've taken some calculated risks which have been a success and are now working in ways we never would have imagined four months ago. We feel extremely fortunate to be supported by funders who have encouraged us to innovate and recognise the need to respond to beneficiary needs in real time.

Our beneficiaries are resilient. They've embraced every opportunity we've offered them so far and they've been incredibly supportive and encouraging of one another. We're spending lots of time talking about how they've felt over the past few months and have been impressed by how they've navigated the uncertainty.

As we no doubt have lots more uncertainty to come, we will continue to support our beneficiaries in feeling resilient, safe, and prepared.”

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