

NORTH
LONDON
CARES

The Big Chill Report

April 2012

Introduction

In January 2012, North London Cares embarked upon a project in partnership with Islington Council and Age UK Islington, funded by the Department for Health, to improve the health and wellbeing of elderly and vulnerable people across the London Borough of Islington during the coldest months of the winter.

Our objective was to recruit young professional volunteers to knock on 3,600 doors in four Islington wards – Highbury West, St George’s, Canonbury and Hillrise – in order to identify those most vulnerable to the extreme cold weather, to encourage and better enable people to stay warm, and to raise awareness of the various support services and networks available to them through our three organisations and the National Health Service.

Over the following eight weeks, North London Cares volunteers exceeded our target, eventually knocking on 4,002 doors, delivering leaflets, and creating thousands of interactions and over one hundred ongoing relationships to support those most at risk in the borough.

Beginning on February 4th, during the first period of snow and the extreme cold snap, we recruited 19 volunteers from various professions and backgrounds, and applying proven social media techniques on a small scale. Those volunteers participated in 21 door-knocking sessions, normally lasting between one and three hours.

Our volunteers were able to meet a number of specific requirements in the borough: we supported people to get their boilers fixed; we delivered cold and carbon monoxide alarms to vulnerable individuals to alert them to dangerous situations; we escorted elderly people to the hospital who otherwise would have struggled to make important medical appointments – and many, many people were reassured simply to see a friendly face, to have a conversation and to know there was a number to call in difficult times.

In carrying out this project, we believe we made a significant contribution not only to the physical and mental wellbeing of many older people in Islington, but also that we helped build a sense of togetherness, of people looking out for one another in the colder months, and of a community which cares.

The Methods

In spite of the minimal planning and preparation time, North London Cares mobilised within two days when the cold snap hit at the beginning of February. Tapping into existing social, professional and digital networks, at first we recruited a very small number of people to participate as volunteers by publishing a blog post on www.northlondoncares.org.uk. Over time, as we used our Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and email networks to promote the story of what our volunteers were doing, and as we met people on the doorsteps, we found more individuals willing to participate.

For each session, we arranged a place to meet our volunteers – normally a train station – where we would brief people on the task in hand and how we would carry out the door knocking. Volunteers were instructed to introduce themselves by name and organisation, and to inform their neighbour about the purpose of the visit and the various services on offer, including:

- Delivering blankets, coats and jumpers to people's doors;
- In very cold weather, delivering hot meals to people;
- Supporting people against drafts, and providing extra heating;
- Ensuring people have access to the services they need;
- Arranging transport and/or escorts to the doctor or hospital.

If the neighbour was elderly or lacking in confidence, our instruction to volunteers was to ask whether the individual was warm enough, whether they had family and friends nearby who visit and whether the neighbour was connected to National Health or Social Services if required.

Where there was a need that could be fulfilled by North London Cares' central operation or our volunteers – and where support was requested – we recorded names, addresses and phone numbers, and made follow-up calls to arrange for that service to be delivered or a connection to be made. We have recorded the details of 100 people in this way, and we will continue to offer support to those people in the future through our core North London Cares programme.

To safeguard our neighbours, we made it clear that all conversations should occur on the threshold of the doorstep, rather than in people's homes; and to safeguard our volunteers, all participants remained in small groups or pairs.

Understanding the Response

Many of the doors that were opened to our volunteers were done so with at least a small measure of initial trepidation; some people were visibly sceptical, and too many were anxious or even scared at the prospect of encountering a stranger on their doorstep. Other people had apparently prepared themselves for a religious, political or sales pitch before our volunteers had even begun to speak. Few expected to see a neighbour asking whether they were safe, warm and well.

Therefore, there was frequently a change in attitude when our volunteers introduced themselves and spoke about the purpose of their visit. Sometimes, these changes found visible expression: security chains were removed from doors, body language softened and our neighbours in many cases told our volunteers that they were genuinely pleased to see them. Common responses included “that’s really great to hear”; “it’s nice to know there are young people out there who care”; “what a great initiative”, and as Wendy – an elderly lady in Canonbury – stated, “it’s nice to have someone come to my door who I actually want to speak to”.

WENDY, 72 years old – Canonbury

A North London Cares volunteer knocked on Wendy’s door four weeks into the project, at the end of February. Wendy told us she was safe and warm, but seemed glad to have the opportunity to talk to someone about her circumstances. As the conversation progressed, it became clear that she was isolated and lonely.

Wendy lives alone. She has no family, no friends and recently faced a battle with cancer with no support outside of the NHS – no emotional support. As they continued to talk, Wendy mentioned that she did not have anyone to go with her to a yoga class she wanted to attend. Our volunteer instantly offered to help. A week later North London Cares facilitated a trip to the yoga class, and a real and lasting relationship between two people who otherwise might never have crossed paths.

The majority of people who opened their doors to our volunteers were warm and well and did not require any specific support – but were nonetheless happy to be approached by someone who cared whether they and their neighbours were equipped to deal with the cold weather. When our volunteers talked about the general vision of North London Cares – strengthening the bonds of community – people responded even more positively. Almost without fail, our neighbours accepted an information leaflet and, if they weren’t elderly or isolated themselves,

promised to keep an eye out for their vulnerable neighbours. We believe that will have contributed to a greater sense of neighbourliness.

As our project progressed, it became clear that there is a latent desire throughout Islington for increased interaction between neighbours and to build, as one elderly lady put it, “a sense of community that has long since gone and seemed unlikely to ever return.”

JOSH, 30 years old

At the beginning of March, the temperature began to rise and our volunteers had to find new approaches to speaking to their neighbours to discuss the services available to them during the winter months. One of our volunteers, Josh, explained his views:

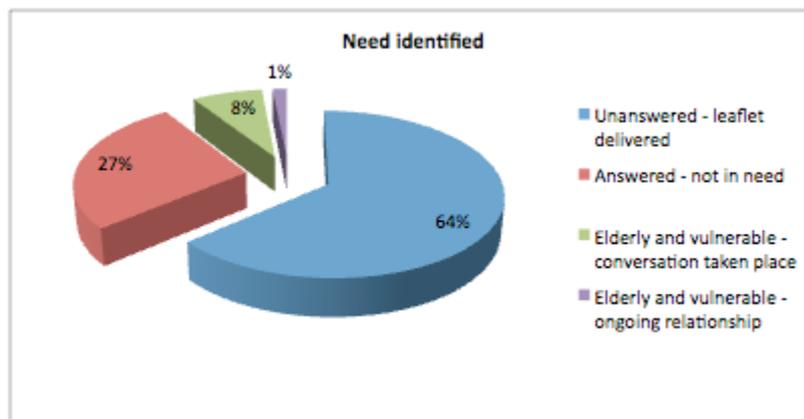
“It’s fun, it’s interesting. It’s kind of ironic that it’s the hottest day of the year, but it is nevertheless cold. But in a way that’s quite a good thing, because it makes it not just about the cold – you then explain a bit more about what it is we are trying to do, which is about building communities. By that I think it is just getting people to understand that there is a world beyond their small apartments, that there are human beings who live to the left and right of them, up and down.”

To watch Josh talk about his experience on YouTube, visit <http://bit.ly/I28QTK>

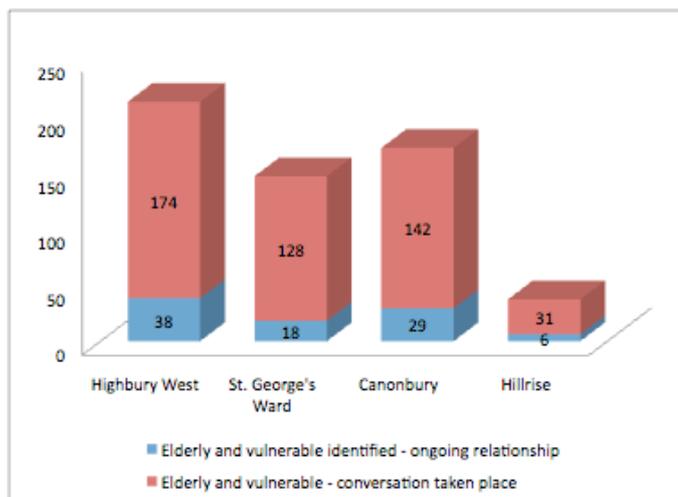


The Numbers

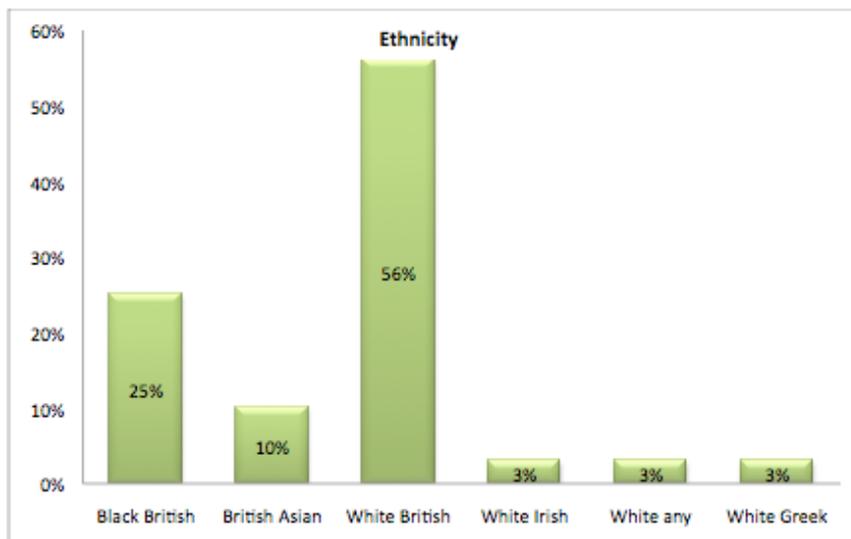
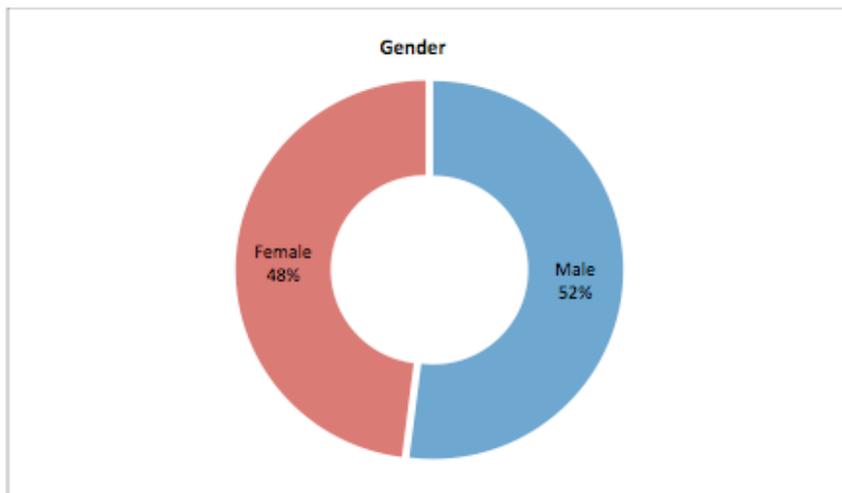
We estimate that, out of the 4,002 doors knocked on by North London Cares volunteers during February and March, 1,700 face-to-face conversations were held (the remainder of the 4,002 doors knocked found no reply, so information leaflets were dropped). Approximately 475 of the conversations our volunteers had were with people over the age of 60; 100 of those (20%) were identified as vulnerable, isolated or in need of the type of extra, ongoing support North London Cares provides.



Our volunteers knocked at 1,002 doors in Highbury West ward, 1,173 doors in St. George's ward, 975 doors in Canonbury ward and 852 homes in Hillrise ward. Out of these four wards, we discovered more elderly people and the highest level of immediate need in Highbury West, closely followed by Canonbury. However, it is important to note that sessions in Hillrise took place towards the end of the project, where fewer people were home to answer the door because of the warmer weather.



Of those neighbours receiving ongoing support from North London Cares, the following gender and ethnicity details have been reported through our customer relationship management system:



Case Studies

FLORENCE, 88 years old – Canonbury

One of our volunteers knocked on Florence's door towards the end of February, when the winter weather was at its coldest and the days were short and dark. Florence is a lively character – she had a good chat with the volunteer that knocked on her door, and was keen to stress how pleased she was to have someone check on her and her neighbours.

Although warm, well and not isolated – with lots of friends and family in the local area – Florence stated that at times she struggled to get out and about to socialise, especially with the long nights drawing in. Florence's friends were meeting that evening, for example, and she had no way of getting to the other side of the borough to meet them. Our volunteer wanted to help. He searched for a friend with a car who could take Florence to see her friends. In the end, none could be found at such short notice, so North London Cares paid for a taxi, in which our administrator escorted Florence to the restaurant. In the meantime, we had spoken to Florence's daughter to reassure her of our good intentions, and when we left Florence we did so safe in the knowledge that she was with friends who would escort her home later that day.

Florence stayed in touch with our volunteer, through North London Cares, and we are now arranging an escort so that she can visit a close friend of hers in Wanstead Hospital.

CHRISTINA, 65 years old – Canonbury

Christina was not in when one of our volunteers knocked on her door. However, a leaflet was pushed through her letterbox and later that day she telephoned North London Cares.

Christina explained that her boiler had broken and that she had been without hot water and heating for two weeks. She did not know who she could turn to and asked if North London Cares could help. After several calls on Christina's behalf to her insurance company and Islington Council – including the local SHINE initiative – as well as back to Christina to reassure her the matter was in hand, the issue was resolved.

Daisy & Carole, 89 & 60 years old – Highbury West

Mother and daughter, Daisy & Carole, were happy to get a visit from a North London Cares volunteer at the beginning of March. Though retired herself, Carole is the primary carer for her elderly mother, and both were struggling with the cold weather. After taking the time to talk through the services available to them, our volunteer identified the couple as in real need of a carbon monoxide and cold alarm.

North London Cares returned with the alarms the next day. Since then we have knocked on Daisy & Carole's door several times – and continue to check on their welfare.

PATRICIA, 89 years old – Hillrise

Patricia had a long conversation on the doorstep with Devon, a North London Cares volunteer, on the last day of our door-knocking campaign in March. Three days later, Patricia called us to request some additional support. She is going into hospital for an eye operation and since she is immobile she will need extra help in future to get to the bank or to get out to the shops. North London Cares will help to build an ongoing relationship between Devon and Patricia. As well as helping Patricia get to the shops and to run her errands, we will also provide companionship over time with regular visits and phone calls.

LOUISA AND ARTHUR, 80 & 65 years old – St. George's

Snow was on the ground when The Big Chill brought North London Cares to Louisa and Arthur's front door. The couple explained that the front and back windows of their property were filthy and that they could not afford the cost of hiring a private window cleaner. Subsequently, their flat was dark and dank – unnecessarily.

Two days later a North London Cares volunteer returned – bucket and sponges in hand – to spend some time cleaning the couple's windows. It was a small, basic activity that made a big difference to the mood and overall wellbeing of our neighbours.

Our Volunteers

Throughout the course of this project, North London Cares mobilised 19 young professionals and students who had never volunteered in Islington before – over half of whom had not done any kind of volunteer work before. The majority of these new volunteers were engaged by, and encouraged to participate through, social media and our narrative development online.

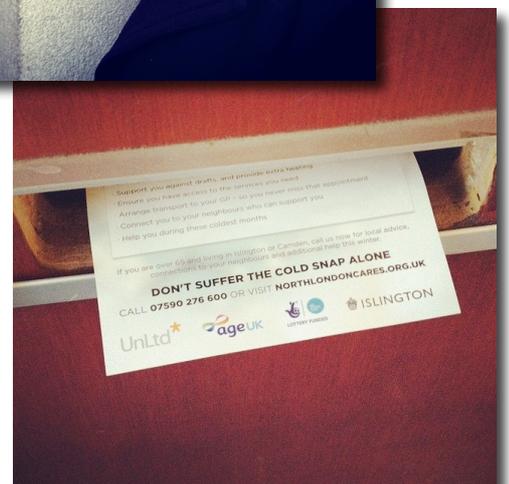
The young people who volunteered on this project told us that they, too, benefitted from their participation. Though many found the prospect of knocking at a stranger’s door daunting at first, by the end of the session most were genuinely enthused by the opportunity to talk to people they might not normally have the opportunity to speak to. Though the people our volunteers met had various backgrounds, experiences, circumstances and views, one thing bound them all together – they were neighbours.

JESS, 24 years old

Following her first door-knocking session with North London Cares, Jess described her experience in a blog post on our website:

“After just a couple hours of knocking on doors, we made contact with several people who needed extra support, and it was rewarding to be able to see the immediate impact of our efforts. It also made me realise that interacting with people in your neighbourhood is often just a matter of practice. If you don’t do it normally it can feel awkward or intrusive but if you push yourself to do it, then it gradually becomes more natural.

“When I started the day I had it in mind that I would be trying to make older or isolated people feel like they were part of the community, and this did happen – but what took me by surprise was that by the end of the session I felt more integrated into that community myself. I’m looking forward to continuing working with them and I’m already urging my friends to get involved too.”



Everyone who volunteered with North London Cares was asked to complete a brief evaluation form to provide important feedback about their experience. Over three quarters agreed that they felt closer to their community as a direct result of working on The Big Chill. What is more, every single one of them stated that they would volunteer with North London Cares again, and would recommend the experience to their friends and colleagues.

Conclusion

Recent surveys have shown that people living alone are more likely to become clinically depressed¹. Additional research suggests that visits to elderly neighbours could prevent accidents and save lives: a survey of 1,000 pensioners shows that 50% had at some point left the gas or iron on by mistake and 94% did not know who to call over a gas leak². And yet, only one in ten younger people see it as their responsibility to visit the elderly³.

Over the course of this project, North London Cares volunteers have begun to address that deficit. We have recruited young people to speak to and support hundreds of our neighbours across the London Borough of Islington. Together, those people have had crucial conversations, and shared in experiences and concerns.

These are meaningful encounters in and of themselves. But as a result of these new interactions, we have now identified 100 elderly and vulnerable people living in Islington who are in need of additional support not provided by statutory services – support we will continue to provide in the future. That will add real value to our communities, and help us to create a lasting legacy for the Department for Health’s investment.

In the coming weeks and months, we will build on this project, by responding to our neighbours needs and requests and providing tangible new support mechanisms that bring people together and break down the barriers to social interaction that exclude too many people. We already have hosted our first “Film Club” – bringing together young and old to watch popular movies in accessible spaces around the community – and we are soon due to host our first “Arsenal Club”, providing a way for older men in particular to interact with their communities using the power of football.

We strongly believe, then, that this project has in itself had an important impact in militating against the likelihood of ill health and depression amongst our older neighbours during the winter months itself – and that it will have an ongoing legacy in the coming years.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-17475240>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17319757>

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17319757>