



# One Northern Devon

## **Learning from the South West during COVID-19:**

A whole-system response  
through social prescribing  
to support those affected  
in the community.

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May 2020



**South West**  
Academic Health  
Science Network

**one**northern**devon**

# Summary

**Starting at street level, in parishes and towns, the social infrastructure and relationships built by One Northern Devon has enabled rapid community-led volunteer support to develop for those affected by COVID-19.**

The social prescribing managers, link workers and community builders that know their communities best have been central to coordinating the effort. To support them these local teams are offered tools – like a template workplan – and opportunities to connect at a daily operations meeting with One Northern Devon. A process for cascading cases up and across the district – including if local volunteers cannot be found – aims to ensure that no one in North Devon needing support during the COVID-19 crisis is missed.

## The challenge of COVID-19

Ahead of the lockdown in March 2020, One Northern Devon was thinking with increasing alarm about the potential impact of COVID-19 on its communities. An ageing population with a high incidence of long-term chronic health conditions meant that potentially many people in the area would be classed as vulnerable and would have to self-isolate.

With the strong and coherent social infrastructure and relationships built through social prescribing, One Northern Devon knew it had a central role in helping to coordinate the community response to support vulnerable residents. By testing and spreading what was being done and learnt in the One Communities, One Northern Devon hoped to find a consistent and safe process to ensure that no one needing support in North Devon was missed.

## How did communities in One Northern Devon respond to COVID-19?

One Ilfracombe, one of the One Communities, put out a call on social media for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked volunteers who would like to support the more vulnerable self-isolating residents in the area. People had to be happy to have their phone number publicly available on the internet but there was a big response.

*"We had over 100 people volunteer in three days. I could see all the messages pinging in. It was just lovely. It made me feel so proud of our town and the work we'd done."*

**Hannah McDonald**

One Northern Devon Partnership  
Development Manager

The town was then divided into 11 areas. Each street was assigned a volunteer coordinator along with an overall area coordinator. Each area set up a closed Facebook group to organise themselves. One Ilfracombe were administrators on the groups so they could monitor and easily share information and guidance from a central point.

## One Northern Devon in context

North Devon is a coastal area in the South West of England, famous for its sandy beaches and surf. It is relatively rural with around 160,000 people living in hamlets, villages and medium-sized towns like Barnstaple, Bideford, Braunton, Ilfracombe, South Molton and Torrington. There is an ageing population and nearly 23% of residents are aged over 65, compared to 18% nationally.

While it is a popular spot for second homeowners there are significant pockets of deprivation. Ilfracombe and Barnstaple are in the most deprived 10% of areas in England. In these towns there are also relatively high levels of ill health. Life expectancy in Ilfracombe is the lowest in Devon, with people dying an average seven years earlier than the national average.

**One Northern Devon** is a collaboration of public, voluntary and community sector partners that work together to improve quality of life in the area. It operates on different levels – directly with people, with towns and villages and with the systems that design and deliver services. Local town partnerships bring residents, health care professionals, emergency services, local authorities, schools, charities and businesses together to work on issues that matter to the local population. These One Communities are in place in Ilfracombe, Barnstaple, South Molton, Bideford, Braunton and Torrington.

One Ilfracombe then designed and printed a leaflet for every house offering help to people without friends or family nearby with three things: shopping, prescriptions and wellbeing checks. The town council covered the printing costs of this. To date they have delivered 7,000 leaflets.

Once all the coordinators were in place they then put out another call for volunteers to help with the shopping. As these people had no contact with self-isolating individuals, they did not need to be DBS checked so it could bring in a much wider pool of people. Other organisations also offered their support. This includes the hospital car service who deliver prescriptions from the pharmacy.

In order to keep check on what was a big logistical task, involving a range of partners, One Ilfracombe developed a workplan. This workplan became an incredibly helpful tool which was given to the other One Communities to share learning. Different towns have subsequently used the aspects of the workplan in different ways depending on the existing assets and infrastructure in their town.

In Barnstaple, the biggest town in the area, the One Barnstaple community developer is employed through North Devon Voluntary Services, the local community and voluntary sector organisation. They are leading the coordination of volunteers in partnership with Barnstaple town council staff. Coordination is happening at different levels across wards with town councillors.

In South Molton, a much smaller town, the One South Molton community developer had been in post for less than a month and the infrastructure was still in development. Nonetheless the newly formed One South Molton group and a small team of dedicated and hardworking town councillors, staff and volunteers hit the ground running when the lockdown was put in place. They leafleted the town, created a website and are offering a matching service between requests for help and volunteers.

In Holsworthy, where there was no One Community infrastructure, the local community themselves created an emergency response team to support those in need.

They have over 100 volunteers in Facebook messenger groups and have so far responded to over 400 requests for help.

Each community now has weekly Zoom calls attended by the One Northern Devon team to discuss how things are going and any support they need. The calls are also an opportunity for One Northern Devon to share information and best practice from the other One Communities.

More recently One Northern Devon developed a system to cascade enquiries from a central council phone number and website into the relevant One Community. Crucially this includes a process for raising cases where no volunteer is found to meet a need at a daily operations meeting. This system has been adopted by all of the One Communities and progress is reported at weekly meetings.

The One Northern Devon COVID-19 operational team meet daily for 45 minutes on a 9.15am call. The call includes One Northern Devon partners from the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, local authorities, GPs, Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and more.

## Facilitating social prescribing through One Northern Devon

**Improving health and wellbeing is a common cause for the One Communities. Social prescribing – which builds social and often local infrastructure and connects people into it – is an approach that has made an impact over recent years in England.**

One Ilfracombe began developing social prescribing in 2014. The funding and structure of the approach has changed over time but the same partners from across the community remain involved. Offering personalised support from a combination of link workers (now attached to GP practices) and community builders, One Ilfracombe has developed an approach that is community driven. Residents know where they can go for help and support should they need it. In the past five years, One Ilfracombe social prescribers have supported over 1,500 residents.

Social prescribing is also in place in other towns across Northern Devon. One Ilfracombe supported the development of social prescribing in South Molton using a similar community-driven approach. In July 2019, the four Primary Care Networks (PCNs)

in Northern Devon received funding for social prescribing link workers. These link workers are employed in different ways – through town councils, GP practices and the voluntary sector.

One Northern Devon has supported these new positions by developing a social prescribing network which includes all those with similar roles in the area. This includes the PCN link workers, six community developers employed by One Northern Devon, link workers at Encompass and Wiser Money, and the police diversion support team. Through the network professionals get support from peers, receive training and share innovative solutions they have found to help their clients.

One Ilfracombe is also one of the test beds of the South West Institute for Social Prescribing – launched by the South West Academic Health Science Network in 2019. Through supporting One Ilfracombe to test and spread its approach to social prescribing, the Institute hopes to help other places with lower life expectancy and deprivation understand how it can be done. For One Ilfracombe, being involved with the Institute has given them a way to learn from best practice and other approaches and make connections with a range of policy professionals and practitioners.

During this time they consider how the last 24 hours have gone, what support the One Communities may need and whether the cascade referral system is working well and people are getting the support they need in a timely manner. Partners use the call to share information from the central North Devon system to the individual communities and vice versa.

## What has been achieved?

The seven One Communities now have a combined volunteer workforce of more than 1,000 people carrying out essential tasks. To date more than 2,000 requests for help have been answered. These include:

- 600 shopping deliveries
- 940 prescription deliveries
- 300 befriending check-in calls
- 160 other acts of kindness like dog walking and letter posting.

*"I don't know what I would do without the volunteers."*

**Mo, 86**

North Devon resident

For someone like Mo, who is 86 years old and lives alone in Ilfracombe, the volunteers have provided a vital lifeline. She said "I don't know what I would do without the volunteers. It's absolutely fantastic otherwise I would not have anything."

For one resident, who has fibromyalgia and has been self-isolating since before the lockdown, One Ilfracombe has helped in a time of need. She said "I already get my food and medication delivered, but that doesn't take into account things like urgent non-repeat medication like antibiotics which I needed recently. They collected my antibiotics at no real notice and delivered them to me. They have said to let them know when another item that needed to be ordered is in and they will collect and deliver that too. Thanks to the angels who live in the town and streets and are prepared to run errands for at risk people like me. Thanks is not a big enough word for my gratitude."

Ten organisations are now involved with the One Northern Devon response. For the Mayor of Ilfracombe, Councillor Val Gates, the work of One Ilfracombe has made a huge difference. She said "from my perspective we knew we needed to engage the community quickly in a support network. With One Ilfracombe and our Ilfracombe Town Council staff we had the infrastructure but had to think about how to roll it out. So the team was given the challenge – they came back three days later with the project fully mapped out. All they needed from the council was a little bit of money. It was a no brainer – they had all the bases covered

*"I do hope that when we are over the crisis some of the skills learned, friends made and services given are not forgotten and we come out the other end in a better state than we went into it."*

**Councillor Val Gates**

Mayor of Ilfracombe

and once launched the community rose to the occasion. A dozen groups geographically based throughout the town each headed by one coordinator and over 150 volunteers.

Now running for over a month, the One Ilfracombe team work closely with the hospital, doctors, pharmacies and police plus many businesses supporting everyone and anyone who is isolated, vulnerable and in need of help and support. There is an amazing community spirit and I am so proud of the way the whole town has engaged in the project. I do hope that when we are over the crisis some of the skills learned, friends made and services given are not forgotten and we come out the other end in a better state than we went into it."

## Step-by-step summary of what was done in Ilfracombe

- Call-out made by One Ilfracombe on Facebook for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked volunteers that wanted to help the most vulnerable self-isolating individuals.
- Leaflets designed and delivered to every house to offer help with shopping, prescriptions and social connections for the most vulnerable self-isolating individuals.
- One Ilfracombe staff divide the town into 11 areas that make sense to the community.
- A volunteer coordinator is assigned to every area. A closed Facebook group is set up by the coordinators for each area.
- A second call out for volunteers is made. This is to do tasks like shopping.
- Other offers of support, from things like hospital car service and local businesses, are built in to the process.
- A workplan is developed to keep on top of the logistics. This is shared with other One Communities.

## What challenges have One Northern Devon overcome?

- **When to mobilise?**

Over the weekend before lockdown the outpouring of support online in Ilfracombe, with residents offering to help one another, drove One Northern Devon, One Ilfracombe and Ilfracombe Town Council staff to quickly decide they needed a process to encourage and direct this support for however long the situation was going to go on for. Some other statutory agencies suggested waiting until there was a clearer national picture, but One Ilfracombe decided to get going as soon as they could knowing they knew their community best. They provided weekly updates to all partners in One Ilfracombe and within a matter of weeks were the recognised coordination point for support to the most vulnerable in the community.

- **How much capacity ensures the system is resilient?**

It took a lot of time and effort to get things up and running. For the small One Ilfracombe team of two full and three part-time staff it has meant full-time work and then some. With limited capacity and the likely prospect that team members could get ill, the team knew they had to find a way for community volunteers to be self-organising. The solution for this was to set up the area coordinators.

- **How to communicate and co-ordinate remotely?**

Changing from working face-to-face as teams in offices to working remotely and online, pretty much overnight, has created an IT challenge. Operating as a collaboration, with different members of the One Communities teams coming from different organisations with different IT systems, creates difficulties in finding accessible video conferencing platforms that all can use. For example, on certain systems Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype are not accessible creating difficulties in finding one way that all can easily speak together. The teams have had to come up with quick fixes, often relying on personal emails, iPads and laptops to ensure everyone can speak on the same platform. Longer term, finding ways to effectively communicate when people cannot get together needs to be given more consideration, especially for cross-sector teams and collaborations.

## What lessons have been learned during this time?

- A whole systems approach to social prescribing, that is focused first and foremost on building relationships across and within the community, has built strong social infrastructure in Ilfracombe. This groundwork, built over years of development, forms the bedrock of effective social prescribing in normal times. It also formed a strong base on which to draw, helping to develop the quick, comprehensive and cohesive community response in a time of crisis like COVID-19.
- One Northern Devon found that taking a bottom-up approach and being confident in their community relationships and knowledge enabled them to respond quickly to a fast moving situation rather than needing to wait for offers of county-wide, regional or national support.
- Developing the system of volunteer area coordinators was essential given the small team.
- As the crisis developed there was an underlying ethos that things need to be 'fast not perfect'. But this does not mean taking unnecessary risks. The team had to initially take DBS checks on trust given the high numbers of volunteers that came forward as the pace of checking certificates could not meet the demand for volunteers to get to work. Recognising that people were not entering properties they pragmatically decided the risks were low and that the pace of checking certificates did not need to slow the practical response. Subsequently the development of governance around community volunteers is ongoing with the team taking advice on insurance, training and other volunteer protocols from voluntary and community sector partners.
- Having the hospital car service deliver prescriptions is very efficient. With their existing links to the NHS and accreditations it is easier for the pharmacist to trust in the process than if they were just individuals.
- One Northern Devon found it is important to be clear about what you are providing and for who, and to set out your boundaries. In Ilfracombe they were clear that people should look after their friends, family and neighbours where they can first. The support on offer was for those people that do not have friends and family nearby.

## What is happening now?

### A more sustained staffing model

One Northern Devon recently employed a System Support Coordinator for a five-month period to cover the COVID-19 response. This is funded by Devon Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP). The post covers the whole One Northern Devon patch with the purpose of developing greater understanding of the needs and gaps in different areas.

### A more resilient system of volunteering

There are concerns that some areas might be flooded with volunteers while other areas have more demand. Potentially, the whole community could experience a sudden need if there was a localised outbreak with fewer volunteers available to respond. To plan for these scenarios the system coordinator will explore solutions with other local partners including businesses to see if they would be willing to fill gaps. Since being in post the coordinator has been able to arrange for one of the partners to collect supplies for three community shops that were running out. If the need arose, further support from partners could include shopping for large numbers of newly isolating members of the community.

### Identifying vulnerabilities and people in ongoing need of support

There are also concerns about people falling through the gaps where communities are not aware of their needs. Working to try and identify people that may not already be known to One Northern Devon, potentially with a high level of need, is a key priority going forward.

### Sharing with others

One Ilfracombe continues to be supported by the Institute for Social Prescribing and together with the South West Academic Health Science Network they are helping to share details of how social prescribing has helped support the community response to COVID-19 in Northern Devon. The Institute will be sharing details from their other test bed sites in Frome and St. Austell in due course.

[onenortherndevon.co.uk](https://onenortherndevon.co.uk)

[swahsn.com/institute-for-social-prescribing](https://swahsn.com/institute-for-social-prescribing)

## Are you a social prescriber?

Share details of how you are responding to the current crisis:



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