



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

COVID-19

Rochdale Borough Council

Tackling Food Poverty

Emergency community response and ongoing sustainable solution around food

Context

Rochdale is a borough with high levels of deprivation so those who suffered most during the pandemic were already at a disadvantage. The primary impacts of Covid-19 in the Rochdale borough were on food, poverty, social connection and digital exclusion. The Council identified cohorts of people who would be at increased risk from the impact of lockdown. The Council already had partnerships and multidisciplinary teams in place at a neighbourhood level. These teams had existing connections to the local community, voluntary and faith sectors which meant the Council's response was formulated, established and up and running very swiftly.

Development

Multi-agency groups formed quickly to address community or neighbourhood issues associated with the virus and lockdown. These hubs were linked to community groups, services, projects and volunteers operating in the area who understand the community. This was vital in both supporting and enriching communities. Expertise was brought in across the system, and everyone played their part. It was an incredibly wide-reaching collaborative process which brought together IT, the contact centre, community safety colleagues, data and intelligence, licensing, library services and so on. Other services provided staff for the Covid-19 response – and where services were stretched, extra support was provided, either formally or informally. The process operated in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation. Many local organisations involved are not formal co-operatives but incorporate the values and principles. Equity was at the heart of the planning, recognising inequalities and identifying people who would be disproportionately affected. Self-responsibility was key, with people who could, supporting people who needed extra support. Services and online drop-ins focused on supporting and enabling people to look after themselves and each other.

Implementation

Five emergency hubs were established to meet the broad-ranging needs of people within the community, which extended far beyond the scope of food provision. Each hub was linked to a specific Township Area and were assisted by a network of community groups and volunteers. They worked together to organise shopping, prescription delivery, wellbeing and general support. As the operation progressed there was increasing stakeholder involvement. The Equalities Assembly was a partnership piece of work between Action Together, Rochdale Council and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector. The focus was around reducing disparities and inequalities around Covid-19. The Assembly has fed into the development of the community response and led to the establishment of a number of forums and specific focus groups to continue conversations started at the assembly. In addition, a number of collaborative spaces have been established with grassroots gatherings, community and faith groups and a food solutions network.



Review

The project has been hugely successful: the immediate needs of the most vulnerable were met and more than 8,000 people have been directly supported through an extremely difficult period. New partner relationships have been forged and existing partner relationships strengthened. Underscored and informed by co-operative principles and values, this diverse group of organisations came together organically to help support the community and the delivery of the response was seamless. It has established a legacy of informal support for people in the community who are vulnerable. The project demonstrated that a sustainable food solution was needed to shift the emphasis from support to self-responsibility. The establishment of the food solutions network and Economic Support Network has arisen directly from the community response. It has led to the development of a co-operative food warehouse, enhancing the offer of affordable food and care packages. It is built on the Covid-19 learning that food is the gateway to a conversation around other support needs. The focus now is on the food solutions network, a legacy of the community response hubs which will continue to meet the needs of the vulnerable in a way that promotes self-help and self-responsibility.

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