



The
Active Wellbeing
Society

IMPACT & INTERVENTIONS REPORT

2020 - 2021



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The Active Wellbeing Society is a community benefit society and cooperative working to build happy, healthy communities living active and connected lives. We work predominantly with communities in areas of high deprivation to tackle inequality and promote community wellbeing.

Our vision is for a society where people have the autonomy, capacity, resources and skills to become the architects of their own destiny; where our individual wellbeing is recognised as being bound up in our collective responsibility to and dependency on each other; and where all of us feel empowered as agents of social change to make a difference.

Health inequalities don't exist in isolation, they are symptomatic of wider structural inequalities and require a systematic and holistic response that goes beyond individual lifestyle interventions and speaks to the reality of everyday life. In Birmingham, where we are based, inequalities are as pervasive as they are stark - with more than 40% of people living in the top 10% most deprived households in the country.

This year we engaged
with

69,428
people

91%
from IMD Quintiles 1 & 2

69.8%
female

43.2%
BAME



"When the virus struck and obviously the need for lockdown, The Active Wellbeing Society approached myself and the city council looking to change their remit to cope with what was likely to come up during the lockdown... Voluntary organisations right across the city have really stepped up, along with individual volunteers, and in many ways the crisis ironically has brought out the very best of Brummies."

- Councillor Ian Ward

Inequality impacts on all of us as insecurities about social status and survival cause communities to break down and retreat, choosing instead to focus on individualised responses to wider social issues. The withdrawal of our social safety net exacerbates feelings of isolation and loneliness, erodes our resilience, and leaves us all more vulnerable to being left behind.

We want to work together, with partners and communities, to rebuild the social fabric that is so damaged by inequality, and instead create the conditions for a society where we all can thrive.

For years, interventions to improve health and wellbeing, and address health inequalities, haven't worked for our most vulnerable communities - despite significant investment in time and money. We recognise that approaches that rely on existing structures and ways of working will inevitably reflect the interests of those who currently hold power, and subsequently uphold the status quo. We want to work with communities to disrupt and shift the balance of power - enabling local people to have more of a say over what happens in their areas and lives.

Those on the sharpest end of inequalities are usually the most powerless in the system, making it difficult to create change and ultimately exercise agency and free will. Our work with communities is based on a deep commitment to co-creation - working with, not doing to - and we see, time and again, the incredible change that is possible when communities are supported to step into their power.



Active Citizens feel more connected and more powerful - they have a greater sense of agency and self-efficacy; they feel more able to make a difference and be agents of social change. This shift in power can lead to increased activity, increased involvement, and more resilient communities.

Throughout all our work we look to find ways to support people in our communities to take the lead - from organising street collections, delivering food or clothing parcels, leading running/cycling groups, and much more - over the last year we've worked with hundreds of volunteers who exemplify what it means to be an active citizen.

COVID-19 volunteer feedback survey

85% felt they personally benefitted from volunteering with us

61% felt more connected to their community

59% found it gave them a sense of purpose

84% felt they made a positive impact in the community

Rachel's story

Rachel signed up to help with packing and delivering supplies with Selly Park South Community Response while she was on furlough. With the support of **Active Streets**, Rachel set up a local collection scheme to help restock the #BrumTogether food supplies.

"I've made and given out 16 boxes to my friends and their friends around Birmingham, which are put out on local streets every Thursday for residents to donate food. The scheme has been a huge success - we had a car boot full of donations in the first week!"

"It's amazing to see how a little help, with things like street donations, supports big collective actions. Sometimes people don't realise that it can just take small efforts such as putting a box outside your house to have a really positive impact - it's only through working with [Active Streets] that I have had the confidence to organise my collection box scheme, and I am hoping to use this going forwards to do further good and keep up community spirit in my street."



Over the last year

1,308

volunteers have been Active Citizens, contributing

25,580

hours of volunteering to our community projects across Birmingham and Solihull contributing

£399,000

in added value



As we work with communities, we see how often systems that are set up to help our most vulnerable, can actually create barriers and reinforce inequalities themselves. Throughout our organisation, we are practising new ways of navigating and distributing power, hearing all the voices - the mainstream and the marginal- as we work towards a more empathic and deliberative approach to democracy and decision-making.

Over the last year, we have been on a journey to create a more participative governance structure, enabling people in the communities we work with, as well as those who support our aims, to become members. Members play an important role for us, helping us to live up to our vision and mission, as well as our commitment to the seven cooperative values: self-help, self-responsibility, openness, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity.

We're building a more participative governance structure, and now have

104 co-op members, including

70 community members,

34 staff members, and

9 organisations



"I want to help others and better my community, I can see the problems and try to put my hand to helping wherever I can. TAWS is very welcoming and accepting and it's easy to fit in, I like the direction of the organisation."

TAWS Member

"I became a member of TAWS as I agree with the core values of the organisation which are to improve people's lives by offering help and more importantly passing on skills and providing support so that people can help themselves."

TAWS Member

We're reimagining our community spaces.

This year we...

distributed

659 grow packs,

installed

28 planters,

established

19 Low Traffic Neighbourhood networks

The environments we live and work in have a big influence on how we feel and behave. Over the last year, we've seen how important space is for our health and wellbeing. In September 2020, Friends of the Earth released a report that confirmed what we could already see - that access to good quality green space is not evenly distributed within our communities, and those in areas with higher deprivation (which are often more densely populated) are missing out. We think everyone deserves to have access to good quality outdoor space - where they can play, exercise, chat, grow or just relax.

We work with communities and landowners (e.g. local councils, housing associations) to reimagine what the spaces around them could be like - from residential roads, to patches of disused land, parks to carparking spaces, and community gardens - and we work together to reclaim those spaces for community benefit, making neighbourhoods feel cleaner, greener and safer.



Bano's story

Bano has been giving out growing packs she's received as part of the Active Communities programme. Bano is a well-connected member of the community and has been part of Active Streets road closures, street cleans and is a walking group leader. She explained that she got involved because she wanted to give something back to her neighbours, who had helped clean the road and had been involved with street closures.

She also hoped planting would help cheer people up who have been feeling low and stressed because of Covid-19. Gardening is a simple activity people can do from home, that can "provide a bit of support so they don't feel overloaded."

Neighbours have been sharing photos of their growing progress and gardening tips in their community WhatsApp group. Bano said the group chat "gives people the opportunity to share their pictures and also to talk about their feelings."

Planting using the grow packs has been a popular pastime which has had a really positive response. A member of Bano's walk group said, "having this little project to distract me from the stress and work of lockdown has made me smile a lot."



Walking and cycling are great ways to incorporate physical activity into our daily routines, reduce emissions and improve the safety of our communities. We know that the cost of a bike is often the biggest barrier preventing people from being able to cycle - so we help people to access bikes through loans and giveaways, as part of our Bike Project, including providing adapted bikes, trikes and e-cargo bikes.

We also support people of all ages to learn to cycle through schemes like Bikeability and Learn to Ride. Throughout the pandemic we've seen increased interest in active travel and demand for more bikes. We're now working with GPs and social prescribers to make bikes available to patients on prescription and promote cycling to more people in our communities.

The success of the Big Bike Project has been recognised nationally, and we're working with local authorities across the country to share and promote our model.

"You can see women of all kinds of ages, backgrounds, different kind of body types. And they were all so motivated. And you could see this really lovely camaraderie between them. And I really wanted to be a part of it."

"Certainly for me the reason I went initially was to get a bit fitter but I didn't realise how social it would become and how much a part of my life it'd become."



We're moving more. This year we led...

153 bubble walk/ run sessions

with **483** attendances

Andrea's story

Andrea (30) is a key worker in one of Birmingham's hospitals who received a bike loan through our 'Bikes to Key Workers' scheme.

"I have been frequently using the bike during lockdown as I live by myself, so I have been spending my time going on bike rides around Birmingham and cycling to my mother's! It drastically improves my mood and encouragement to get out and be active."

"The bike loan has massively helped me to overcome my fear of cycling on the roads, I was really worried of road users, but this renewed practice and having my own bike has helped me conquer that."

"I feel so much better within myself, and I feel like I'm doing my bit for the environment, as well as for my own health and wellbeing."

2,511
total bike
participations

82 bikes
to key
workers



We provided essential emergency support to **10%**

of Birmingham households, which included

172,626 food parcels

80,000 toiletries & household items

35,471 cooked meals

Over the last year, we have seen the number of people experiencing food poverty across the country skyrocket, with people of all ages going hungry. As supermarket shelves emptied and many services shut their doors, we were concerned about the devastating impact Covid-19 would have on our most vulnerable communities. Working with partners across Birmingham - from new mutual aid groups and grassroots community organisations to faith groups and housing associations - we established a citywide community food distribution network. We set up a distribution hub in the city (initially at a community centre and later at Aston Student Union), where we received, packaged, and distributed 933 tonnes of surplus food.

We diverted

933 tonnes of surplus food from landfill to make

50,000 cooked meals



Distributing food parcels to people's doorsteps allowed us to check in and stay connected with people during a time of high anxiety and isolation. As restrictions began to ease, we changed the model to encourage people to gradually reconnect through local community food hubs and cafés. Connecting over food and eating together can have a really powerful impact on our wellbeing, our sense of belonging and trust, going forward we want to do more of this.



"You've been reliably - like clockwork - providing me with food parcels for the last 3 months... This week's parcel just arrived. Thank you for keeping me in your thoughts & keeping me alive. I feel valued by my fellow citizens in Birmingham."

"I like being in the kitchen quite a lot. I'm actually making jacket potatoes right now with vegetables. Since that day [of using the recipe kit] I've been cooking quite a lot. I've got anxiety and depression and cooking helps; it takes my mind off the stress."



We need a better food system - one that works for everyone, and for the planet. We're working with communities to develop and embed alternative food models - shifting away from individualised behaviours and routines towards a more communal approach. Growing, cooking and eating together enables us to not only reduce food waste and ensure nobody goes hungry - but also to unlock a wide range of co-benefits from diet to mental health, social connections, support and access to opportunities.

Our communities are full of assets - people with skills, resources, time, and knowhow - and throughout the last year we have seen a wave of goodwill as volunteers have come forward eager to help out where they can. But we've heard from our communities that often people don't know where to go or how to offer help - while others aren't able to access the support they need. Our sharing projects bring people together to offer/access resources, skills and opportunities - helping to do the 'social knitting' within communities, that helps us all be more connected and resilient.

Sharing can help us reduce waste and protect the environment, while also bringing us together to connect and share resources, making sure that everyone has enough. We've been working with communities to develop Share Shacks in Balsall Heath and Ladywood.

Share Shacks are community spaces where people can borrow items, share skills, and build connections. Because of lockdown restrictions, these Share Shacks haven't been able to be fully open for the community - but we've found other ways to promote sharing, working together with communities and partners across the city.

Our **'Wear & Share'** project, set up as an emergency response to the pandemic, received

6,183 tonnes

of donated clothes which were packaged up and distributed to

2,336 recipients

by our staff and volunteers.

"Thank you so much for your quick response and the amazing work you all do, it really does make a big difference to people."

Ian's story

Ian (36) was referred to the Wear & Share project by a local charity. He has been struggling with substance use for 20 years, is vulnerably housed and has very little income.

"I had nothing, no money, no clothes, so what I got from you guys was really helpful."

A few weeks later, Ian came back asking for a tie for a job interview.

"I was lucky in that I was able to go there in person and see the clothes myself... There was a suit and it fit me like a glove. It's probably my first ever suit - I'll look after that suit so well."

Ian was successful at the job interview and is now working for a charity supporting people struggling with substance abuse. He said the suit

"made all the difference to the interview and me getting the job. It has a really positive impact, not just on myself and my confidence in walking into that interview but also showed that I made an effort."

"Organisations like yours just really helps people like me who have been through some difficulties."



90 Share Shack members

200 items available

Following the Government announcement in 2019 to increase access to social prescribing as part of the NHS Long Term Plan, TAWS began to work with GPs and health partnerships about developing a Link Worker service in Birmingham.

Not all health-related problems can be resolved by a medical prescription, 'social prescribing' offers an opportunity to look for social responses to issues patients often present to GPs with. For example, people experiencing high levels of stress, employment and debt issues, loneliness and isolation, or bereavement, can find it helpful to talk to someone who is trained to help them - and who can connect them with support networks within their community.

Equally, those who suffer from health conditions connected to lifestyle issues, can often be better supported with a social and holistic response that looks at their wider wellbeing needs.

"OHP [Our Health Partnership] and The Active Wellbeing Society have produced a unique system of social prescribers across Birmingham that works according to individual local area needs and priorities that use each organisation's skill set to provide a really deep and broad offer to patients and their needs."

- Dr. Ratnasuriya

"It's a really good service for the patients, it's good for the doctors, it's good for the reception team to have someone that they can advise patients about. I think the future is a positive one for social prescribing."

**- Sharon Dainty,
Practice Manager**



Coffee & Chat for Carers

It has been a difficult time for everyone, but especially for people with caring responsibilities and the people they care for. Many people care for a family member, so have had little respite since the pandemic begun.

"I don't think anyone who hasn't been through it realises how difficult it is, the effect it has on your mental health... I've never had stress like this and I've had stressful jobs. I can feel my own health deteriorating." George, a member of the group

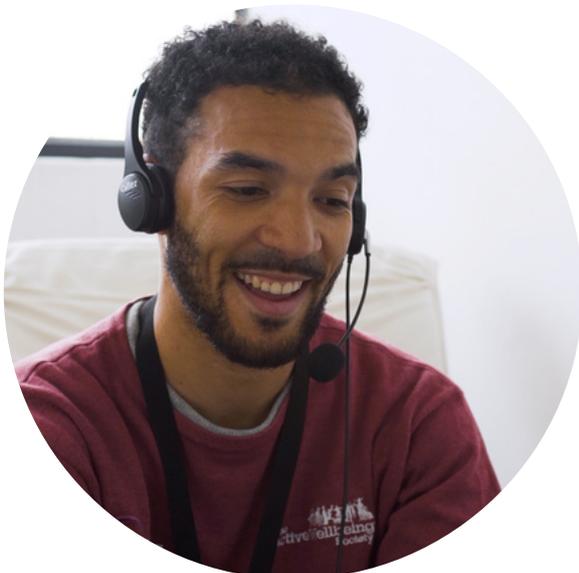
Our Social Prescribing Link Workers have been working together with people with caring responsibilities, partners, and GP practices. Our patients needed the opportunity to *"talk to someone else going through the same thing"* so together, we decided to host some virtual sessions that would enable us all to connect.

"Occasionally you pick up tips and tricks but for me it is talking to people who are on the same wavelength as you."

"Talking to friends is different - unless people have had to care for someone in some way, they don't understand."

Over the last year, we've found new ways of connecting with and supporting patients, across the **51** practices where we deliver our Social Prescribing Link Worker Service.

These new approaches have ranged from 1:1 support over the phone, to virtual groups on Zoom - and even 'bubbling' activities in person, where restrictions have allowed. We've also recently been helping with the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out, partnering with GPs to support patients arriving at surgeries - particularly those who are anxious or have struggled with impact of Coronavirus and isolation.



We work across

51 GP surgeries

9 primary care networks

covering a population of

380,000 patients

Alyssa's story

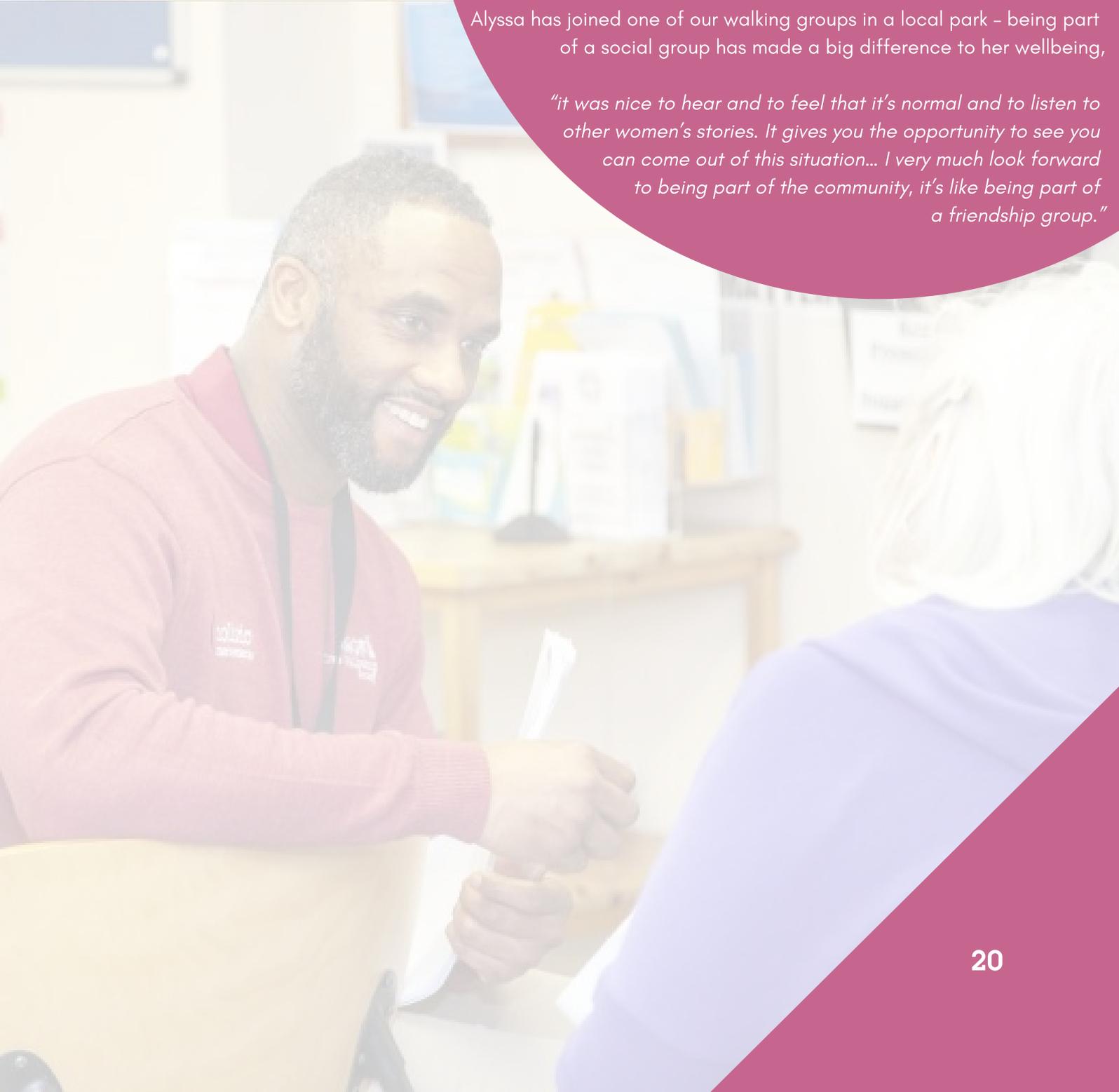
Alyssa lives alone and as a result of Covid-19 she became cut off from forms of social contact and started to feel vulnerable and isolated,

"I found myself feeling depressed and feeling like I didn't have anything to look forward to. I just stayed in my room, I couldn't make myself even get up to open the curtains. I was just in a dark place."

Alyssa went to her GP for help and they referred her to our Social Prescribing service. She spoke to her link worker every week on the phone, who also helped her access food parcel deliveries while she waited for her benefits claim to be processed. Alyssa realised, *"this woman is going to help me. I really found a lifeline, it pulled me out of my darkness in such a friendly way."*

Alyssa has joined one of our walking groups in a local park – being part of a social group has made a big difference to her wellbeing,

"it was nice to hear and to feel that it's normal and to listen to other women's stories. It gives you the opportunity to see you can come out of this situation... I very much look forward to being part of the community, it's like being part of a friendship group."



The pandemic, and subsequent lockdown restrictions, have made our mental health crisis in the UK much worse. As people struggle to come to grips with their own experience during this time, we have already started to see an increased demand for mental health support, against a backdrop of services already feeling overstretched and under pressure. In March, as social distancing was introduced, the way we worked with communities changed drastically. Our model of support was adapted from being predominantly face-to-face to operating virtually - online and over the phone.

We set up a Befriending service to offer support to those in our communities who might be in need of a 'friendly chat'. Many of those we spoke to were unable to meet their basic needs or felt they had nowhere to turn as services changed overnight. We were able to draw on our networks and delivery teams to respond, not only with emotional support, but also practical solutions - addressing the environmental factors that often undermine good mental health (e.g., lack of food or essential supplies, housing problems, bereavement, or domestic abuse).

We made

14,845 calls

supporting **5,572**

people



"I had been feeling quite low but this call has been a breath of fresh air."

"I would have been lost without you, I'm really grateful for the service, It has made it easier to shield with organisations like yours."

David's story

David (72,) lives alone and has been struggling with depression as well as money issues.

"I used to walk around a lot, but...this lockdown you can't do anything. I just watch TV with my cat."

Our Listen & Connect team connected with David in August and were able to provide him with food and clothing, as well as help with his gas and electric from the Witton Centre.

At Christmas David received a treat bag from TAWS,

"She sent me a Christmas treat bag. She sent me a hot water bottle through, my little hot water bottle is in a felt bag. I take that to bed every night and it keeps me warm at night and day."

David said he was *"overwhelmed with what you've done for me"*, but the most important thing was having someone to chat to,

"They listen, they care, and they're understanding. There was somebody at the other end of the phone if I wanted it, if I was getting depressed with it. There was somebody to help me with food. There was somebody always there for me."

"Big, big thank you to the whole of TAWS, to everyone that has helped me, and the befriending service who let me talk her ear off! you have all been so kind and reliable and I really mean that from the bottom of my heart."

This offer has now evolved into a new service area, 'Listen & Connect', which offers a listening ear along with practical solutions for those in need.

We found new ways of connecting with our communities this year online. Our livestreams on Facebook and YouTube have taken us into people's homes, helping our virtual community to stay active through activities like Zumba, Tai Chi and Chair Based Exercise. Through our Sensory Walks and Wild Challenges, we've been able to introduce our communities to new areas and showcase some of the amazing green spaces that are available on our doorsteps. We've collaborated with artists and creators to turn our collective experiences into art, and to facilitate conversations around the pandemic.

We also ran private zoom sessions for group activities - creating opportunities for connection between people with shared experiences including new mums, Carers, and people with specific health conditions.

We know that digital doesn't work for everyone - many people in our communities don't have the space or privacy to join in with our virtual sessions, and others don't have access to the devices or WiFi needed to connect. We're working with communities, and partners, to support digital inclusion - making tablets and laptops available on loan from our Share Shacks and facilitating courses to help people develop their confidence and skills.

We helped people stay connected and be active online through our

1,203

virtual wellbeing sessions, with over

987,000

minutes viewed

"It has been a great help having these zoom classes online as it helps with my physical and mental wellbeing. It has been a lifeline during these weird times."

Nadia's story



Nadia lives in South Birmingham, has three children. Before the pandemic, she was a member of one of our running groups, which helped her with anxiety. She joined in with the This Girl Can zoom sessions which really helped especially having the chance to interact with people she'd never met before.

She felt through the sessions she was able to be in contact with the outside world, and her friends, despite being at home in lockdown.

"Thank you so much. I've been incredibly down today but this amazing session has lifted my mood."

"I started putting it [camera] on and it was nice too when the person leading, they would like say, 'Well done, Nadia, you're doing amazing today. You were really into it.' So it's like they are watching. And they do really give you that positive vibe as well. So I started putting my camera on, and it's the confidence really isn't it, the confidence was coming out of me."

Nadia recognises the importance of exercise in helping with her mental health, and is really grateful for the This Girl Can Zoom sessions. She saw them as "my time for me" and an opportunity to "invest in myself."

"And they really helped me get through the lockdown... I have to say, I love the zoom sessions."

Connecting in person will always be an important part of our work, but over the last year we've seen how connecting online can help us reach new and different audiences, bring people together virtually who might otherwise never meet, and build community during a time of isolation.

At the beginning of 2020, The Marmot Review: 10 Years On, presented some shocking (though perhaps not surprising) evidence that health inequalities across the country have grown in the last 10 years, and life expectancy has stalled. We know that, in order to tackle these widening and persistent health inequalities, a radical shift is needed.

Across all our work we endeavour to influence and improve the wider determinants of health by working with communities to identify and address the barriers, conditions or contexts which undermine good health and wellbeing. Our work is informed by NEF's '5 Ways to Wellbeing', and we take a holistic, person-centred approach to understand and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities.

We are committed to being grounded in the communities we serve, and evidence based. We use insight from our work on the ground to innovate with communities, developing new thinking and ways of working to improve wellbeing. We also play this insight back into the system - highlighting barriers and uplifting the voices of our community.

We carried out

21

surveys with

2,461

responses

500,000+

people engaged
with us through
social media

A woman wearing a light-colored hijab and a green long-sleeved shirt is looking down at a clipboard she is holding. She is holding a pen over the clipboard. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery. A large blue circular graphic is in the top right corner, and a blue diagonal graphic is in the bottom right corner.

"The data and insight provided as part of the #BrumTogether campaign was incredibly important in helping us to understand where the need was and influence where resources were being driven within the system. We were able to identify trends and anticipate the demand, it also helped us understand who we were reaching through our provision, and where we needed to improve our engagement or adapt what we do and how"

We facilitated

7 focus groups
&

60 interviews

Throughout 2020/21, The Active Wellbeing Society showed up and pitched in – negotiating this period of crisis and heightened anxiety with bravery and integrity.

We embraced our principles of staying with communities and responding to need. We held our nerve and worked to reflect back to the system what needed to change – we saw first-hand the need to pass risk up the system, rather than leave it for those struggling in our communities to hold.

We were supported to do this by our existing funders (including Sport England, Birmingham City Council and Our Health Partnership) along with some new ones (e.g., National Lottery Community Fund, DEFRA, BVSC) who understood the need to be flexible and brave in the face of uncertainty. We've learnt that we need to be brave with power, and support others to do the same.

We've built some incredible partnerships over the last year and worked together to achieve significant system change and impact. We will continue to work with partners to show how the sharing and distribution of power and leadership, with priorities determined from the bottom-up, can really work to ensure that communities are supported, and that resilience is built.

We supported
14 community
groups with
fundraising
& published

19 funding
bulletins

