

Bradninch Together: The Journey So Far

As we approach one year of Bradninch Together, we wanted to take the opportunity to share with our community something of our adventures so far and our plans for the future...

Coffee-fuelled Beginnings...

On Friday 13th March 2020, confirmed UK cases of Covid-19 increased to 798, sporting events were suspended and British council elections were postponed; we now know that little over a week later the first England lockdown would begin. Amidst this national picture, that Friday morning two strangers – brought together having contacted Rev. Olly with Covid concerns – drank coffee in a Bradninch kitchen and discussed the potential impact of the new virus on our community; and how the community might pull together to respond. The strangers found that they shared similar perspectives, and the idea of an informal group called Bradninch Together (now fondly known as “BradTog”) was born. Its aim was to facilitate a network of support across Bradninch and Hele, ensuring that all residents could get practical, Covid-secure help should they need it. Shortly after that initial meeting, a third stranger joined what was to become the “Steering Group” – today comprising seven “strangers-turned-friends” – and on 15th March a call for volunteers went out on social media. The response was immediate and positive, with 50 people signing up on the first day alone.

Getting Going...

A number of volunteers jumped at the chance to take on the role of Co-ordinators, with each individual or pair becoming the point of contact between those needing help and those offering to help in a particular part of town. Six coloured geographical “zones” were demarcated, and an additional team (later merged with the others) created to offer telephone “check-ins” to anybody who would welcome the contact.

On the evening of Wednesday 18th March, the Steering Group and co-ordinators met in a ventilated and therefore chilly St. Disen’s Hall for what was to be our first, slightly uneasy experience of a socially distanced meeting, with the aim of getting things going. A flurry of leafleting, posterage, social media posting and article writing later, and we were off, little knowing that we would still be going nearly a year later! There have been peaks and troughs (coinciding with periods in and out of lockdown) in terms of demand, but the availability of help has been, and remains, constant. At the peak of the first lockdown there were 141 active zone volunteers, with 100 still active at the end of 2020; that’s not including those volunteering for other tasks and projects.

Diversification...

As the pandemic has progressed with ever-evolving circumstances and regulations, the scope of BradTog’s work has broadened, though the general focus is still to respond “nimply” to local needs and opportunities that may benefit the community. The Steering Group being largely allergic to bureaucracy and hierarchy, there has been, and continues to be, encouragement to all members of our community to come up with ideas and lead or get involved with projects: BradTog is about facilitating activities, helping people to build connections and co-ordinating and supporting the efforts of anyone who wants to get involved. So far, a number of initiatives, both long- and short-term, have been developed under the BradTog umbrella, involving countless people. Highlights have included:

- Creation of a BradTog website - a virtual community hub, full of information about the projects mentioned here and much more.

- Establishment and administration of the BradAid hardship fund, offering grants of £50 to anybody in our community with an immediate financial need.
- Coordination of a facemask-making initiative, with quality re-useable masks available to local people.
- Offer of a daily newspaper delivery service during the first lockdown.
- Creation and running of Bradninch Open Work Space at the Kensham Club during September and October, offering the opportunity for anyone wanting a change from home to access a pleasant, Covid-secure setting, with work spaces, WiFi and coffee.
- Development of a “Mental Health Matters” group that offers regular postings of support via social media and has engaged with other organisations on a number of matters, including the development of support at the Hele railway crossing.
- Organisation of the “Spare Plate” project, offering Christmas lunches to those who might otherwise miss out.
- An art competition and a festive Zoom quiz.

Looking ahead...

We can't know what lies ahead, but it seems likely that Covid impacts will be with us for some time. The journey so far has shown that there's much to be gained, both practically and emotionally, from facing challenges together.

To that end, through its network of volunteers and existing initiatives, BradTog will continue to offer swift and effective response to community needs, as best we can. We will also continue to support and enable local people to develop new projects that enhance care, kindness and mutual support in our community. To help us to facilitate these activities on an ongoing basis, we have recently set Bradninch Together up as a Community Interest Company – watch this space for further news.

Too many “thank yous” to mention...

BradTog has been a true community effort of mutual support, and its achievements so far are testament to the wonderful community in which we're fortunate to live. Thanks are due to all who've freely given their time, skills and resources in myriad ways. In addition to these numerous individuals, it's worth just mentioning a number of other groups and organisations who've supported or collaborated with us in various ways over the past year:

Bradninch Arts Group
 Bradninch Baptist Church
 Bradninch Spar
 Bradninch Town Council
 Catch 77
 Devon Community Foundation
 Network Rail
 St. Disen's Church
 Sustainable Bradninch
 Tesco
 The Kensham Club

To find out more about all of the Bradninch Together projects and opportunities mentioned above, together with a wealth of other community information, check out our website:

www.bradninchtogether.org.uk Applications to the BradAid fund can be made via the website, or paper forms are available from the door of St. Disen's Church Hall.