

# To be alone freely: How Thanet is supporting its isolated elderly

Writer  
Alastair Haggart

Images  
Courtesy of charities

**“Only the young can be alone freely. The time is shorter now for company, And sitting by a lamp more often brings Not peace, but other things”**

- Philip Larkin

**L**ike many coastal districts across the UK, Thanet faces pressing age-specific challenges in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Office of National Statistics, there are approximately 35,000 people aged 65 and over living in the region, more than 4,000 of whom are over 85. It is a demographic particularly vulnerable to the disease, and one for which isolation can be emotionally challenging, in addition to the stresses of coping with the shifting practical minutiae of the day-to-day. Thankfully a number of organisations are responding locally to these concerns by offering a range of new and ongoing initiatives to assist Thanet's most vulnerable citizens.

In the wake of the spread of the coronavirus, **AGE UK THANET** shut down its hub activities to focus on delivering emergency support out in the community. This included delivering 80 “buddy box” meals a day, and performing “check-ins” for the most vulnerable with the support of Margate Fire and Rescue Team; providing a Covid-19 crisis shopping service with volunteers from Your Leisure; and a voluntary telephone befriending service, which reached over 2,000 people in two months.

The organisation also provides targeted advice and information about alleviating the financial stresses which have burdened so many since the outbreak began. “People are having difficulties with benefits stopping or changing, and are struggling to get the right help,” says Vanessa Wood, chief officer of Age UK's Thanet branch. “We are signposting and supporting with

information and advice, even down to finding dry shampoo for those people who are unable to wash their hair, or new microwaves for our vulnerable client group, who without such vital equipment cannot remain independent with their choice of meals.”

These initiatives are fuelled by the energetic kindness of people willing to help. “We always need volunteers to help support our services,” says Vanessa. “Many elderly people who were independent now find themselves requiring support and companionship, due to shielding and keeping themselves safe. We're keen to secure partnerships with local companies that share our values and vision. If there are any individuals out there who wish to make a major difference, then we'd love to hear from them.”

Lou, a volunteer coordinator, says that the elderly and vulnerable are rewarding these efforts by providing inspiration to those more fortunate. “I get a lot of strength myself from our older generation. They just seem to get on with it, with a stiff upper lip,” she says. “One couple clapped for us on the phone the other day (first the husband and then the wife).

They couldn't thank us enough for being there and supporting them. It brought a tear to my eye.”

## Thanks to Age UK Thanet

“I couldn't have done this without you. You should be called Angels UK”  
**Anonymous, Client**

“A lot of clients have said I didn't know Age UK Thanet did so much!”  
**Diane, Information & Advice**

“I've been calling Bob\* at least once a week, sometimes two. He seems in good spirits as usual. I think he enjoys our chats. I'm not 100% sure (haha) but he always sounds glad to speak to me. He's definitely waiting to when I can visit him again though, and making plans of things he'd like to do”

**\*Name changed, Befriender**



Vanessa Wood and Louise Collins

**CHANGING MINDS KENT CIC**, a non-profit organisation “on a mission to help inspire, educate and reduce the stigma around mental health”, responded to the pandemic by creating a new bespoke project that can help address local needs.

“Before the lockdown, we were on the cusp of expanding our work into the wider community to reach out to even more individuals in need,” says Steve Migan, the organisation's community engagement officer.

“When the pandemic started we had to adapt our service pretty quickly. We decided to launch the Lifeboat Project in place of our usual social schedule. The project provides care packages of food and toiletries to vulnerable individuals all across Thanet, along with signposting them to other organisations who can help. We provide scheduled weekly packages to in excess of 30 elderly individuals at the moment, as well as fresh produce for several supported living accommodations in Margate, Broadstairs and Westgate. And we are offering online support through our social media and the Mentally Fit YouTube channel, which provides a range of informative self-care and exercise videos.” ►





Steve Migan of The Lifeboat Project

## The Lifeboat Project

Quotes from members of the community who have received packages:

"Brilliant service, nice variety and very reliable"  
**Glenn and Moyna**

"Very supportive and friendly service, you have really helped me out so much"  
**Hamidah**

"Lifesavers, I don't know what I would have done without you guys"  
**Becky**

Quotes from our volunteer team:

"The Lifeboat project was the place I came to when hopelessness had set in and I didn't know where to turn, or how to help. Driven by a deep sense of care for our community, they have not only given me purpose, but also so much pride and wonder at what big things ordinary people can achieve."  
**Katie**

"I think I would like to say that I feel privileged to help out with such a wonderful, committed team - and to be able to give something back - I feel driving a few care packages to those who can't get out is the least that I can do! I have been amazed by the spirit, energy and commitment of the team that lead this project."  
**Donna**

"In these strange times it is good to do something worthwhile and help others. Glad to work with such a public spirited group of people."  
**Trish**

The organisation also provides "online mental health first aid training", for those wishing to either maintain their own mental fitness or develop skills that may be of benefit to those around them. "While we are experiencing changes to our daily routines and social interaction during the pandemic, people may be experiencing mental health challenges," says Steve. "This course gives access to information that they may be able to use to support their families, their friends and themselves, and to continue supporting others in the community."

Steve adds that further support is encouraged, in the form of volunteered hours or donations of necessities. "We are always looking for volunteer drivers to deliver care packages and collect donations that are offered through the community," he says. "Volunteers are welcome to apply through our website to express their interest. We are also seeking donations of food and toiletries. While the community has come together brilliantly through

the pandemic, there are still lots of people who are vulnerable and self-isolating who need support through care packages."

Rebecca, a volunteer with the **LIFEBOAT PROJECT**, says that the experience has been a heartening one. "Watching a large number of volunteers share their time, kindness and diverse skills, to help feed and take care of vulnerable people in our community, has reinforced for me how a community should always be," she says. "We all need to take care of each other. It's that simple!"

Two organisations demonstrating the efficacy of strategic partnerships in times of crisis are the housing group **ORBIT**, "the UK's leading developer of new homes for affordable and social rent", and Global Generation Church in Margate (**GLOGEN**).

"Orbit has a dedicated community investment team which works with various community, charity and public sector groups all year round," says Julie Potts, Orbit's senior PR officer. "When the pandemic hit the UK and lockdown was enforced, Orbit was able to reach out to those groups very quickly, find out what was needed, and tailor its support accordingly. Orbit used its strategic partnership with GloGen to help get food supplies to those who needed it most."

In addition to the 50 food parcels a week it now provides, GloGen also assists with obtaining prescriptions for elderly residents, and monitors their wellbeing with regular phone calls. "These calls received very positive feedback, because some people did not know who to ask for help or where to go to for referrals to services," says Julie. "We hope that as a result of those calls, many will be accessing support they did not know

existed before, and will continue to reach out for that support post coronavirus."

James Issott, project manager for the coronavirus activity at GloGen, says partnerships of this kind, and the opportunities for wider involvement they create, are invaluable. "We are so thankful to the support of Orbit Housing for our organisation during this time," he says. "But in particular to all of the volunteers within the community who are working tirelessly to make sure parcels are made and delivered. It is so incredible to see the community stepping out to help one another."

## Get in contact

Age UK Thanet can be reached on 01843 223881 or at [vanessa@ageukthanet.org.uk](mailto:vanessa@ageukthanet.org.uk)

To learn more about the Lifeboat Project, please visit [changingmindsKent.co.uk](http://changingmindsKent.co.uk) or email [management@changingmindsKent.co.uk](mailto:management@changingmindsKent.co.uk)

GloGen can be reached on 01843 226232

Financial, wellbeing, education and training and digital support can be found on Orbit's Better Days website [betterdays.orbit.org.uk](http://betterdays.orbit.org.uk)

A one-stop resource and guide hub for anyone concerned about or caring for an ageing parent or relative, neighbour or friend is available at [agespace.org/local/kent](http://agespace.org/local/kent)

The hub has a dedicated Coronavirus page signposting people to the key support organisations in Kent and links to the national Age Space site for general health, wellbeing and technology advice.



Volunteer at GloGen