

Thanet Virtual High Street brings local Christmas shopping to your living room

Karen Brinkman set the group up after seeing the impact lockdown had on her daughter's and best friend's businesses

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By **Katie Boyden**

The Thanet Virtual High Street is offering businesses and crafters another way to find customers during these difficult times (Image: TVHS)

A new group set up to support small businesses in Thanet, Kent could be the answer to the isle's Christmas shopping.

Thanet Virtual High Street is a way to do your Christmas shopping or look for other goods and services from the comfort of your living room - and with the isle's coronavirus infection rate soaring, shopping from home as much as possible might be a good idea.

Karen Brinkman, 48 and from Westbrook, was furloughed from her job as a local charity worker during the coronavirus lockdown, but she couldn't stand not having anything to do during her time off work.

During the lockdown she saw the impact closure was having on small businesses - including her daughter who runs her own business as a beautician, and her best friend who runs a dance school.



Karen Brinkman (Image: Karen Brinkman)

Initially Mrs Brinkman set up a Facebook group titled 'Thanet's Virtual Summer Fair', to give a bit of publicity to local crafters and traders who may not have websites or the facilities to sell their products online.

But this soon grew to its own website directory, where for £22 per year businesses can list themselves and promote their products daily in the renamed Facebook group, Thanet's Virtual High Street.

Mrs Brinkman explained: "More businesses were getting involved, more than just crafters and stuff like that, we had people who wrote wills, book keepers, and all sorts of local people.

"At first I did an introduction list for every new business on the group but when we got to 500 it was the longest list in the world and it was ridiculous, you wouldn't be able to find the businesses.

"That's when we came up with the idea of the website with a directory, split into categories.

"I don't want to take anything away from the high streets, they're so important, but to have a virtual shop as well to promote what they're doing it will encourage people to visit when you can reopen."



The Facebook group has proved to be a great way to support local businesses. With 3,000 members made up of both businesses and customers, shoppers are able to ask for recommendations and can receive dozens of comments to help them find the items or services they require.

One event organised by Mrs Brinkman between lockdowns included the safari, in which businesses shared in the group they would be open on a specific Sunday, and crafters without business premises opened up their front doors to customers, to encourage shoppers to visit, browse and shop - within coronavirus restrictions.

35 businesses took part, and one of those took more than £400 on a day they normally might not have even been working.

Mrs Brinkman added: "A couple of days a week I try to think of something new to drive engagement. Last week I asked businesses to post one photo of what they do and there were more than 250 comments.

"Someone posted saying they were looking for a present for a tricky older gentleman and it had 81 comments.

"The way I explain it is, years ago we had the Yellow Pages - this is becoming the modern version of the Yellow Pages.

"I decline a lot of requests to join the group if I can't find a connection to Thanet - I didn't want online traders from all over the country joining. I can't say 100 per cent but I try to see if they're connected in some way so the local economy is benefited as much as possible."

To register your business or shop for goods and services in Thanet, visit the Virtual High Street's [website](#) or [Facebook page](#).