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While footfall on Ramsgate High Street will be low during the latest lockdown, many businesses are learning to adapt

## Online group helps residents shop local High street goes 'virtual' in bid to save businesses

By Oliver Kemp  
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When the country went into its first lockdown in March, many people found themselves looking for projects to keep themselves busy.

Some took up more exercise, others learnt a language - but one woman from Thanet hatched a plan to bring her local high streets online.

Karen Brinkman, from Westbrook, started a Facebook group in the hope of connecting traders who could promote their businesses and advertise their services in a much easier way.

Following a successful online summer fair, Thanet Virtual High Street was born, giving the Isle's business owners an opportunity to find new ways of reaching customers in the comfort of their own homes.

Mrs Brinkman said: "I was on furlough and I'm a very organised person who likes to do things, and I just felt that so many of my friends and family were being affected who were self-employed.

"I just had one of those light-bulb moments and thought, 'I wonder whether this would work?'"

With more than 3,500 people having now joined the Facebook group, the 48-year-old expanded the idea to a website where local businesses are able to advertise themselves to customers for £22 per year. For some traders, it was the first time they had ever even considered using online resources to find customers.

Mrs Brinkman said: "I can



Karen Brinkman set up Thanet Virtual High Street

think of two businesses in Westbrook that never ever had a Facebook page, so they've used it to give them ideas."

For many traders the pandemic has been a sink or swim moment, where adapting to working online was the only way to get in front of customers during the lockdowns.

It is something businesses are continuing to face with the most recent restrictions.

But Mrs Brinkman also thinks shoppers have found a new perspective on which businesses they choose to support.

She said: "I think people's ideas of wanting to support local businesses have changed - I know I would normally have gone to Boots and looked at their Christmas gifts.

"This group was not created to take anything away from an actual high street. I see it more of a platform to tempt people to visit local shops when they open."

With nearly 100 firms signed up to the Thanet Virtual High

Street, some traders believe the idea has been vital to the growth of their business.

Cheryl Llewellyn, from Ramsgate, started Essentially Original during the lockdown, offering handmade items such as microwavable pocket-sized hand warmers, yoga eye pillows and migraine masks.

Through the connections she has made on the virtual high street group, Cheryl is planning on working with other small businesses to open a physical store in Ramsgate selling items to local shoppers.

The 54-year-old said: "Once we come out of lockdown and we're able to do that, we'll have a shop with seven or eight of us, forming a sort of collective."

Other businesses launched in 2020 have also received a boost from being part of the online community.

Sam Halliwell launched Mimosa Soapery during lockdown, making small batches of vegan and eco-friendly soap from her Margate home.

She said: "The support and camaraderie is lovely and just seeing what people are making and doing is brilliant. Who knew we had so much going on right on our doorstep?"

Local people on the Facebook group say it has helped them discover businesses they never even knew existed.

Victoria Turvey said: "If I'd not been added to this group I wouldn't have known about all the fabulous, hard-working people running amazing businesses with great products right on my doorstep and I'm grateful for that opportunity."