

Cork City Partnership Clg.

Lot Number: Cork City (17-1)

Title: SICAP's response to the upscaling of Friendly Call during lockdown

Thematic area: Collaboration

Target Group: Older People



CCP was delighted to get a visit during lockdown from the Lord Mayor, Cllr. John Sheehan acknowledging the importance of the Friendly Call Service

Friendly Call

Older People in the city have been named by the LCDC as a specific target group to be supported under the current SICAP programme for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020. This is due to the fact that Cork City has a higher number of older people than the national average. Prior to SICAP Cork City Partnership had supported and developed a project called Friendly Call (FC). We employ the staff member and on an ongoing basis source funding for FC from both state agencies and private companies to varying degrees of success. In recent years, in addition to these external funds, SICAP has continued to support the growth and development of this service and provide all administrative support. A local advisory committee provides invaluable input into FC and it is managed overall by the SICAP programme manager.

The service itself provides a daily phone call to older and vulnerable people in the city, hence the name Friendly Call. The calls are made by volunteers that have been trained to a high standard and Garda vetted. Over the past few years the service has expanded to include a visiting service for particularly vulnerable people, we have also sourced funds for a small bus to take people to hospital appointments, shopping and on outings and FC continues to have social events including afternoon teas which are either funded by FC or hosted by the Lord Mayor and other organisations. Due to the level of funding FC is limited in the number of people it can cater for and this is an ongoing challenge.

When the country went into lockdown in March of this year, it was evident from the outset that older people would be one of the hardest hit groups as a result. The isolation, inability to access food, prescriptions and pensions and the lack of social contact were immediately identified by SICAP as needing to be addressed very quickly. During this time we saw an over 70% increase in clients, with 397 clients (261 females/136 men) receiving the daily calls at the peak and we delivered food directly on a weekly basis to over 70 older people, with others having their grocery shopping done for them. We decided not to collect pensions during the lockdown, instead we ensured that no one who contacted us went without food, medicine or a friendly call every day to check in on them.

Under the stewardship of the SICAP programme manager we set up two task groups within Cork City Partnership. One to look at expanding the call service to new clients and increasing the number of volunteers to make those calls and the second to look at food sourcing, collection and distribution.

Collaborating internally with the Partnership, staff from FC, our Tus team Leaders and SICAP staff worked together to upscale the service and this was achieved very quickly. Throughout lockdown there were 5 SICAP staff members working on supporting FC. Their roles included grocery shopping, hamper delivery, prescription collection, making the daily phone calls to clients and liaising with the volunteer callers and updating the main database of information.

It was essential that older people in the city were informed about the service so they could avail of it immediately. Social media, radio interviews, and print media were used to advertise the service, existing contacts with other organisations were used to source new volunteers and Cork City's Community Response newsletter was also key in helping to reach additional volunteers and get the message out to potential clients. We were also aided very well by Cork Volunteer Centre who advertised for volunteers for us and provided a fast turnaround of Garda vetting applications for new volunteers.

The second service that needed to be put in place quickly was food and prescription delivery as FC clients could not go out and were understandably very anxious about getting their essential needs met. A second internal team was set up to address this. On the food side the team worked with St. Vincent's GAA Club/Penny Dinners, St. Vincent de Paul, FeedCork, and Churchfield Community Trust amongst others. In particular a strong collaboration evolved with FeedCork in the provision of food hampers, a contact established through SICAP staff members participating in the Cork City Food Distribution Group set up by Cork City Council as part of the work of the Community Response Forum. For individuals grocery shopping, SICAP staff linked clients to their local supermarkets and set up accounts with Supervalu on the Northside and the Southside so that we could purchase food for clients and deliver it to their homes. SICAP staff shopped for the food and our Tus Team Leaders delivered it to the older people. For older people who had bank cards we facilitated them in accessing online food deliveries, where the person had no bank card SICAP funded the groceries and also bulk purchased food for hampers to the value of approximately €2,200.

As time progressed and the initial fear of not being able to get their basic needs met had been resolved, other needs became apparent in addressing social isolation and loneliness. SICAP supported the collection and delivery of crossword puzzles, jigsaws and books to help people while away the time as it became clear that people's mental health was also being affected by spending endless time on their own. The staff of a private company on the Northside volunteered to write letters of hope to our clients. These letters were incredibly well received and older people told us how much they looked forward to them. The letters made sure that the older person knew that someone else was thinking about them. Over 130 letters were written and posted to FC clients. We also made sure that if there was a birthday or special occasion that an extra special call was made and cake delivered.

We are very proud of the company's quick and efficient upscaling and diversification of this service to meet these needs, it was set up and running within a few weeks of the lockdown and we also acknowledge that without SICAP staff and funds it would not have been possible. All of this was coordinated by the SICAP programme manager.

Internally as outlined above, staff from a range of CCP programmes collaborated to upscale this service. Externally too there was also significant collaboration to support the extended service.

In the week leading up to lockdown the HSE Community Work Department and Cork City Council were both generous in allowing staff members to be trained up to make FC calls and a number of their staff continued to make calls until they were redeployed back to their usual duties. This external resource was supplemented over the first few weeks by staff from Churchfield Community Trust and Arup who also allowed staff to be trained and make the daily calls.

We worked closely with HSE staff, Cork City Council Community Call, the local area response teams, ALONE, Garda and voluntary organisations, all of whom referred older people into FC. As mentioned above Cork City Council and the Cork Volunteer Centre helped us in our call for new volunteers, as we knew that as staff returned to their usual duties, we would have to maintain the service.

Funding and resources too quickly became an issue we needed to react to. Having a larger group of volunteers working remotely, together with other costs, meant that we had to look for support to other agencies/groups as FC is not a fully funded service. Again, in anticipation of the extra COVID19 demands, the HSE Cork Kerry gave us €5000 prior to lockdown, in addition to their annual core funding

towards the service. The SICAP programme manager worked with the FC development worker to make applications for other funding to meet the extra costs. This included for example funding of €3500 from Cork City LCDC's 2020 Covid-19 Emergency Fund. In recognition of the extra costs involved, one of our corporate sponsors, Synergy Security/Tour de Munster, were also generous and doubled their contribution towards FC for 2020.

In addition to extra funding, we also received resources which helped cut down financial costs on FC, for example, in the form of phone credit from ALONE. Other groups, including the Chinese Business Community of Cork, Sanctuary Masks and Arup, were generous in donations of PPE which we were able to distribute to FC clients. The Irish Red Cross provided us with comfort packs, including bedlinen, for particularly vulnerable clients.

The upscaling of FC is a wonderful demonstration of how SICAP as a community based programme with knowledge of the local area, relationships that have been built up over years with the community and other agencies can in times of crisis, produce a strategic rapid response. The flexibility given to SICAP by the Department and the LCDC to adapt the programme was also very positive and demonstrates that this is a community development programme that works and is needed and relevant. The collaboration between organisations in the city to support this FC response to the needs of older people was incredible, organisations and agencies, both private and public could not have been more helpful, everyone rolled up their sleeves and responded to our requests for help. Being part of the Area Based Teams was also a very important part of the collaboration on this, our SICAP and FC staff participated on these teams across the city and could link in to address gaps in the service, individuals who had fallen through the net, and also used this as an opportunity to publicise the FC response to a new range of individuals and organisations.

However, this scaling up of FC has not been without its challenges. During this time, our volunteers have grown in number from 27 to over 50, all of whom are making the calls from home, rather than from our offices in Churchfield which was the practice until the lockdown. This provides challenges, in particular the need for good communication to respond to any issues being flagged by the volunteers and for mobile phones and credit so that the volunteers are not using their own phones into the longer term.

As stated above, during lockdown the service was supplemented by staff redeployed from other programmes, both internally in CCP and from external agencies, including Cork City Council and the HSE. As restrictions have eased these staff have returned to their normal duties. However, the numbers of clients have not reduced as we had expected. We anticipated a number would naturally leave the service as lockdown eased. However, this has not been our experience and relatively few clients have chosen to leave. This, combined with the need to keep volunteers working from home and the redeployment of other programme staff, has increased strain on the service. This is proving an ongoing challenge to us to be able to sustain the service into the future and at the time of writing, four SICAP staff are still actively involved in supporting the service.

Finally, there needs to be a recognition of the significant additional non caseload individuals receiving supports through FC. Recording individuals as non-caseload has always been our practice for certain groups of older people. This is because the individual has already completed either the FC application or Senior Alerts Scheme application and it has been felt onerous to expect them to complete a further

registration process before receiving supports, especially during a time of crisis. This has been noted in LCDC sub-group meetings.

A flavour of how this collaboration and positive experience of upscaling FC during lockdown worked from different perspectives is shown in the following testimonials from both SICAP staff and external collaborators who worked with us across the range of services provided.

A SICAP development worker's experience

"As part of the COVID 19 response through the SICAP programme some members of staff had to change roles within the organisation to support our more vulnerable people within the community during phase one of lockdown in Cork City. My own role changed over those months when I became part of the friendly call service given my own list of 8 clients all who were in the older and most vulnerable category.

I rang them each day and chatted about how they were dealing with the pandemic and the tight restrictions that were in place for them, at the beginning they were struggling very hard as they couldn't go out and about doing their usual chores but most heart breaking was they couldn't see family/friends and this effected them most and their mental health. They relied on my calls for support, chats and updates on the outside world. It was through this and feedback from other volunteers within the friendly call service that management decided to establish a shopping team which I was part of.

The shopping team was set up because of the high demand that was put on supermarkets with in-house grocery shopping and deliveries and people were struggling in getting their groceries on-line.

CCP set up accounts with Supervalu in Southside/Northside of the city to allow us to go and purchase using SICAP funding, goods on behalf of our clients and they found this service invaluable and it was really appreciated. I found it a very rewarding thing to do as it made their life so much easier and less stressful. The TUS supervisors then came on board and delivered the groceries each week for us".

HSE/Area Response Team

"Friendly Call proved during Covid it's high intrinsic value as a social health support network, essential within community healthcare networks. Friendly Call enables a functional and responsive community health intelligence that has time to listen to individual's health and wellbeing needs.

The Blarney Street/Churchfield & Gurrabraher Team along with many other Local Response Teams throughout the city valued the collaboration with Friendly Call service in the knowledge that what exists is an openness and willingness to meet the individual where they are at – and how important this was during Covid, as links were made with people that were isolated or when family networks were not available to individuals. In some cases, responding to extremely difficult individual needs.

The Friendly Call service provided strong and sustained support for Local Response Team referrals –the collective of volunteers and agency staff working together, with community-centric approach to meeting needs as they emerged.

Friendly Call staff and volunteers together with members of agencies and local volunteers used all their connections and supports to provide a better and more understanding way to respond to complex needs in the community. This collective approach to community health, supports communities' ability

to respond to where the greatest need is, and helps identify what signposts, supports and referrals are needed to help improve wellbeing as a community.”

Theresa McCarthy, HSE Community Worker. HSE Lead Blarney St/Churchfield &Gurranabraher Local Response Team and Micheal O Connor. Health Action Zone. HSE Lead Farranree, Fairhill/Shandon/Blackpool Local Response Team.

Redeployed Agency Staff

“When Covid-19 closed our libraries, I, along with other colleagues, volunteered to be redeployed. My new job turned out to be with Friendly Call Cork run by Cork City Partnership. Before the outbreak, the organization had 220 clients aided by 27 volunteers: they now have 367 with 50 volunteers.

I have found the Friendly Call posting a natural fit for a library staff member. In normal times, chatting with your regular patrons, many of whom are older and may be a little isolated, was a regular feature of the job. Our links with housebound patrons also show how we actively reach out to vulnerable groups.

Working with Friendly Call has been rewarding. It’s a humbling experience to be invited into someone else’s life, as it fulfils a basic human need: to be somebody for somebody else. People who have found themselves feeling isolated, through bereavement, illness or because their children and family are living far away, really value the Friendly Call service. It’s not so much the speaking as the quality of listening that matters, as I’ve discovered. Never underestimate the effect of a call and, when you hang up, you do so on that call and not on that person.”

Cork City Library Staff Member – Elizabeth McNamara

A New Volunteer

“I had been aware of Friendly Call for some time but only when I started volunteering with the service at the start of April, did I realise how much people really appreciate the calls, particularly to discuss and share their experience of Covid-19 . Each individual is very much dealing with it in their own way, often in the context of existing health or social problems. I work as a researcher in the School of Public Health, UCC and much of my research is about models of integrated care for chronic disease, particularly diabetes management in primary care. While volunteering I became interested in how services like Friendly Call are linked in with other community healthcare providers, and how they have responded to the challenge of Covid-19. This has prompted me to apply for funding to support a project, which (if funded) will hopefully help us to understand the potential of Friendly Call as part of an integrated and cohesive network with healthcare services to support older, socially isolated, and vulnerable adults.”

Fiona, a Public Health Researcher

Corporate partner

Since April, volunteers from Arup have been speaking on the phone with lonely, isolated members of the community to offer contact, help combat loneliness and improve wellbeing.

Una O'Grady, one of Arup's volunteers, said: "Personally, the opportunity to support some of the most vulnerable members of our community is really rewarding. It can be tough to hear the daily struggles of the clients, but as you call the same handful of clients every day, your relationship with them develops. It is a small, targeted effort on our part, but I truly believe it's helping improve the quality of life of the clients in question."

The Friendly Call clients

"The phone call is a great comfort to me. It is the only time all day that my phone rings"

"I am cocooning, I can't get out. My life has completely changed. I used to be out all the time. It is so lonely now. I am so happy to get a phone call every day for a lovely chat".

"I just wanted to thank you for all the help you have given to me over the last few months. I am so grateful to you. You don't know what it means to me, you are so good".



Painting that a FC client painted as an acknowledgement of the kindness she receives from FC (painting is displayed in our Churchfield outreach office).