

## Helping reduce social isolation during extreme weather: Snow Angels, Cheshire

### 1. SUMMARY

'Snow Angels', a community interest company (CIC), aims to support vulnerable people, including older people, by promoting general community resilience to deal with extreme weather. The CIC was established after a successful pilot study in Northwich, Cheshire during 2011/12 in which a number of different organisations, from different sectors, came together to work in partnership. Cheshire West and Chester has higher rates of excess winter deaths than other local authorities in the north west of England and older people are at risk of social isolation. Future projections indicate that the number of those over the age of 85 in the area will increase by 41 per cent between 2010 and 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Snow Angels combines the expertise of a number of partner organisations covering emergency planning, housing, health, and environmental planning. The Snow Angels are volunteers recruited from the local area who visit the socially isolated and undertake practical activities, such as clearing and gritting paths when there is snow and ice. Included as part of the service are weekly telephone calls to the vulnerable people who have signed up. The CIC helps to establish Snow Angels in other areas and to ensure that these local groups are sustainable beyond their first year of operation. This case study discusses activities relating to the pilot study.

### 2. ACTIVITIES

A range of local organisations had been supporting people throughout the extremely cold winter of 2010/11. It was thought that this could be more effective and reach more people if it was better coordinated. Meanwhile, emergency planning services, in partnership with local resilience fora, were developing resilience plans to cope with extreme weather events. All of these organisations came together to design and pilot the Snow Angels initiative, during the winter of 2011/12.

Volunteers were recruited through the voluntary service community to support local people. Those who sign up for the service are provided with practical help and advice. Volunteers help with shopping, path clearing, heating problems, delivery of meals, and so on, during periods of extreme weather. Clients receive a weekly telephone call during the three months of winter. When the Met Office issues severe weather warnings, Snow Angel volunteers make daily telephone calls and/or visits to clients. Thermometers, advice about other benefits that they may be entitled to, and fire safety checks are also provided as part of the service.

#### Partners

- **Emergency Services:** Cheshire Constabulary, Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service
- **Voluntary and Community Organisations:** Age UK Cheshire, Vale Royal Disability Services, Cheshire West CAB, Groundwork Cheshire, Cheshire Community Development Trust, Cheshire Community Action
- **Local and National Government:** Cheshire West and Chester Council, Adult Social Care, Climate Change/Sustainability, Emergency Planning, Highways, Housing, The Environment; Department of Health
- **Other:** Weaver Vale Housing Trust, West Cheshire PCT, East Cheshire NHS Trust, Cheshire West Warm Zone

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<sup>1</sup> Cheshire West and Chester. [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#)

**Length of time:** The project took around 9 months from idea to pilot evaluation. The pilot began in December 2011 and ended during February 2012.

**Funding:** The Northwich and Rural North Area Partnership Board provided funding for equipment for the Snow Angels volunteers. The Department of Health, Cheshire West and Chester Council and the Vale Royal Clinic Commissioning group contributed £25,000 to Snow Angels, which helped to pay for supplies and volunteer training. Many of the partner organisations provided volunteers; in-kind contributions (e.g. time) totalled £11,000.

### 3. OUTCOMES

- In the pilot scheme, 82 people registered, of which more than three-quarters lived alone.
- There was a decrease in the [social isolation](#) experienced by many recipients who indicated that they felt safer during the winter months.
- There were discernible improvements in working across sectors and across partners for the organisations involved. The Snow Angels Evaluation Report included feedback from partner organisations, such as *“It has been wonderful to understand vulnerable people’s point of view and what they need”* and comments that there are *“a lot of very independent people out there who just need a bit of extra support when the weather is extreme and a scheme like this almost allows people/volunteers to be ‘good neighbours.’”*
- Overall, the cost per Snow Angel customer worked out at less than £25 but this included the costs of starting up the scheme and does not take into account reduced spending through savings elsewhere (e.g. by having less emergency admissions).
- Continual monitoring of the scheme takes place using bespoke software developed by a software company who were part of the team. This keeps records of volunteers and customers so that they can be easily matched with one another.
- Some of the vulnerable people have families who live in other regions of the UK. Therefore, family members gained peace of mind that their relative(s) were receiving support.
- The scheme has become known locally and nationally (see the [BBC TV News story](#) from 26/11/2013).

### 4. BARRIERS

- Initial barriers include the perception that clearing snow will result in claims for personal injury and this is a widely held belief. Advice from the Health and Safety Executive demonstrates that this is not the case and has been useful in overcoming this particular barrier.
- Another barrier, in some communities, has been the perception that local people will not volunteer – to date this has not happened and the wider scheme deriving from the initial pilot has been successfully delivered in a range of community settings including urban and rural areas.
- There is a difficulty in accessing sources of information, advice and training, for volunteers and community organisers and two portals have been developed for Cheshire East and for Cheshire West and Chester local authority areas to overcome this.

## 5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ Include main partners on a steering group and involve them in project design. Keep partners updated with a regular newsletter.
- ✓ Complement local resilience with some centralised support, such as through providing volunteer training, project management and evaluation.
- ✓ Establish what support is already being given to individuals, such as through the voluntary and community sector, and make contact with those organisations. Such organisations can help to: coordinate activities; identify other services that individual users can benefit from; recruit volunteers, and to understand requirements such as training and insurance.
- ✓ Use the whole year in order to coordinate activities and to keep people prepared and updated.

## 6. LINKS

- [A longer case study](#)
- [Snow Angels website](#)
- [Interview conducted for \*Cheshire Life\*](#)

## 7. CONTACTS

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