

Rationale

In May 2012, North London Cares was commissioned by the Seasonal Health and Affordable Warmth team at Islington Council to work on a project to prepare Islington's vulnerable residents for the possibility of a summer heat wave, and to help raise awareness of the importance of staying cool and hydrated during the summer months regardless of unpredictable weather conditions.



This project was part of the Council's 2010-2015 strategy to better prepare residents, businesses, community groups and other local stakeholders for changing weather patterns and conditions and other risks associated with climate change. This was particularly pertinent because in 2003, during the UK's last major heat wave, the London mortality rate rose by over 42%, and by 57% amongst people over 75.¹

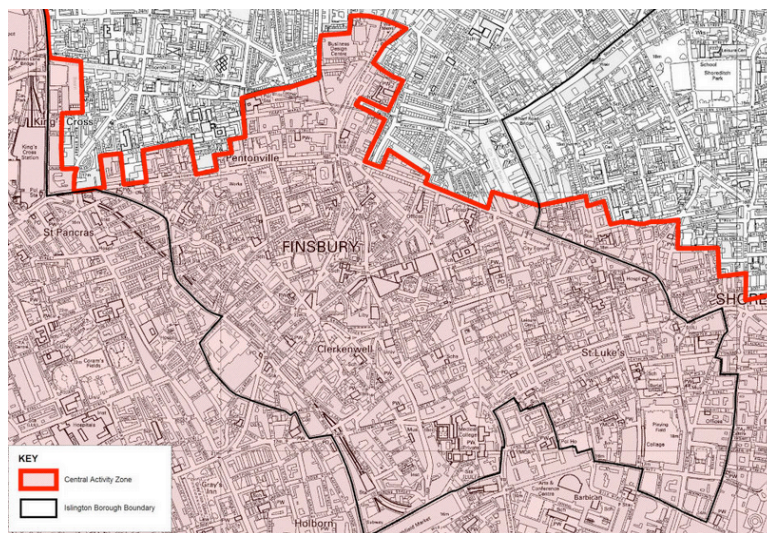
The Council was therefore particularly focused on the need for a pro-active communications outreach effort which could inform local residents (especially the most vulnerable) about the various ways to protect against extreme heat in

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[http://www.islington.gov.uk/publicrecords/Documents/Environment/Pdf/Sustainability/aff_warmt_h_2010_web_\(3\).pdf](http://www.islington.gov.uk/publicrecords/Documents/Environment/Pdf/Sustainability/aff_warmt_h_2010_web_(3).pdf)

an innovative and relatable way; and a planned emergency response operation that would focus on elderly and high-risk residents in the community in case official threshold temperatures for a heat wave were reached and exceeded.

At the direction of John Kolm-Murray at Islington Council, North London Cares focused our efforts on the borough's southern wards of Bunhill and Clerkenwell, both of which are strongly subject to the



Urban Heat Island effect; contain large concentrations of properties whose residents could be at risk of excess heat (such as high rise tower blocks); and which also contain tenants who typically do not have the means to improve the resilience of their properties. These are also areas with significant deprivation, where people are more likely to suffer from the poor physical and mental health that make them more susceptible to extreme heat.

Methods

North London Cares' objective with this as any other project was to reach out to people on their own terms; to go to the places people inhabit and frequent in order to make the core message as accessible and relatable as possible to the target audience.

The outreach methods we agreed with the Council prior to the project, and which we carried out, were:



To knock on 1,000 doors, targeting older & vulnerable residents, particularly in high-rise buildings in Bunhill and Clerkenwell wards.

To design and distribute 1,000 clear, striking leaflets to properties where we found no answer.



To brief staff & residents at care homes / sheltered housing accommodations about staying cool & hydrated in a heat wave.

To host or co-ordinate events that would attract over-65s, to spread the message of how to remain cool in summer.



Our efforts began on June 18th 2012 and lasted through to mid-September, when the heat-health watch period officially expires. We began by recruiting volunteers to knock on doors in Errol Street, to get an initial sense of the response to our core messaging, so we could refine it as the project developed.

Over the following three months, our volunteers knocked on 950 doors in the two target wards, focusing especially on the tower blocks of Coltash Court, Galway Court, Braithwaite House, Barnabas House, Macclesfield House, Turnpike House, Godfrey Court, St Mary's Tower, Peregrine House, Kestrel House and Gambier House.

Our core team also contacted 25 local care homes and made visits to 13 including community day centres and sheltered accommodations to brief staff and residents on ways to stay cool and hydrated. Those homes included:

- *Wray Court Care Home;*
- *Belmore House Care Home;*
- *St George's House Care Home;*
- *Stacey Street Care Home;*
- *St Mungo's Care Home;*
- *Hornsey Lane Care Home;*
- *King Henry's Walk Care Home;*
- *St Luke's Community Centre;*
- *Turtle Road Care Home;*
- *Lennox House Care Home;*
- *Cloudesley Road Care Home;*
- *The Peel Centre;*
- *The Drovers Centre;*
- *Queen Elizabeth Court Care Home.*

And we hosted various social clubs, predominantly film and lunch clubs, at which our staff, volunteers and officers from Islington Council spoke to older people about the need to remain aware and healthy during the summer months – and to prepare for the possibility of a heat wave.

In the event, the summer was relatively cool, with only two periods of very hot weather that were in any case below the heat wave threshold. This had an impact on the effectiveness of our campaign, as we will show.

Outcomes

We estimate that through this project, our volunteers and core staff made contact with up to 500 vulnerable people to talk about the health consequences of changing weather and climate conditions.

Approximately 300 of those residents were spoken to on the doorstep; 100 were engaged at our social events; and a further 100 were contacted either directly, or indirectly through staff, as a result of our care home visits.

A further 670 leaflets were distributed to high-risk homes where residents were not in at the time of our visit. Leaflets were also left in places where older people congregate, including at the Age UK community centre at the Drovers and St Luke's Community Centre.

We also worked directly with officers from Islington Council to deliver two extended "Cool It" presentations, which were well received by some 25 older people at St Luke's Community Centre and a further 25 at the Peel Centre.

On the whole, these planned, co-ordinated events were moderately more effective than door knocking, which was labour intensive and produced fewer returns during this project than during our equivalent winter project last year, when more people were at home, feeling the cold, and willing to talk about extreme weather conditions.

Across the project, however, we did make a number of important connections with vulnerable people. Most residents we contacted were not aware that the 2003 heat wave had increased mortality by 42% and, as with previous North London Cares projects², many residents told us they felt reassured to have a knock on the door or a talk from someone to ensure they were healthy and well connected to local services.

A large number of those older people also welcomed ideas for how they could stay cool. As a community outreach project with an important message at its core, this was therefore a valuable exercise.

However, it is important to note that there was some resistance to our project, which we were unable to overcome and which we believe will persist while extremely hot weather remains rare in the UK.

Converse to our messaging, many people we spoke to craved hot weather – and even heat waves – and cursed the cooler temperatures and rain we experienced in the first half of the summer until the end of July. Even on warmer days, many people told us that they enjoyed hot weather, felt its risks were minimal, and were not prepared to discuss contingencies for heat waves at length, which they felt in any case to be positive phenomena.

² See *North London Cares: The Big Chill Report* (April, 2011).

Many people in the highest flats in large tower blocks, which we targeted deliberately for their relative vulnerability to heat and poor accessibility, said that their flats were in fact cool, especially when two windows were open to create a draft. People in these flats were more likely to complain about cold accommodations in the winter, and high heating bills, which remain a problem for many Islington residents.

Going forward

This project was instructive for learning about public attitudes in the borough towards extremely hot weather – most notably that even where risks are well known they are frequently dismissed as at most a nuisance, rather than a major health issue.

The project's multiple methods were successful in bringing people together to discuss seasonal health, and in raising awareness about the ways people could combat extreme heat. In particular, co-ordinated events in well-known community centres attracted and engaged people most effectively – and particularly during our brief periods of extended warm weather.

The various responses to those methods are already informing North London Cares' work, and the work of the Council in planning for future seasonal health campaigns. In particular, it has become clear that more work needs to be done to encourage people to take precautions against the dangers of very hot conditions and to take rising temperatures and the increased risk of heat waves seriously.

We believe that community-based projects, matched to an ongoing communications effort by the Council, will help residents, particularly

vulnerable residents, to better understand the risks associated with extremely hot summers and will over time improve community resilience to changing conditions.

In conclusion, then, the attitude of local people towards extremely hot weather represents a threat and an opportunity. While local residents are keen to hear from their Council or Council partners on matters relating to seasonal health, and that continuing efforts could have a real impact on raising awareness of the importance of taking the issue seriously, it appears that recent moderate weather conditions may prejudice public interpretations on the relative benefits of local authority responses to those conditions.