

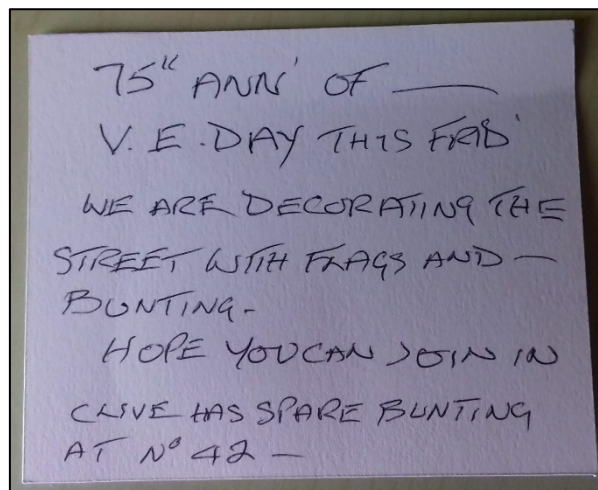
## Connected Communities and Covid-19

### A Slice of Normal

How one little note brought a street together in a time of lock down.

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On Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> May, the residents of my street received a handwritten note from one of the neighbours called Clive, aged 82. The note simply said that he will be marking VE Day by hanging out some bunting and invited us to do the same. If we needed bunting, he had some spare that people could borrow. By the evening, almost all houses had various bunting, balloons and decorations outside their house and in their windows, my own included. On VE Day itself, everyone came out and, at a socially acceptable distance, took the time to talk to one another. Homemade cake was distributed, along with glasses of wine and gin.



The note all residents received.

I myself offered people a slice of Victoria Sponge or orange and ginger cake. This simple act took me over an hour to complete, since everyone wanted to chat about how they were coping and enquire how I was. I learnt about the person who had recently bought the end house and was in the process of doing it up. Clive told me about his motivation for asking people to join him in hanging bunting - his father and uncle had fought in WWII and he wanted to recognise their achievements and that he himself had been in the RAF. Another neighbour informed me that their husband, who I knew had a long-term health condition, was not doing too well but that they were trying to keep positive. I was also informed, that for those neighbours that did not know my name, I was often referred to as the person who walks Bella, the black dog. In 30 years of living on the street, this is the first-time

neighbours have come together and got to know one another. Even passers-by acknowledged the display of community spirit.



My 'make do' window display.

Over the past six weeks, responses to the Covid-19 lockdown have been well documented within the media, with the revival of community spirit and neighbourliness often being reported. We have heard stories of communities coming together to help make and deliver food parcels to the elderly and vulnerable groups; children drawing rainbows and putting them in their windows; personal trainers motivating neighbours to join in social distant exercise classes; as well as people standing on their doorstep at 8pm on Thursday evenings to applaud the NHS and key workers. When I consider how my street has responded to the lockdown, it has mainly been business as usual. People, including myself to some extent, have remained in their own little bubble, kept themselves to themselves and only acknowledged passers-by if they have really had to. Like when Bella sees them coming out of their front door and insists on some attention. So, why did people choose to spend time with their neighbours?

I suppose the right answer would be to say to celebrate VE Day and remember the sacrifices of all those men and women that fought and died for their country. However, given the lack of collectiveness to mark other national landmark events, such as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE day or 65 years of Queen Elizabeth being on the throne, I do not think solely making the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day was the motivating factor. If the day had occurred outside of the lockdown, most of us would have probably taken advantage of the bank holiday and good weather, spent the day away from our homes and not really reflected upon the significance of the day. But we were in lockdown and at a stage where the simple things in life, like listening to the birds, were becoming the highlight of our day.



Clive's window dedicated to his Father and Uncle.

Technology to some extent enabled us to stay has connected, with video calling becoming the 'new normal' for visiting friends and families. Yet, it does not provide the same satisfaction and enjoyment as physically seeing and being with them. Even simple acts such as going shopping or walking the dog no longer provide an opportunity to have a conversation. People only go shopping when they must and when they do go, they no longer stop in the aisle and have that short conversation about the weather or what they are having for tea. Instead, they keep their distance, get what they need and leave as quickly as possible. Similarly, when going out for exercise, people no longer pause on the footpath and pass the time of day. Rather they brush up to the fence and quickly hurry past. Whilst such behaviours are understandable, they further limit the opportunity for conversation, with the absence of small talk becoming more obvious as the weeks go by.

Clive's note therefore, came at the right moment and provided people with an ideal opportunity to break the monotonous cycle of staying indoors and cleaning the house for the umpteenth time. This small gesture enabled us to forget the sense of isolation inflicted upon us by Covid-19 and allowed us to experience a slice of normality and a sense of belonging that has been absent over the past few weeks. We were able to reflect upon our connections with our neighbours and recognise that whilst we may all live different lives, now more than ever we need to come together as a community to support one another. Thank you, Clive.