

Breathe Easy

However, cost isn't the only factor limiting digital access.

Breathe Easy Andover is a support group for people with respiratory conditions. Before Covid-19, the group met face-to-face for exercise and information meetings monthly. The group had 50-55 members, and is completely volunteer-led. It is affiliated to a network of Breathe Easy groups across the country.

The pandemic put a stop to in-person meetings. The group's members are all severely vulnerable, so had to self-isolate for months: going nowhere, doing nothing and seeing no one. When Breathe Easy Andover moved online, this offered a lifeline for those members who were able to join virtually. Approximately 20 of the group's members were able to meet regularly online. For these members, the virtual group has been a lifeline, and members have become even closer.

However, not all members have been able to access online sessions. Using a grant from the National Lottery, the group was able to purchase laptops for 7 members which was a big help.



Breathe Easy Andover

Group members are mostly of an older generation, and lacking digital skills and confidence. The group's facilitator was able to send a weekly newsletter to a further few, keeping in touch somehow. A handful of members haven't been heard from. The group has also lost six members who've passed away over the past year.

The group's facilitator was able to provide messages, through the Zoom meetings and emails, about Covid vaccinations, getting testing kits and other vital information. The facilitator also produced a monthly newsletter and sent this out by post to all members, reporting on the online meetings and other events.

Virtually, the group has had Christmas and New Year parties, painted Easter eggs for Easter and so on. As much as possible, the group has tried to continue on – though virtually. Those who have been able to join the virtual Zoom groups feel they have fared better, physically and mentally, than those who haven't. Members say they'd have gone crazy without the virtual outlet.

One benefit from the pandemic is that more members have come forward to volunteer for the group. One member is great with IT and has provided support for other members to get online. Another has a background in physiotherapy and is about to start an evening virtual exercise group, which will expand access to those who work during daytimes. Another is stepping up to be a back-up facilitator.





their risk was greater, and these concerns are what fuel anxieties today. In the last six weeks, five of the group's members have caught it. The group continues to meet virtually, with members lacking the confidence to resume face-to-face meetings. Those who have been able to join virtual meetings are less keen to return to face-to-face than those who've gone without the group entirely.

Between lockdowns, some group members have met in the park in small groups like they used to do. Members were overjoyed to see each other in person again, and found it difficult not to hug each other. The group is hoping to do more walks from May 2022, as the weather improves. Due to their respiratory conditions, most members are unable to wear masks so have to use other precautionary measures like social distancing.

Today, a fifth of the population live with some form of respiratory disease and the figures are expected to increase. While the group focuses on Andover and the surrounding area, there are members from as far as Winchester and Wiltshire. The group's numbers are expected to grow, as the rates of COPD and asthma increase. There are already new members wanting to join once the group starts to meet in person again.

Find out more about Breathe Easy:
<https://www.blf.org.uk/support-in-your-area/breathe-easy-andover-support-group>



This has been a relief to the facilitator, who felt a responsibility to keep up morale during the pandemic. While that has sometimes been a strain, the facilitator feels that the group has been as much a support for her as she's been for them.

Another positive outcome from the pandemic has been coordination with other Breathe Easy groups. Before the pandemic, the facilitators were only able to gather once a year, if at all, in person. Now, there are regular virtual meetings which has enabled support and idea exchange between the groups.

The group is entirely volunteer-run, and largely self-funding. The group stopped collecting regular member dues during the pandemic, though many members have made contributions anyway. The group has also received some support through bereavement bequests, community donations and the National Lottery grant to buy laptops. The group's vital Zoom account was paid for by one member who undertook a daily sponsored walk at 4am (in order to avoid anyone else) for a week, to raise the funds needed. She covered 20 miles in total, with her oxygen tank and walker in tow.

For the group's members, the pandemic was a frightening experience. Already faced with respiratory conditions, members understood



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March 2022