

Volunteers Member Champion report – Cllr Nick Bye

This first Annual Report as Champion for Volunteering will focus on the response of the Voluntary & Community Sector to the Coronavirus Pandemic from March 2020. We are all aware & value the tremendous work undertaken by volunteers in Torbay who do so much to make this a more pleasant place to live for so many residents & visitors. It would be impossible to list the many longstanding groups & organisations as well as individuals who do so much for the Bay, often unsung & unnoticed.

However, the response to the Pandemic has been truly exceptional. Torbay can be proud of its strong & varied voluntary sector which demonstrated its value in its response to the challenges of the Pandemic.

So many volunteers provided support for vulnerable residents across Torbay.

This report is an opportunity to say a very sincere “thank you” to our amazing army of volunteers who greatly mitigated the impact of the Pandemic & provided support through the three lockdowns.

The Torbay Community Helpline was set up in March 2020 & since then has received an incredible 22,000 calls from more than 6,200 residents, including 1,600 volunteers who offered their support.

Help provided included shopping, the collection of prescriptions, telephone befriending Just someone to talk to! As the Pandemic progressed then volunteers have helped as marshals & chaperones at the vaccination centres in Torquay & Brixham where 150,000 jabs have been administered to 85,000 residents.

These volunteers’ kindness has been much appreciated & practical support has been a real “life saver”. Volunteers themselves have provided positive feedback, finding their role enjoyable & fulfilling.

However, the Pandemic is still with us, so we still need this assistance as a community in future. The voluntary and community sector pulled together during the pandemic which leaves the sector and Volunteers well placed to respond again in terms of organisational arrangements along with all the shared learning from the pandemic experience.

Many excellent examples how Volunteers responded in the last 18 months are available both for Adults, Childrens and Families and in specific places in the Bay.

Volunteers have substantially reduced the risk that residents in Torbay would go hungry or would be left lonely & isolated. A coalition of charities from across the Bay concentrated on finding enough volunteers to ensure shielding residents were able to maintain supplies of food and sometimes life-saving medications. Rapid response teams were set up that joined snaking queues outside supermarkets, local shops and pharmacies before delivering essential supplies to those advised to stay behind closed doors.

To highlight a few of the many responses:

- The Torbay Food Alliance

Twelve foodbanks, again mostly staffed by volunteers came together to provide meals for those who could no longer afford to put food on the table, and more than half a million meals / parcels have been provided since the Torbay Food Alliance was set up at the end of March 2020.

- Debt Advice

Financial support was also added to help people whose lives had been changed overnight by furlough and job losses run through the Ageing Well Torbay sponsored FAIR project – again often staffed by volunteers.

- Vaccination support

When vaccinations were introduced at the beginning of this year, it was again volunteers who were mobilised. Initially at the English Riviera International Conference Centre in Torquay and the Horizon Centre at Torbay Hospital. People came forward in their hundreds to help with visitors to the RICC sometimes standing out in the wind and the rain for up to six hours at a time. At one stage, there were more than 200 volunteers on the rota at the RICC and another 110 at the Brixham Rugby Club which began delivering vaccinations a few months later.

- Mental health Advice helpline

Concern regarding Mental Health and Well Being has been a significant and growing issue in the community. The helpline specialist befrienders were recruited to handle complex mental health issues and triage services were set up to deal with severe cases caused by the ongoing crisis. Almost 70 people have now volunteered as specialist befrienders.

Other Volunteer mental health support is in place such as peer support and a range of good neighbourhood schemes and out of doors activity.

Many of the above Volunteer activities have a focus upon working age adults and older people, however the Imagine This Partnership and others in the voluntary and community sector support Children's and Families, as do Volunteer activity related to Food Banks and Family Debt advice.

Also, Volunteers take a role in Place Based natural environment activities such as community gardens and schemes in neighbourhoods that improve the area for local people in tangible ways so that the place in which they live is improved.

Councillor Nick Bye, September 2021

Input with preparation from Jo Williams Director Adult Social Care and Steve Honeywill Head of Commissioning