

Notes of Northumberland VCS Assembly Online Network meeting – Celebrating volunteers

Thursday 4th June 2020

Volunteers from Bedlington, Morpeth and Ponteland COVID-19 Support Groups talked about their roles as volunteers.

Lindsay Jordan – Bedlington Network

Already active in the community, running a wrestling academy and keen on building networks, finding out who can help and signposting people. Also involved in Cramlington as well. On a personal level challenge of COVID-19 in relation to business and rates. Working with other volunteers has been valuable, lots of ideas, ways of coping and encouraging one another to help. There has been activity-based involvement with music outside care homes and on estates which has generated positive feedback and wrestling on the green. They have been picking up prescriptions and checking on neighbours. Community spirit has been brilliant and there has been quite a change in the area, a willingness to get out and help and an excitement of being part of something. Now need to think about the future and exit strategy, how continue to support and get funding and impact of people getting back to normal. Need to know the people who will continue to need support and whether need to signpost to statutory organisations.

There has been a lot of learning from all sectors statutory, voluntary, business and personally. None knew where to start and required capacity for fluidity and adaptability. Needed to pull together and was a good experience and learning opportunity.

Volunteers have included all age groups, young families coordinated by Leading Link, Engage had been involved with young people. Lots of over 50's including sharing experiences. Voluntary youth project making weekly phone calls.

Alison Byard – Morpeth

Alison is a town councillor and mayor. Has been involved with Stobhill and Stobhill Link which provides help getting people back to work, community shop, school uniform provision, community garden. Support was not focused and organised to begin with and included lots of informal helping. There were Facebook requests for help and concerns were expressed that there was a need for trusted volunteers to be organised rather than people relying on anyone to help. Fifteen trusted volunteers worked in the shop and carried out prescription runs which has been well organised. Elderly people and those shielding have been grateful for the help. Morrisons have been helpful and fortunately their initial minimum order of £25 for delivery has now changed to no minimal order. People have been encouraged to use this scheme by phone although some nervous about it.

Morpeth has a strong community and a lot are wanting to help and encourage others. Alison enjoys signposting and making connections and feels it has been brilliant seeing people grow in confidence. She feels that they have been able to meet requirements in the town.

Ela Akay – Ponteland

Ela works as a neurologist. Ela set up a Facebook group initially for volunteers and those needing support in terms of shopping, prescriptions. Connected with people with a range of skills and developed a website. It took a couple of weeks to set up and had 120 volunteers. However some lacked flexibility so was probably left with about half the volunteers to provide support. The Town Council came on board and took the phone calls. Divided town into small areas with a lead and group of volunteers. Leads then report to one main person organising the volunteers. There were different views on how they should communicate. The main help has been with shopping. A groups of volunteers have been picking up and making deliveries with payment through the one store- Waitrose and aware that this is more expensive. There are pockets of social deprivation in Ponteland and drug problems.

Awareness raising has been a problem. They tried to show how many people they were helping and their activity to give some legitimacy to the group early on. They ran a campaign for patient toiletry bags and street by street food collections. Food distributed to food banks including Ashington to support residents in need. These side line campaigns were to help people feel engaged as less flexible.

The challenges have been that this has been run by two women working full time and using one week of annual leave to set up. It has been challenging responding to emails when at work. Concerned about GDPR and resources needed. Registered group with the ICO. Working out safe ways to keep information on phones for example. No infrastructure to handle donations. More formalisation of the group is needed and plan to make it into a charity but don't know how sustainable in the future

Michelle Brannen from **Business in the Community** informed about the National Business Response network. Link below to organisations to upload requests

<https://businessresponsecovid.org.uk/>

Questions and discussion related to digital inclusion and older people, lists of organisations for signposting, the Public Health App of organisational support, sharing contact details and collaborating, support to the Syrian refugees