

VOLUNTEERS' WEEK 2020: Volunteer Voices from Buckinghamshire

SPECIFIC COVID-19 RESPONSE VOLUNTEER ROLES

MIKE COLLIER - volunteer with High Wycombe Mutual Aid in response to COVID-19

Mike started off volunteering by collecting shopping and prescriptions for people who are self-isolating. Since then he has become involved in delivering flyers to homes around High Wycombe to let people know what is available, and he also joined the team that matches people's needs with those who have volunteered to help.

Mike has been volunteering with High Wycombe Mutual Aid since March 2020 but has been involved in volunteering (on and off) since he was a teenager. The level of involvement has varied over the years depending on Mike's other commitments; he currently volunteers with High Wycombe Mutual Aid in response to the pandemic as well as acting for free in student films (currently on hold due to the pandemic).

Mike says: "I enjoy the follow-up phone calls to people who our buddies have helped, and they are invariably delighted with the support they have been getting. Hopefully, it has meant that they have been able to make it through these troubled times a little more easily than would otherwise have been the case."

Mike always felt compelled to give back to society; he found the role with High Wycombe Mutual Aid by posting on Facebook saying he was fit and well, and wanted to help people who are not so fortunate. He was directed to the High Wycombe Mutual Aid page and started volunteering.



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LINDSEY FEALEY – volunteer telephone befriender for the Princes Risborough area in response to COVID-19

A longstanding volunteer for many years, Lindsey recently also became a volunteer telephone befriender for people isolated by the coronavirus situation. This role was set up by the local Council Hub in Princes Risborough.

Lindsey explains: “Lots of people self-isolating do not have access to the internet and rely on the TV and radio where there is a huge amount of negativity in the news. A telephone befriender provides personalised support according to what each person needs. Where there is a practical concern, I can connect them with the Council’s local Hub to help sort things out. But many people are, above all else, lonely. As a befriender I am perhaps the only human contact they have that day. We can chat about the weather, life in general or can talk about possible coping strategies, such as the importance of having structure in the day. Every call does make a difference.”

The length of calls and frequency vary according to each person. The longest calls tend to be with people who are living alone – her longest call has lasted 45 minutes but many are much shorter.

Lindsey knows her calls are valued: “The people I befriend over the phone are usually full of gratitude: expressing thanks and often conveying a sense of relief at the end of a call. They greet me with enthusiasm when I next call. It really is a two-way street – we both get a lot out of it.”

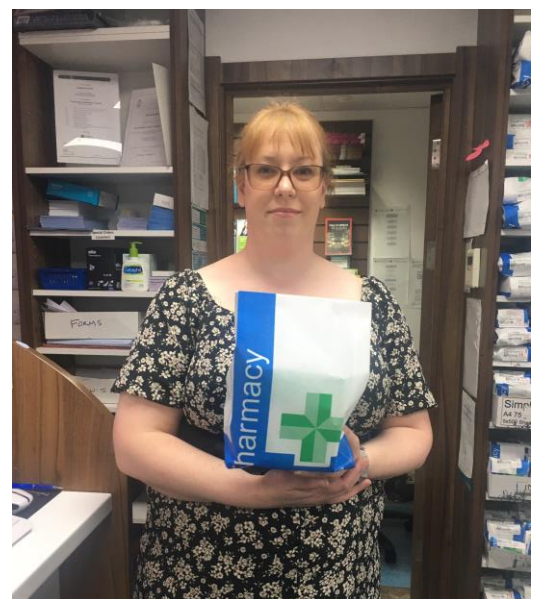
Lindsey is also a volunteer bereavement listener for the Florence Nightingale Hospice.



LINDA FRANKLIN – volunteer delivering prescriptions in Aylesbury in response to COVID-19

Linda is finding her new role very rewarding and enjoys doing something different but worthwhile. Linda is a teacher and, after she signed up as a volunteer on the Council’s website, the Buckinghamshire Volunteer Matching Service paired her with a pharmacy in Aylesbury to deliver medication to people unable to pick up their own prescriptions.

The coronavirus situation has meant that many who would otherwise be able to pick up their own prescriptions cannot now do so. The role offers a very practical way of helping others which Linda feels she is well-suited to: “Before going into teaching I was in medical research so I understand about how to handle medication. Perhaps because of my background I saw this as a lower risk volunteering opportunity than others might. The pharmacy, based in a local surgery, offers good support and provides all the necessary PPE.”



Linda spends about four hours every other week delivering medication to patients in various parts of Aylesbury. She finds it easy to fit around the work she still does as a teacher, despite schools being currently closed. When asked how she feels about volunteering, Linda said: “An unexpected bonus is discovering parts of Aylesbury I didn’t know were there. But the most rewarding aspect is the positive feedback I get from the people I deliver to – I am often greeted with a lovely smile and genuine thanks for a simple delivery. This is a really well-organised chance to do something different to what I’d normally do.”

ELLIE WALPOLE – remote volunteer with Community Impact Bucks in response to COVID-19

Ellie joined Community Impact Bucks as a volunteer in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteering from home, she supports the Volunteer Matching Service which involves contacting people who registered with Buckinghamshire Council to volunteer, as well as placing volunteers with Bucks organisations which are in need of an extra pairs of hands.



“There’s so much positivity out there and willingness to help. Everyone is so grateful to have a call and the opportunity to dig in to help. I have also come across some lovely projects which are run by volunteers to specifically help local communities,” Ellie explains. “Every tiny corner of the day is full but it’s nice to do something from home to help.”

Ellie’s role was set up early on in the crisis though she envisages the Volunteer Matching Service will be more long-term: “Volunteer vacancies will start to reappear as time goes on as volunteers, who were maybe furloughed, will start returning back to work.” She also runs a voluntary group, Cook n Chat, where young people volunteer at a monthly social club for teenagers with low communication skills to cook and talk about country-themed food.

OTHER VOLUNTEER ROLES – ADAPTED IN RESONSE TO COVID-19

JULIE – Horticultural Volunteer and Gardener Supporter at Lindengate, Wendover

Julie is a Horticultural Volunteer and Gardener Supporter at Lindengate, a Buckinghamshire-based charity helping people with mental health needs through gardening. She started volunteering at Lindengate when it was a very new charity and the site was just starting to be cleared.

As a result of COVID-19, Lindengate had to close which meant Julie was unable to volunteer alongside her group or offer them any support. Instead, she has been able to continue in her horticultural role which has since grown as a result of needing to maintain the gardens that have been tended by a skeleton staff for seven weeks. She says: “It is a lovely opportunity for us to be creative and have an input to the overall look of the garden.”



Being a keen gardener with colourful flower beds at home and tending vegetables on an allotment, she has personal experience of how healing and relaxing gardening can be. “I enjoy the social side of my role and we have many laughs. Seeing a neglected area of five acres flourish, wildlife return, plants, trees and vegetables grow, so that it can be enjoyed by many people, is just such a pleasure.”

Julie finds volunteering gives structure to the week, improves her knowledge of plants whilst learning new gardening skills and building her confidence in many ways. “To have seen the garden grow, flourish and then open to welcome the Gardeners has been very rewarding. There are so many positives to volunteering.”

MICHELE HUNT – volunteer counsellor with the Aylesbury Vale & Milton Keynes Sexual Assault and Abuse Support Service whose role has changed due to COVID-19

Michele has been volunteering at the Aylesbury Vale & Milton Keynes Sexual Assault and Abuse Support Service (SAASS) for over three years as a counsellor, whilst also working part-time in retail and having her own private practice.

The role used to involve meeting clients face-to-face, however, due to COVID-19, the counselling sessions are now offered either online or via the telephone. This has provided its own challenges as not everyone has a space where they can talk privately.

Michele says: “I believe in the benefits of counselling and volunteering as it opens out this service to people who may not normally have access to it. I was attracted to SAASS by a chance meeting and the warmth of the people at the agency, and the respect and compassion they show to each individual client.” SAASS is very supportive of their volunteers and offers supervision, specialist training and support from other counsellors.

Michele enjoys meeting new clients and working with them through their pain and individual difficult situations and, as time evolves, seeing the improvement in their confidence and self-esteem as they find a way to process their trauma. This volunteering role allows Michele to make a difference to her clients and provide them with the space to build trust and belief in themselves and process their trauma to be able to heal and move forward.



FRANCIS PORTER – volunteer role with Wycombe Homeless Connection changed due to COVID-19

Francis has been volunteering at Wycombe Homeless Connection (WHC) drop-in centre for just over a year. His role includes dealing with customers face-to-face and helping them with their issues; these include sourcing accommodation, assistance with benefits, and helping set up an email address.

Since the pandemic started, Francis' role has shifted so he now assists with the delivery of food parcels for the guests in temporary accommodation. He was first attracted to the role as, during his travels, he was noticing more and more homeless people around Bucks. Francis says: "Volunteering seemed a good way to do my (small) bit in trying to tackle the situation and, above all, help someone out who is down on their luck. I always feel it could be you one day, and I believe in good karma".

For Francis, the best bit of volunteering is seeing someone smile when you help them out and the gratitude shown by some guests. Volunteering makes a big difference to him, restoring his faith in humanity and also changing his perception of the homeless. He would like to think his volunteering will encourage other people to get involved and to think he has made a difference.

KIZZY ROSS – volunteering more with Chiltern Foodbank due to COVID-19

Kizzy has been volunteering as the warehouse co-ordinator for Chiltern Foodbank for over six years. She normally volunteers between 1 – 2 days a week however, since the COVID-19 pandemic, she is now volunteering Monday-Friday to deal with the extra demand.

Prior to volunteering at Chiltern Foodbank, Kizzy volunteered at The Theatre Shed in Chesham for four years. Volunteering is a great opportunity to work with and meet new people and to keep busy. Kizzy said: "I love my role at Chiltern Foodbank and part of the joy of volunteering is being with a great team, meeting new people and making new friends."

Since COVID-19, the role at Chiltern Foodbank hasn't changed but, as Kizzy is now volunteering for the whole of the week, this has meant she has been able to get more involved with the Food Bank and gain a greater understanding of the stock and needs of the community.



Kizzy chose to volunteer so that she could give something back to her community - she previously worked in retail and wanted to use the skills she gained to help others. "I love my new responsibilities but volunteering also gives me the freedom to pursue other activities like going on holiday, whilst at the same time giving me a sense of self-worth, satisfaction and reward." Kizzy also likes talking to others and lending an ear, and feels her contribution is helping to make a difference within her community.

CHERYL RUSSELL – ‘Mind The Gap’ volunteer at Bucks Mind whose role has changed due to COVID-19

Cheryl is a volunteer at Buckinghamshire Mind and runs ‘Mind The Gap’, a social group where people come along to chat and play board games. Cheryl’s role is to make people feel welcome and a part of the group, involving them and finding out what they like to do. She says: "I believe the group can have a big impact on people’s mental health. If someone is struggling, they are welcome to have a 1-1 chat with myself or another volunteer and we will do our best to support and help them."

Unfortunately, as a result of COVID-19, the group hasn’t been able to meet but Cheryl keeps in touch with a few members by phone or text to make sure they are ok and coping. She has found it frustrating not being able to run the group in the normal way, as it not only affects the group but it also has disrupted her daily routine.

Cheryl decided to volunteer for Buckinghamshire Mind after being a service user herself for several years. She says: "I attended the group regularly and had a befriender for a couple of years. I went from someone very introverted because of my own mental health struggles and because I’m autistic. Slowly I have come out of my shell which is mainly due to my befriender who was a real support and really understood me. I have blossomed so much."



Sue Connolly – volunteer with Winslow Big Society whose role has changed due to COVID-19

Sue Connolly volunteers for Winslow Big Society in a variety of roles in Winslow and the surrounding villages. She is a community driver, helps at a mum and baby coffee morning, and is a befriender calling people on the phone to chat to those who are either house bound or have difficulty getting out and about.

Her role has changed and adapted as a result of the pandemic - certain functions or activities she drives people to are no longer taking place due to COVID-19, but she can still help by shopping for families and chatting to people on the phone as a befriender.





Sue has been volunteering for the Big Society for 2 1/2 years since coming back to England to retire after working in a management job in Canada. “I’m a very out and about person! I get to meet so many people and hear their life stories and discover who they are and what they do, it’s very rewarding. There’s something to do every day, volunteering gives me a routine I need. It helps keep me and my brain active.”

Sue’s volunteering gives people the ability to get out of their homes and into the community: “It helps keep people young. They need help getting to doctors as sometimes relatives are not around or out at work, so this way, it takes the workload off others and helps to fill mine!”

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