

Reset '21:

Sandwell Volunteering

SCVO Report | Summer 2021





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From running the muddy Sunday morning sidelines to brewing tea and comfort in the temple, tens of thousands of Sandwell residents help out in the community each year.

Some simply shop for their neighbour, others may share their specialist expertise to keep a local charity on track, but all give their time freely in increasingly diverse ways to make Sandwell a brighter borough.

How has 2020 affected volunteering in Sandwell? And what does the future hold?

Sector support organisation Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) takes a look back and a stride forward...

Pictures courtesy of organisations offering volunteering opportunities on www.letsgosandwell.info

Introduction

A global pandemic has affected almost every aspect of life in Sandwell for the last year, and volunteering is no exception.

There has always been a quiet army of thousands helping out in the borough, giving their time freely to both formally organised community ventures and informally, sometimes just by being 'good neighbours'.

But those ranks swelled from March 2020 as hundreds more stepped forward to help in the Covid emergency, many for the first time.

As we hopefully emerge from lockdown and look forward to our community organisations opening their doors again, we take a look at what's happened during the last year and what's needed to sustain a 'new normal'.

Our Covid emergency response

For three months (March-June 2020) SCVO ran a volunteer response to Sandwell's Covid 19 crisis.

As the call went out for members of the public to offer their time to help those in need, SCVO set up a volunteer data base to house useful information such as special skills and access to transport.

First requests for support came from existing voluntary organisations who themselves were responding to the crisis, such as food banks. Volunteers were allocated to roles that included drivers, chefs, kitchen staff and carers.

In tandem, Sandwell Council developed a Practical Response Unit, taking calls from residents in need, and it was agreed that SCVO volunteers could be deployed to support some individual residents. Volunteers quickly began to support hundreds of residents by collecting shopping, medication and walking dogs for example.

In total, 732 Sandwell residents signed up to the SCVO data base. More than 400 were actively deployed, with around half supporting individual residents and the rest divided between voluntary organisations and telephone befriending.

Many more were recruited and engaged directly by local voluntary organisations; joined in with neighbourhood 'Mutual Aid' groups, or signed up to national schemes like the NHS Volunteer Responders service.

The 'quick fire' response was only ever intended as a short term 'fix' to an emerging crisis, and SCVO gained much insight during the three months into the needs and vulnerabilities of both residents and volunteers. As the scheme wound down, residents with ongoing needs were referred to the newly-developed Community Offer.



732

Sandwell residents signed up to the SCVO data base

Approximately

1,000

residents were supported by SCVO volunteers during the crisis.

Our Covid emergency response

Continued

Approximately 1,000 residents were supported by SCVO volunteers during the crisis. In terms of practical assistance much of the support was with shopping, collecting medication and telephone befriending. But the impact reached much further in some cases with the volunteer being the resident's only link to the outside world.

As volunteers were told that the official response by SCVO would come to an end, they were asked to complete a short survey. The survey showed that half of those who came forward to offer their time were new to volunteering.*

98% of all volunteers said they enjoyed the experience, with 82% saying they enjoyed it 'a lot'.

"It gave me some purpose in a time of uncertainty."

"It's been fabulous how this has all been organised. Taking part in this has really made me feel that I'm a useful member of my community."

75% said they gained something from the experience, such as confidence-building, learning new skills or learning from others

"It was a very rewarding experience.....made me aware of the loneliness in the local community and the need for better facilitiesin particular for the elderly and bereaved. It also made me aware of the poor facilities for people with dementia and mental health issues."

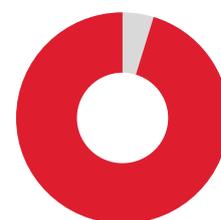
"I made friends and met some lovely families."

95% said they were likely to carry on volunteering in the future.

"I'm about to start a voluntary post with RSPB."

"I haven't been volunteering for long, but it makes me extremely happy that I am able to. I love what I'm doing right now and I am not planning on stopping anytime soon."

We've captured the story of how helping out benefitted new 'Covid' volunteers and residents (Appendix One).



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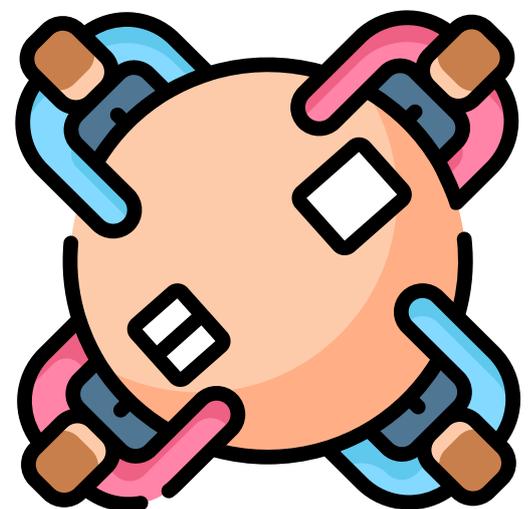
*Based on 147 responses

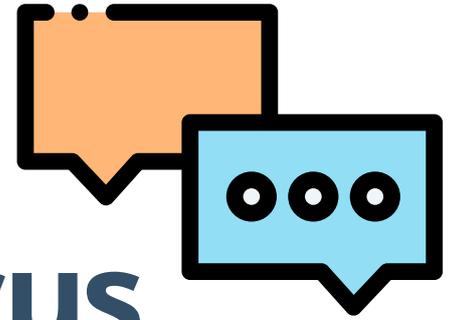
Volunteering focus

A small sample of voluntary organisations across Sandwell took part in a 'focus group' survey with us in March 2021, outlining their journey through the Covid crisis and detailing what they need to support them over coming months.

The organisations ranged from small, local, independent groups with a tiny turnover to huge, national-reaching charities with a Sandwell presence.

Some have staff who manage volunteers, others are almost exclusively volunteer-led; some have more than a hundred local volunteers, others have a handful. Yet surprisingly there wasn't a significant difference in what they were saying: it's been a tough year, and they all need support to get back on track.





Volunteering focus

Problems faced in 2020

As the first lockdown came into force in March 2020, many organisations were simply forced to close their doors. Some carried on Covid-compliant activity such as delivering food parcels, but most were initially unprepared for the abrupt enforcement.

“Our volunteer service closed at the start of lockdown due to the nature of the work the volunteers do.”

The focus group identified retaining volunteers, or keeping them engaged, as one of the biggest issues of the last year. Those who managed to continue operating identified training and risk-assessing new volunteers ‘at speed’ as a problem, particularly the smaller organisations where paid staff were not as plentiful.

Digital access was also highlighted in 2020 as meeting became ‘virtual’ overnight. Many people claim the pandemic caused a further rift in the ‘digital divide’, segregating those who could afford/use technology from those who couldn’t.

“Not all volunteers use technology and they would normally come into the office for training etc. Most contact is over the phone and they miss out on virtual activity.”

We interviewed two volunteers who had to suddenly stop helping out, and asked them the impact that had (Appendix Two).

Potential 2021 difficulties

Bridging that digital divide is an issue uppermost on volunteer managers’ agendas as we eventually come out of Sandwell’s series of lockdowns.

The ‘new normal’ will undoubtedly continue to involve increased use of technology as public, private and voluntary sector acknowledge that working remotely has been one of the few ‘wins’ of the pandemic.

Indeed, the focus group identified that deciding what we keep from Covid learning, and what we go back to as ‘normal’, is an issue in itself. There will be members of the workforce who yearn for an exact reset to February 2020, whilst others have realised the waste in time and resources that might be.

Other potential difficulties mentioned were recruiting new volunteers, particularly attracting a more diverse contingent, and convincing existing volunteers it was safe to return.

“My goal for 2021 is to have a diverse group of volunteers that can support our local community; to increase our social media presence to engage with all age groups.”

On a practical level, with many charities and community organisations suffering financial loss, there was a concern that having staff to manage volunteers, and funds to pay their expenses, may be an issue.

Support needed 2021 and beyond

SCVO sought to identify from the focus group what support they may need in relation to volunteers as we blink our way towards the light at the end of lockdown.

Though there was a slight difference in priority depending on the size of the organisation, their support needs were broadly the same:

Partnership working

"Partnerships are great too, more referrals and maybe more corporate volunteering."

Training

"Training for non-digital users. Some volunteers do not wish to adapt and want to wait until things go back to normal. One is waiting until we are back in the office to do admin again and doesn't wish to do admin at home. We have to keep in mind what is best for the volunteers and balance risk."

Peer support

"As I am new to the role of volunteering, partnership working around best practice would support me to offer the best volunteer experience."

Funding

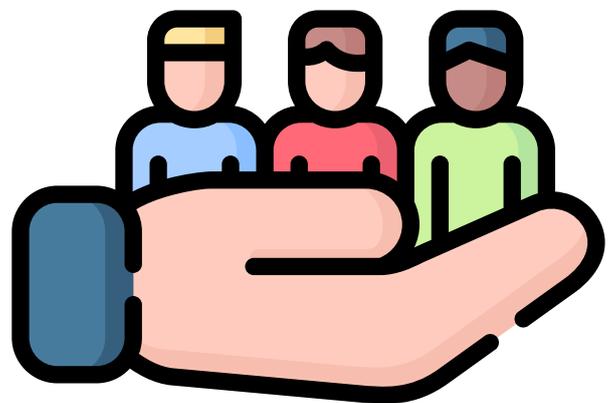
"Any support we can get, whether that is funding for a full time coordinator or admin support would be great."

Resources

"To continue to develop and grow our volunteer cohort and more importantly support them with new digital skills and confidence."

New volunteers

"To recruit at least 3 to 5 more volunteers and looking forward to getting back to some form of normality."



Support needed for the road ahead

As a team, SCVO supports the local voluntary and community sector with its volunteering offer, signposting to best practice and helping to ensure that both organisations and volunteers get the most out of the experience.



With a skilled and experienced team, SCVO is well-placed to support organisations with both their strategic and operational needs. Areas of support include: helping new/ established groups look at their governance structures; providing practical fundraising guidance (identified as a major need for 2021 post-Covid recovery); business and strategic planning (particularly in the post-Covid environment), and connecting the voluntary and community sector to wider strategic partners. SCVO's team-working, collaborative approach means that organisations gain access to this collective knowledge and experience when seeking support.

The addition of a dedicated Growing Participation and Volunteering Mentor in early 2020 enabled even more focused support on volunteering, which now includes a variety of new initiatives to boost the 'reset' in 2021 and beyond:

- The new web site 'Let's Go...' where organisations can showcase their volunteering opportunities and residents can search in a variety of ways for ideas to help out that suit their time, skills and needs www.letsgosandwell.info

- Sandwell Volunteer Coordinators' Forum – a quarterly meeting of volunteer coordinators to discuss common issues and share good practice
- Signposting to training and tips for recruiting and retaining volunteers, and new 'in-house' resources on best practice www.scvo.info/support-services-2/volunteering-support/
- Dedicated social media campaigns to support volunteer recruitment
- Volunteering advocacy at local events and forums
- Partnerships with business to re-invigorate Corporate Social Responsibility
- Determination to build on the legacy of Commonwealth Games 2022 to further promote local volunteering opportunities

For a conversation about volunteering support available contact kim@scvo.info

Sandwell's Covid Emergency Responders

More than 700 Sandwell residents stepped forward to support SCVO's Covid emergency response, at least half of them volunteering for the first time.

From March to June 2020, at least 400 were deployed either to help local voluntary/community organisations deliver their own emergency response, or to support individual residents identified by the Council with shopping, collecting medication and telephone befriending.

An estimated 1,000 residents were supported by volunteers deployed by SCVO, including Doreen:

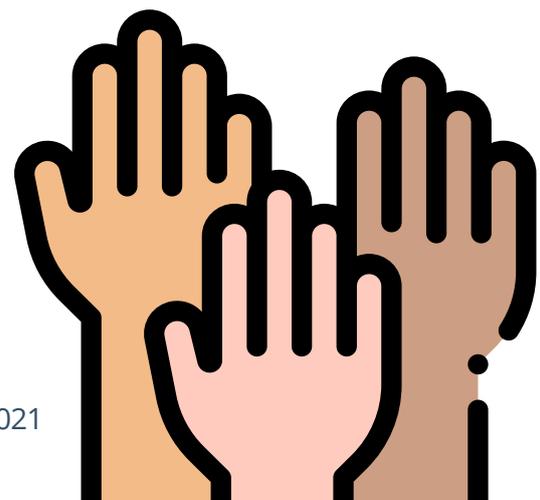
"Sending volunteer Andy to us has been like some kind of miracle. My husband and I have no family close at hand, and all of our friends are in the same boat, stuck inside unable to go shopping. Andy calls us to see what we need and he's so warm and friendly. When he turns up with fresh veg and fruit it feels like your birthday and we're so glad to see him, even if it has to be from a distance."

"Last week when he dropped off the shopping I wasn't feeling very well and even from the end of the path he noticed. He asked me what was the matter and insisted on going back to the shops to get me Paracetamol in case I had a fever. He made sure I had numbers to call and knew what to do if I got any worse, which thankfully I didn't, and then he rang every day to see how I was."

"I can't thank Andy enough, and SCVO too for organising such a fantastic service."

Doreen, Smethwick.

"An estimated 1,000 residents were supported by volunteers deployed by SCVO."



Like any volunteering, helping out during the Covid crisis benefitted those giving as well as those receiving:

Skip hire manager Phil from Great Barr never imagined volunteering before the current crisis.

In recovery himself from cancer when lockdown loomed he decided he needed to step up and 'do his bit' for the Sandwell community.

"I was furloughed from work and my partner was working full time from home, so apart from household chores I felt a bit useless," he said.

"I sent in my expression of interest to SCVO but was a bit hesitant about what I could do because of the cancer recovery.

"Remarkably, they set me up to be a telephone befriender, which was absolutely perfect. I was used to talking to people on the phone, and I had some training from Sandwell Advocacy to deal with stuff I might encounter, which was great.

"That first time I rang someone who needed befriending was very daunting. I was nervous to say the least, even though I talk all day at work. But I soon got into it and it's been amazing – there's a different world out there I never knew of before and I'm privileged to be able to make it a bit better place.

"My family and friends are quite surprised I'm doing this but I enjoy it and have no plans to stop volunteering in some way or other even when this is all over."

Phil was a volunteer for Sandwell Together, created during the pandemic by Sandwell Advocacy and SCVO as a befriending service for isolated residents.

Dave Bradshaw, project co-ordinator at Sandwell Advocacy, said:

"The Covid-19 crisis has seen our community pull together in ways never seen before. People have come forward in their hundreds to step up to the challenge and volunteer to do something positive in a time of adversity. From supporting the work of health and social care services, to providing practical support to people unable to do their shopping or collect medication, through to those providing emotional support and social contact via telephone befriending the response has been overwhelming. This army of volunteers has demonstrated what a huge difference volunteering can make."

"This army of volunteers has demonstrated what a huge difference volunteering can make".

How Covid affected long-term volunteers, and the road ahead

Covid 19 undoubtedly opened the door to hundreds of new Sandwell volunteers, who courageously stepped in to help out for the first time ever.

But the pandemic also closed that same door to many more who had been helping out for years.

Christine and Christeen were devastated when their community centre inevitably had to close its doors in March 2020. Both experienced a huge sense of loss and loneliness without the companionship and support of their 'family' at the Dorothy Parkes Centre in Smethwick.

As thankfully they're both now looking forward to better times and are gradually easing back in to helping out at the centre, they reflect on realising exactly what volunteering means to them.

Christeen's Story



"In 2019 I was absolutely loving my life as a volunteer.

After previously retiring on medical grounds, I'd been looking for something to occupy my time and wandered down to the Centre with my granddaughters to watch a show. There was a really great atmosphere there and after chatting to a few people I started helping out.

I was involved in lots of things, like the school uniform exchange and Christmas fete, and I ran a storytime session for pre-school children, which had also developed into craft sessions too.

I even got roped into learning how to Tango, which was something I never ever imagined I could do! I had a total of nine hours to learn, with a wonderful Argentinian dance partner, who I clung on to

for dear life as we showcased my new skill at the summer fair. Wonderful days.

Then in January 2020, just prior to Coronavirus hitting, I lost my husband. So as we went into Lockdown I had temporarily stopped volunteering, but never did I think that would continue for so long.

Not being able to help out at the Centre left me lonely – and frightened actually – frightened that I'd lose confidence, a sense of community and support from my 'extended family'.

Fortunately, I needn't have worried because gradually, and safely, I'm getting involved again. I've just supported a new volunteer with dyslexia to do some online training – which I was delighted to pass myself! And I'm training to be a 'listening ear' for bereavement, which I think will be a big help to people in so many ways at the moment.

Appendix 2

I feel like I'm being 'reborn' into the family again, and I'm so looking forward to it. The world is now a totally different place and people will need support more than ever. Volunteers can make all the difference to someone's life, even just by making them a cup of tea and listening to them.

I don't need a pat on the back for helping out, because I get so much in return anyway. Every five minutes I spend helping someone else to get on in the world, I get back in hours of the 'feel good' factor.

Now I'm looking forward to this new chapter in my life where in order to help me, I need to help others. I can't wait."

"I began volunteering because I wanted to give back to the community, but it actually gives more back to me".

Christine's Story



"I was at the centre nearly every day before Lockdown, and I really loved it. I ran a knitting

and crochet club on a Monday, afternoon teas once a month, and I joined in loads of other classes too.

My real joy believe it or not though was buffing the hall floor! I was a store manager before I retired and I persuaded them to let me do it years ago as a bit of therapy for a shoulder problem. I get my best ideas while I'm buffing, thinking how we can raise funds for the centre.

When the doors had to close because of the pandemic, I felt like I went downhill quickly. I have an underlying health condition, so I had to shield, and I started to feel very depressed. Then last November, totally out of the blue, I actually got Covid. I've no idea how I caught it but I did, and it made me very poorly with breathing problems. I was extremely low.

Fortunately, I pulled through, and I'm determined to get back to the centre. My sister and I have started doing a 'take away' cream tea, with a scone and jam, and it's become the highlight of my week.

I began volunteering because I wanted to give back to the community, but it actually gives more back to me. I recommend everyone to find something they enjoy spending time doing because the pleasure you get from it is unbelievable.

Helping out is such a lift for mental wellbeing, especially in a happy place like the Centre. I haven't been looking forward to getting up in the morning for months, but I'm planning to go in next week and buff the floor, ready for some safely returning groups, and I'm really looking forward to that.

We're like a 'happy bubble' of staff, volunteers and community, and I've missed it very, very much."



Contact us...

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Pictures courtesy of organisations
offering volunteering opportunities
on www.letsgosandwell.info

SCVO
connecting · enabling · transforming

www.scvo.info/

 **let's go...**

www.letsgosandwell.info/