

Celebrate the Covid Heroes

Amongst the misery, isolation and frustration that people have been experiencing over the last 14 months, some people have been presented with opportunities.

The opportunity to learn something new. The opportunity to get to know their neighbours. The opportunity to take a fresh look at their lives. The opportunity to become a Covid Hero.

For many it has been a matter of struggling through and damage limitation. Those with mental health issues or learning disabilities, carers, the elderly, parents trying to home school, those on low incomes. They all had services and support put on hold. Visits to day centres and lunch clubs were cancelled. Support sessions were put on-line. Parents struggled trying to home school.

We heard of individuals and families being put under unthinkable stress and pressure. A mother looking after a young energetic woman with a learning disability who could never understand why all her activities had been suddenly cancelled.

A man who was overcoming his alcoholism, being left to himself with no distractions.

At the same time many people from Edinburgh, Scotland and beyond answered the call to step up and offer their services to help those who were isolated at home. Either through social media or the NHS, council or volunteer centre, they collected shopping and prescriptions, walked dogs, put out bins. Of course many of these people had their ups and downs during Covid but they were at least able to spend some of their time helping others, feeling valued and appreciated.

But this was often not the case for supported volunteers.

Volunteering has offered those with support needs (whether it be a mental health issue, a learning disability, a long term health condition) a reason to get up in the morning; a way to be a giver rather than a receiver and all the self-esteem and confidence that goes with that; a chance to get out of the house; a chance to meet new people; a chance to say they have a job.

For many people it has been a lifeline.

For them Covid was a double blow. They were required to stay at home and one of the most important elements of their week was denied them.

Charity shops, lunch clubs, community cafes, gardening projects closed down. Befriending projects went on line. Furloughed workers and retired professionals engaged in volunteering for the first time. Voluntary roles became more technology dependent or required the volunteers to hit the ground running and show high levels of initiative. Organisations that were required to adapt to the new environment were stretched to breaking point and could not possibly have the time, patience and capacity to support someone with, for example, a learning disability and their support worker.

Which meant that those who were not able to adapt to the new requirements were left at home, denied the benefits of volunteering. A recent survey conducted by Volunteer Edinburgh showed that people were 5 times more likely to feel valued

during Covid if they continued volunteering than those who stopped. Figures for motivation and mental wellbeing were similar.

So where does that leave supported volunteering as projects begin to open up again?

As organisations get back on their feet and try to make up for a year's worth of lost income, in the short term at least there will be little capacity to provide extra support. Many of those who enjoyed their first experience of volunteering are now looking to move on to something else. The influx of these volunteers means that projects can recruit volunteers who can get on with a job with minimal supervision.

And where physical space is short they cannot afford the luxury of engaging a volunteer **and** a support worker when the alternative is two highly efficient experienced workers.

There is also a perception, rightly or wrongly, that some volunteers will not be able to follow Covid related rules and regulations.

Over the last few decades, supported volunteering projects have been striving to ensure that people with disabilities are given the chance to use their skills and abilities to contribute to organisations through volunteering. There is a danger that the clock has been turned back 30 years to a time when only those who do not require support need apply.

And what of those who were regularly volunteering at the beginning of last year, who are now unable to volunteer? How will they be supported to get back to where they were?

So yes, celebrate the "Covid Heroes" – but also consider those who have contributed over years and years, for whom volunteering has been a lifeline which has been denied them over the past year and may well be for the foreseeable future.

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