

Helping us to really love thy neighbour

Our Good Neighbours Network has been supporting voluntary groups across Hampshire for more than 40 years

BETTY was anxious about her health and on a list of people who would receive a daily phone call from a volunteer to check if she was OK. When she didn't answer the phone one day, someone went to knock on her door – to discover that she was stuck in her bath. She was rescued by paramedics.

It's this kind of personalised support that is the hallmark of dozens of voluntary groups that exist across Hampshire. Local volunteers run groups that offer support to any of their neighbours who need practical help – everything from small tasks around the house, to transport for medical appointments, to emotional support through befriending.

There are more than 120 such groups that exist throughout Hampshire, and together they are known as the Good Neighbours Network. Each group is unique and operates independently, and all of them aim to reach out to those who are isolated, and help to foster community spirit.

In the past year, more than 4,000 volunteers have performed more than 170,000 acts of kindness, including driving patients to and from hospital, doing shopping or gardening, taking people to coffee mornings and lunch clubs, and changing a lightbulb. And the list of social engagements they take clients to includes singing groups, film clubs and exercise classes.



Volunteers from various neighbourhood groups at this year's annual event, hosted by the Good Neighbours Network

Each group has a co-ordinator, who will take calls from people who need help – and then match them with a volunteer. Those who need help appreciate that the volunteer is a local, trustworthy individual. And often those who are helped then offer to volunteer themselves.

‘Good Neighbours is a fantastic concept and a huge success’

And each of these groups is supported by the Good Neighbours Hub, which is based in our diocesan

offices. A small team aims to relieve the groups of the bureaucracy associated with running a group – offering training in safeguarding, marketing and befriending, hands-on guidance and a hotline for queries.

The network offers free insurance and DBS administration for all groups. It also provides regular drop-in Resource Cafes, where group members can pick up resources, share knowledge, chat together and with an adviser.

Each year the network holds an annual event to bring together Good Neighbours volunteers.

Founder delighted to see her network still flourishing

WHEN Beryl Kenchington drew up a suggestion for a network of care groups in the 1970s, she could scarcely have imagined that her blueprint would still be working more than 40 years later.

Now 96, she had the vision to suggest that volunteers could band together in care groups, serving their communities by carrying out small, practical tasks for those in need. And she was the first adviser to that network of care groups – the forerunner to our current Good Neighbours Network.

Beryl was originally a medical social worker, and then stopped work to have a family. In 1972, she started going to church in Droxford, where the then rector had been a probation officer. He suggested that she take over the care group he had formed to serve the village community.

The Droxford group had been based on a similar group in nearby Swanmore, which was created during a flu epidemic in 1968-69. Volunteers had

fetch prescriptions, changed library books and taken people to appointments. The template for care groups elsewhere was established.

The message was passed from vicar to vicar throughout Hampshire, with Beryl at the forefront of organising the practicalities of creating each care group. She was appointed as the network's first adviser in 1974.

“I remember one of the early tasks was to help a woman in Swanmore who kept a goat at the end of her garden, and she wasn't able to get out of the house,” she said. “Someone would have the task of leading the goat to her back door, so she could milk it.”

Beryl continued to lead the Droxford care group, co-ordinating requests and volunteers by using a card index. Volunteers would be asked to change a fuse, change a lightbulb and other practical tasks. By 1985, when Beryl stepped down, there were 96 care groups in Hampshire.



Beryl Kenchington

She lost touch with the network, but when she moved to a village near Chichester, she was invited to speak at the AGM of its care group. There she met Debbie Sutton, who was at that point an adviser to the Good Neighbours Network.

“It was a big surprise to discover that it was still going,” she said. “I'm thrilled that it is still here, and to hear how little the original concept has changed. Of course, now I sometimes need to ask for help from my local care group to get to hospital appointments, so the wheel has turned full circle.”

The network of volunteer groups has been operating for more than 40 years within Hampshire, and there are some groups within the city of Portsmouth too.

Churchgoers were often heavily involved in the creation and running of these groups, as they realised support was needed for those living locally. Most groups operate on a suggested donation basis for driving trips.

Representatives from many of the groups met this autumn for the annual event in Winchester, which included workshops on first aid and helping those with dementia.

Keynote speaker Dr Dev Chauhan, a geriatrician, talked about the value of social interaction as a method of treatment. And the conference



Good Neighbours Network administrator Nicky Dodd explains a point to volunteers at this year's annual event

also acted as the climax of the network's Year of Kindness campaign, with a competition for the best way of showing kindness.

Professor Sue Bailey, NHS board member and former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said: “Good Neighbours is a