



A Decade of Caring

Volunteers across Shropshire are celebrating a decade of friendships, care and compassion which have brought 'life-changing benefits' to the community.

Each week the county's Compassionate Communities network of trained volunteers helps hundreds of residents out of loneliness and social isolation by the simple act of befriending them.

Founded by Severn Hospice in January 2010, the network offers companionship and social support to anyone who might need a helping hand to keep connected to their community.

The hospice helps train the volunteers who are then matched to local residents who have agreed with their GP that they would like to have this type of support.

Paul Cronin, who set up the scheme during his time as hospice Chief Executive, said: "It's such a simple idea but it means so much to those it helps and to the communities where they live.

"Just talking to someone, or helping them get out to a social event, makes a huge difference to their mental and physical health.

"As soon as we started, we could see evidence that our Co Co work was preventing people slipping into a health crisis. Typically, the people we help will be advanced in years, infirm or ill and we saw an immediate impact on everything from unplanned hospital admissions to home visits by GPs, attendance at A&E, calls made to NHS Direct and use of ambulance services.

"If you have someone who loves you or someone you can talk to if you have a problem, that is a more powerful predictor of whether you will be alive in ten years' time, more than almost any other factor, certainly more than smoking," he added.

From pilot schemes in Church Stretton and Cleobury Mortimer – both still active today and proud to have helped some 300 people between them since – the network now covers more than 20 communities across Shropshire.

Christine Richardson said she was a Mayfair Community Centre volunteer in Church Stretton before helping to set up the Co Co scheme there. "The project is extremely powerful: The effect of a couple of hours a week on both the client and the volunteer can be life-changing," she said.

"Being there for somebody, listening to their problems, holding their hand through difficult times, listening to their past life, sharing their joys and sorrows, suggesting things that might and do help them, developing new skills, being part of a team of like-minded people, meeting interesting people – these are the most rewarding things, for both clients and volunteers."

Her views were echoed by Katja Jones at the Cleobury Mortimer Co Co group. "Most volunteers, myself included, come to Co Co because they find themselves with a little time to spare and want to give something back. It is a rewarding experience and great to be part of something bigger across the town and indeed the county."

Feedback from those who have been supported is universally positive. "It's changed my life," said one Worthen resident whose support from Co Co has helped her overcome anxiety about leaving the house.

Another from Pontesbury, offered: "I am over the moon, I just can't believe my luck. There couldn't have been a more perfect volunteer for me. There are no awkward silences we just chat freely. I can't wait for the spring when we can sit in the garden together."

Home visits from the Knockin group have helped a mother and daughter: "Most of the time it's just myself and my mum. I look forward to our visitor, Vanessa. A fresh and friendly face and always welcome. It breaks up the monotony for us and means my mum can nip to the shops without leaving me on my own."

And in Market Drayton, volunteer Margy Taylor has become firm friends with resident Florence Davies, who is in her 90s. They have a shared enjoyment of crafting and chat while Florence embroiders.

At Hodnet Co Co, volunteer Karen recalls the difference friendly contact had made to one resident who was ill: "He had no family to speak of and I would accompany him on hospital and doctor's visits.

“As he was housebound, he took great delight in his weekly trips out for coffee and cake – I knew that because he would hum or sing along to Classic FM on the car radio as we journeyed.

“Even when he was too poorly to go out we just sat and watched 'Escape to the Country' together.”

Clun’s Co Co coordinator Mary Eminson recounts a similar experience with one elderly resident:

“She was 93 and lived alone with carers, supported by a son who visited two or three times a week. She absolutely loved being taken out in the car and her Good Friends visitors were able to take her out for the first year or so of their visits, and to take her to a local show – she didn't want to go home, she was enjoying herself so much.

“As the resident became physically and mentally more frail, unable to get out even with help, one visitor brought in her dog which was a source of delight, and read stories, another sang regularly with her. She knew far more words of songs and carols than the visitors did.

“Both visitors attended the funeral and were warmly thanked by the family, who gave the visitors presents every Christmas. We visited for over three years. There is no way to assess what we achieved, but it felt as if the visits were a time of kindness and shared pleasure, which I hope were experienced as positive for her. It felt as if we were doing the right thing by her.”

Dee McNeil, a practice nurse professionally, is the Co Co co-ordinator for the Brown Clee group. She said her group used social media and general advertising to let people know help was at hand.

“We want people to know they are not alone,” she said.

Hodent volunteer co-ordinator Mary Hardy added: “Although the thought of being visited by a complete stranger may feel daunting at first, don't let this put you off. You and your volunteer visitor soon get to know one another, and it's good to have something to look forward to if you're spending a lot of time on your own and aren't able to get out as much as you used to.

Martyn Cox, from Baschurch Co Co acknowledged how difficult these first steps could be: “Generally people that Co Co is aimed at, are possibly in their 80s or 90s, and have never asked for any support in their lives, as they are of a generation when they 'made do' – and proud of it too – so trying to convince them that there is help and support out there is difficult.”

And he gave this advice: “Don't be embarrassed to ask for help, if we don't know that you require support, we cannot give it.”

Paul Cronin added: “The hospice got involved because we see all the time how someone’s general well-being can be improved through relatively simple acts which enable people to feel they are not alone but are part of society and community.

“As well as expertise in how ‘caring’ can help someone feel better in themselves, the hospice has considerable knowledge of managing networks of volunteers – it has more than 1,400 who help in all aspects of the hospice’s work – and the healthcare landscape.

“Our role was to offer a support service to the Co Co volunteers, setting up their local scheme and offering practical and professional advice on how to access services and so on. It’s a model born and developed in Shropshire and one which proves its worth every day,” he added.

Chrissie Jupp from the Market Drayton group added that new volunteers for Co Co were always welcomed and appreciated, especially men.

It is a theme repeated by Hannah Wass from the Worthen group: “The most challenging part I have found is having enough volunteers that have different interests and cover all parts of our practice area, not just the village that the surgery is situated in. I have also found that most of our volunteers have been women, in fact only two so far have been men so it would be great to see more male volunteers involved.”

There are Co Co groups in the following communities.

Albrighton
Alveley
Broseley
Baschurch
Bishop’s Castle
Brown Clee
Church Stretton
Clebury Mortimer
Clive
Clun
Craven Arms
Ditton Priors
Ellesmere
Highley

Hodnet
Knockin
Ludlow
Market Drayton
Much Wenlock
Pontesbury
Priorslee
Shifnal
Shrewsbury (four groups)
Wem
Worthen

To find out more about yours, contact your local GP surgery and ask for their community care co-ordinator.

If you would like to set up your own Co Co group, please contact Severn Hospice 01743 236 565

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