

Let's talk  
**VOLUNTEERING**  
Community

**Blog written by Tracey Robbins – Head of UK Delivery, Eden Project Communities.**

Acts of kindness, individual action, community action, Informal volunteering, formal volunteering neighbourliness, kindness, connectedness ... they all have many subtle and nuanced differences.

There is often a delicate web that already exists in some communities, so delicate it is often unseen and easily broken like a spider's web. And it is this web of informal relationships and connections I am fearful for.

A lot of us have seen a resurgence of connection within our neighbourhoods and seen people reaching out to others during the Covid-19 crisis. We have also witnessed many people desperate, alone, without support or food, many who have lost people they love, lost jobs, skills, confidence, contact with family and friends... The juxtaposition of these two very different truths keep playing on my mind.

I have worked in community development 25 years now. I have seen investment in communities come and go. After 9 years volunteering I count myself lucky to have been employed within the Sure Start days, where each Sure Start initiative was made up of multidisciplinary teams, parents involved and reflective of each neighbourhood, long-term funding support in place .... That was at the start of my paid career and it gave me some good solid foundations which I have built on over 2 decades.

What I am passionate about, and a great advocate for, is informal support, which is why I love working for Eden Project Communities and The Big Lunch, which encourages, supports and provides a reason for people to connect. I love being neighbourly and the power of 'Ordinary People' to change their own and another's life or environment.

Informal support, individual action, sense of community, call it what you will, it doesn't just pop up from a barren land. Like anything else it needs the right environment and encouragement to become established and to flourish, it needs to be nurtured, mainly with human endeavour, as well as with the right resources to enable us to find the capacity and time to invest our efforts where we live.

I hear at times distinction between 'informal' and 'formal' volunteering as if one is better than the other, yet both are incredibly valuable and desperately needed. We need to support those often fragile 'informal' volunteering actions, opportunities and structures that already exist and not sweep them aside with formal services or provision, nor try and change them to meet our own unmet needs.

That said I also believe that communities need structured support, reflective of the communities that it belongs to, working with people within their own communities, addressing the needs they identify.

Yes we still need, #NeverMoreNeeded, volunteer services, charities and organisations that have become established to meet an unmet need. Often those safety net services have been set up to meet the needs for those where resources are scarce, there is no spare capacity and where people do not have the time to offer. Time is not a free resource.

Recently time has been granted for many people who have become engaged in their community, helping some people connect with their neighbours and their community and helped some reconnect with the balance of their life: the invaluable sense of their human connection to one another .... Will this time have helped rebalance the informal and formal?

Moving forward I hope to see the value and respect paid to a human connectedness that is due. For decades and decades we have been told to be proud and to be independent!

We are not, nor are we meant to be: we are an interdependent species. We do need other people. If Covid-19 shows us anything, it has shown us that we need other people. It has reminded us that we need informal relationships, neighbours, not to mention the kindness of strangers to help us get through.

We need formal support networks to reach those people we cannot reach. We equally need the delicate web of support and relationships around us. Ultimately, it is essential that we respect how precious our mutuality and interdependence really is and ensure as we move forward that we give this the priority, patience and parity it truly deserves.



**This blog is part of a 6 month Suffolk campaign. Volunteering: the 20/20 vision. Let's Talk Volunteering. Join in and follow our programme. Facebook @VolunteerSuffolk & join the CAS network <https://www.communityactionsuffolk.org.uk/join-our-network/>**