

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford

Why its vital we reverse the decline in number of people volunteering

LAST week was National Volunteers' Week, so it was unsurprising that a few of my engagements were with volunteering organisations.

Let's start with a rather large number: 140 million.

According to new research commissioned by the Royal Voluntary Service and carried out by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), that's the number of volunteer hours that went unused by UK employees last year. Despite 62 per cent of businesses giving their employees volunteer days to provide their time, free of charge, to the voluntary sector, about £32 billion worth of that time is going unused. Much of that, we're told, is because would-be volunteers struggle to find voluntary roles that would suit them.

That's such a shame because there are so many fabulous organisations out there doing all sorts of work – and the vast majority of them are crying out for volunteers to help them in the often vital work they do. I met a few of them at last week's VOLFEST in Chelmsford High Street.

VOLFEST is a day of celebration and information organised every year by Chelmsford CVS, which coordinates the charity and voluntary sector in our city. It takes the form of lots of information stalls set up in High Street, staffed by volunteers from each organisation.

The aim is twofold: 1) to raise awareness amongst the public about what they each do and what volunteering opportunities are available; and 2) to network with each other to find ways that these organisations can help each other.

Take Barrow Farm, for example (www.barrowfarmrda.org.uk).

Based in Highwood, just outside my Chelmsford constituency, they provide riding and carriage driving for the disabled.

It was clear from talking to them and the fun-filled photos on display on their stall, how much joy and laughter they bring to the people they serve.

But they told me about a partially-sighted user who needs to use a box with steps to climb into the carriage



Marie Goldman MP with Rainbow Trust at VOLFEST in Chelmsford
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP



Marie Goldman MP with Freda Mountain at Age Concern at VOLFEST



Chelmsford CVS at VOLFEST



Marie Goldman MP with Luna the Ambassador dog and Rhys

or mount a horse. The one they had didn't have any sides, so it wasn't as safe or easy to use as it could be. When I visited their stall at VOLFEST, they told me that volunteers from Men's Sheds, just a few stalls away from them, had kindly offered to make a new one for them, putting their own volunteering skills to extremely good use.

When I go to these events, I try to speak to as many people as possible, although I don't always have time to speak to everyone.

But I will admit that some stalls are likely to draw my attention more than others – and I'm a sucker for a cute, well-behaved dog. Cue Service Dogs UK (www.servicedogsuk.org), who drew my attention with gorgeous Ambassador Luna.

Once my attention was dragged away from the affectionate, fur baby at my feet, I had a lovely chat with Rhys and Amanda about the amazing work they do training dogs to act as confidence-building companions to former servicemen and women who may be struggling with anxiety

and, in some cases, PTSD. Their beautiful dogs provide reassurance to their users and, for many, it can mean the difference between being afraid even to go outside, and being able to live an independent life.

It's so important that we support our ex-servicemen and women, so it was lovely to hear about the work this organisation does to help with that.

Volunteers' Week was marked in Parliament too. I was pleased to be able to join some perhaps more well-known organisations in the Palace of Westminster for a reception where we heard from some young people and their leaders from the Scouts and Girlguiding.

The focus of their campaign this year is on trying to encourage more people to take up the volunteer hours that employers are setting aside but are going unused.

Remember those statistics at the top of my column? £32 billion could go a VERY long way to help the work of charities and voluntary organisations, often referred to as the third sector.

Although the monetary benefit-in-kind is important to the organisations, the volunteers I spoke to were very keen to point out how much the volunteers themselves get out of it.

Volunteering isn't a purely altruistic

endeavour – sure, it can do a lot of good for other people, but it can be incredibly rewarding and self-fulfilling for those doing the volunteering.

They can learn new skills, visit new places, forge new friendships, and yes, feel a sense of satisfaction that comes from knowing you're doing some good in the world. What's not to love?

Unfortunately, the number of people volunteering has declined quite markedly since Covid. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly why that is, but lots of people point to the changes in working practices, a change in daily habits, as well as previous volunteers choosing the pandemic as the right time for them to retire from voluntary life.

At the same time, it has been difficult to recruit new volunteers. Whatever the reasons, the bottom line is that the voluntary sector can't run without volunteers.

So, how about it? Why not try out something new and volunteer some of your time today? If you want to find out more about what opportunities are out there, contact the CVS here: chelmsfordcvs.org.uk.

To close this week's article, I wanted to bring you a couple of bits of good news from Parliament: firstly, thanks in no small part to the excellent campaigning by my Lib-

eral Democrat colleague Max Wilkinson MP, the Member of Parliament for Cheltenham (for some bizarre reason, people keep confusing the names of our two constituencies!), the Government is bringing forward plans to insist on all new builds having solar panels on their roofs, helping to keep household bills down and creating more resilience in our energy generation and infrastructure, as well as tackling the climate emergency.

And finally, the Liberal Democrats have long been campaigning for children from the poorest households to have free school meals. It was clearly in our 2024 manifesto.

The great news is that despite free school meals not featuring at all in Labour's 2024 manifesto, the Government has just announced that all children whose parents are in receipt of Universal Credit will soon be eligible for free school meals.

This is excellent news. There's more to do, including auto-enrolment and, as I pressed the Government, ensuring that schools do not have to pay for this out of their existing budgets, but I'm very pleased to see this positive step to help ensure all children get the best possible start in life.

Thanks for reading.

Marie

“Whatever the reasons, the bottom line is that the voluntary sector can't run without volunteers.”

Marie Goldman MP