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POINTS OF VIEW

Amazing volunteers helping those who have fallen on harder times

If you're a regular reader of this column, you'll know that I like to throw a light on the amazing work that our voluntary sector does across Chelmsford. I'm often out visiting charitable organisations, finding out what they do and then telling you about it.

So, when a resident recently challenged me to "come and see real life", I'll admit to feeling a bit frustrated. I know it's the fashion to lump all politicians into the same box, assuming none of us care or know anything about the world around us. I think that's a pretty unfair accusation, but on this occasion, he had a bit of a point.

Every Wednesday evening since Covid, an amazing group of volunteers gathers by the library in Market Road, right in the heart of Chelmsford, and provide food, clothing and other essentials to people who have fallen on hard times.

They do it every week, come rain or shine. It happens in my Moulsham & Central city council ward and I'd never been to visit them. Last week, I put that straight.

I was invited (one might say 'admonished') to come along by John, a chef who lives in Chelmsford but who spends most of his days working in London. But every Wednesday, he and his family prepare and serve hot meals from their blue 'STREETFOOD' van, parked opposite Chelmsford library in Market Road.

Many of the people he serves are sleeping rough on our streets, but some are homeless in other ways, perhaps sleeping on a friend's couch, or maybe living in temporary accommodation nearby.

John says he doesn't turn anyone away. If someone needs feeding, he feeds them. I'm not sure there is a more basic and vital way to help someone than that, and I could see the passion in John's eyes as he talked about the importance of what he does. I could also see the gratitude from those who queued to get a steaming bowl of pasta from his wife and daughter as they handed it through the serving hatch.

Across the road from John's van were several tables laid up with all kinds of bits and pieces. There were



Cllr Marie Goldman with John from STREETFOOD
PHOTOS: CLLR MARIE GOLDMAN



Jan and Jo from Chelmsford Community Church



June and Chris from Chelmsford Community Church

shoes and clothes, toiletries, cups of tea and coffee, sausage rolls, bags of crisps, fruit and sandwiches. And behind the tables was an even greater number of volunteers.

The volunteers represented several different organisations, now all working together (it wasn't always so) to ensure that what they do complements rather than duplicates the efforts of others.

I met Sarah and Erin from a charitable organisation called Lally's Loot of Love, set up in memory of Sarah's daughter. We both had tears in our eyes as Sarah showed me a photo of

her beautiful daughter who passed away a few years ago due to complications from childbirth. She told me that Laura-Jane - Lally - was forever paying things forward, doing what she could to help others in need. Sarah wanted to continue her legacy so was out every week, making sure that people had what they needed to keep clean and look after themselves.

I chatted with Chris, June, Jan and Jo (who is also one of my lovely Lib Dem city council colleagues) from Chelmsford Community Church. June has been doing this for six years! They support the homeless with fresh food donated by Greggs and Marks & Spencer, and they put together what they call 'grace bags' - small bags full of breakfast bars and other snacks for an easy, relatively

healthy breakfast. These packages were very popular, with several people approaching the table to ask for them while I was there.

Then there were Julia, Frazer and Penny from Warm Hearts for Cold Hands. They were providing clothing and sleeping essentials. Even, on occasion, giving out small camping stoves so that rough sleepers could make themselves a hot drink on a cold morning. One of the things they desperately need is a lock-up where they can store the donated items that they eventually hand out. If you can help, please do get in touch.

And finally, I spoke to Helen, from Cool 2 Be Kind (C2BK), an organisation I've known for a long time, ever since they evolved from the Rucksack Project. C2BK now act as an umbrella organisation for some of

the charitable groups, bringing everyone together to work as one.

It was clear from speaking to all the volunteers that although the most obvious reason for them being there was to provide the essential items that were carefully arranged on their tables, it was really about much more than that. For many people sleeping rough or otherwise homeless, trust and relationships with other people can be very difficult to build up.

But what struck me was how many people were obviously coming back week after week, and the smiles that came from both the volunteers and those they were helping when they turned up. Genuine friendships had been forged, despite the difficult circumstances. That was lovely to see.

One thing we all agreed was that we wish these services weren't necessary. Solving homelessness is extremely complicated and it won't happen overnight. Sometimes when we think of people being homeless, we think of people sleeping rough on our streets. But the problem is far, far bigger than that. In addition to rough sleepers, we currently have about 450 households living in temporary accommodation in Chelmsford. That's huge and it's by no means unique to Chelmsford.

One of the ways we can address this is by building more housing and making sure that a good chunk of it is genuinely affordable. Government housing targets are regularly missed and the shortage of affordable and social housing is at crisis point. Liberal Democrats are committed to building at least 150,000 new council and social homes a year nationwide and improving standards for new homes to ensure they are warm, cheap to heat and produce zero emissions.

Of course, we also need to grow the economy so that wages are enough not just to live on, but to keep pace with costs and provide opportunities for everyone to reach their full potential. That needs a change of government. Luckily we have the opportunity to make that happen in just a few short weeks' time.

In the meantime, thank you to all the volunteers out there who give up so much of their time to make those who are less fortunate a bit more comfortable and safe.

You can read more about the Liberal Democrat plans for our country here: www.libdems.org.uk/plan.

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