



Ageless Thanet

Taking a Different Approach to Volunteering

Overview

In 2015 Social Enterprise Kent received £3 million as part of the National Lottery funded 'Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better' programme. We are one of 14 areas nationally exploring the best ways to reduce social isolation and loneliness, and improve the wellbeing and quality of life of people over 50. Ageless Thanet has five key areas to the project - Wellbeing Activities, Life Planning, Ageless Entrepreneurs, Age-Friendly Business Scheme, and Active Citizenship (volunteering).

Since the summer of 2017 we have recruited 110 volunteers and they are an integral part of our vision to make Thanet a great place to grow older. Our aim is to encourage more people in later life to take up opportunities to share their skills, knowledge and experience with their communities through volunteering. We also want to increase their confidence, showing them that they have a voice that can shape the communities in which they live.

Here at Ageless Thanet we support the creation of flexible and bespoke volunteering opportunities for anyone aged 18+, which work around the time, skills and confidence of the individual wishing to volunteer. We strongly believe there is a volunteering opportunity for everyone, regardless of qualifications or experience.

Our volunteers are involved across all areas of the project and help us in reducing isolation and loneliness, empowering communities, improving people's mental and physical wellbeing, and ensuring older people's voices are heard. We want to change people's perceptions of getting older and our volunteers are vital to us achieving this. We seek volunteers of all age ranges and backgrounds to help us in our goal.

As well as being an integral part of our governance panel and various committees, our volunteers lead a huge range of different activities. From IT support, language sessions, coffee get-togethers, a sewing group and regular walking groups; our volunteers are making a huge impact in Thanet. This report is based on the findings from 2017.



Volunteering: a different approach

Volunteering with Ageless Thanet is different to traditional volunteering. Our key objectives are to make the experience as personal and as flexible as possible, to ensure maximum benefit and enjoyment for our volunteers. We steer away from advertising specific volunteering roles, instead encouraging individuals to create their own personalised opportunity.

Personalised Volunteering

We always meet with a potential volunteer face to face, to firstly explain the objectives of the project, but also to add that personal and friendly touch that means the individual knows that they will be valued and appreciated.

If a volunteer is unsure of exactly what they want to do, we spend time with them to understand their skill set, hobbies and interests, to help them determine what they might like to offer. This varies from running a class or activity to helping out at events or community engagement days.

Our volunteers bring the passion and enthusiasm for their particular interest, and we assist with the practical side of things such as booking venues and creating marketing material. We involve the volunteers at every step of the way, to build their confidence and to empower them rather than simply enabling them. If there is something they enjoy doing, and would like to share it with others - we make that possible.



“ I thrived instantly from that person to person communication once again (something I had missed since retiring at 65). Putting pen to paper in a classroom with students again felt good. I enjoyed building these 1:1 relationships within the group and watching student’s abilities grow. ”

Colin, Pastel Pencil Painting Volunteer



“ I volunteered to assist at wellbeing events which included, setting up the venue for an evening ukulele course, making refreshments and socialising with group members. Engaging with other people, socialising with my peers and gaining the knowledge that I am still a person with something to offer. My mental well being has improved. ”

Glenn, Ageless Thanet Volunteer

Colin

Colin retired from teaching aged 65, and had moved into online teaching as part of a family business with his son. Whilst experiencing a quiet spell with their business, Colin decided to offer his skills as an artist to run Pastel Pencil Painting classes with Ageless Thanet. He said that he had missed teaching people face-to-face and having the opportunity to see people's abilities grow in front of him.

Ageless Thanet would never have advertised for a volunteer to run something as specific as pastel pencil painting classes. However, these sessions have been thoroughly enjoyed by both the participants, and Colin who said it has kept him "busy" and giving back has given him a "great sense of purpose".



Glenn

Before getting involved with Ageless Thanet Glenn was lacking in self-esteem and was feeling isolated. Glenn went along to an Ageless Thanet pottery course and seeing that his wellbeing was improving, decided that he wanted to continue building up his confidence and self-esteem. As a result Glenn approached the volunteering team and started assisting with the setting up of events and making refreshments. Since then, Glenn's confidence has improved a lot and he has taken on more responsibilities such as opening up and locking the premises for other classes.

Due to his lack of self-esteem, Glenn didn't feel confident enough to run an activity on his own, but was very open-minded to different ways he could get involved. He has been instrumental in making 'things' happen, without him the activities wouldn't have been so successful and may not have been able to have happened at all! Not only has Glenn benefitted himself from being able to get involved with these activities as a volunteer, but a range of participants have also benefitted from his support.



15
different types of
regular activities run
by volunteers each
month



225
people benefit from a
volunteer-led activity
in an average month

Flexible Volunteering

Every little really does help! Whilst some people can commit to regular activity, volunteers should never feel pressured to give their time. However little time a person may be able to offer, or however infrequent, it should always be greatly appreciated.

Our volunteers are reassured that they can give as much or as little time as they can, when it suits them and have the option to take a break or stop altogether if life gets in the way. All volunteers are welcome to return to volunteering if and when they want to.

“I did a job I loved for 40 years but when retirement came there were no regrets, I wanted a complete break away. I was offered jobs but didn't want that level of commitment. I needed to replace that sense of passion and purpose though, something to lessen the risk of me becoming isolated and lonely. I couldn't have a day where I wasn't doing anything, I needed to feel useful.

I was amazed when staff said it didn't matter that I couldn't give a weekly commitment to volunteer. I can honestly say Ageless Thanet have never given me any pressure to give my time. When I've needed help staff have always been there to turn to. I do what I can, sometimes a whole lot more in one time period than in the next. I have been appreciated for the help that I can give.”

Linda, Ageless Thanet Volunteer



We have more recently started to recruit a 'bank' of reserve volunteers that may be able to relieve others on occasion (such as holidays, appointments, spells of ill health), so that activities may continue as scheduled and participants (who may rely on and look forward to this activity) don't have to miss out. This also takes the pressure off our regular volunteers if the need to step away arises, for whatever reason.



Ageless Thanet Volunteer Training Session

Age-Inclusive Volunteering

Ageism is when a person is treated unfairly on the grounds of their age. Despite The Equality Act 2010 outlining that age is a protected category, and people must not be discriminated against as a result, volunteers are not protected under it in the same way that employees are (NCVO, 2019).

While volunteers may not be legally covered under this legislation, this does not mean that it is acceptable to discriminate against them in any way. Sadly we have heard from multiple people throughout the Ageless Thanet project, that they have encountered ageism whilst attempting to find a volunteering role for themselves elsewhere. One lady we spoke to was told she was "too old" to volunteer. It is important to realise that older people bring a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience; and are in no way a risk or inconvenience, simply because of their age.



It is good to be aware that older people's needs may differ from others, but these can usually be easily accommodated. As we get older we are more likely to find ourselves living with medical conditions (43% of Ageless Thanet volunteers surveyed stated that they had a long-term health condition or disability). Simple accommodations such as printing documents in a larger font or ensuring that chairs are available if a person is expected to stand for long periods of time, can really help include volunteers living with health conditions.

People volunteer for a huge range of reasons; some want to make a difference to their local communities, while others want to gain or share skills. Older people have told us that organisations have offered them volunteering opportunities that they feel are patronising, or doesn't use their valuable skills. Our volunteer, Claire, told us of her experience:

“I approached another organisation to volunteer who told me that I could make the tea and do the filing. Before I retired I was working as an Office Manager with financial responsibilities, as well as managing four members of staff. I wanted to put my computer skills to good use, as well as a sense of achievement, doing work I felt was worthwhile.”

Claire, Ageless Thanet Volunteer



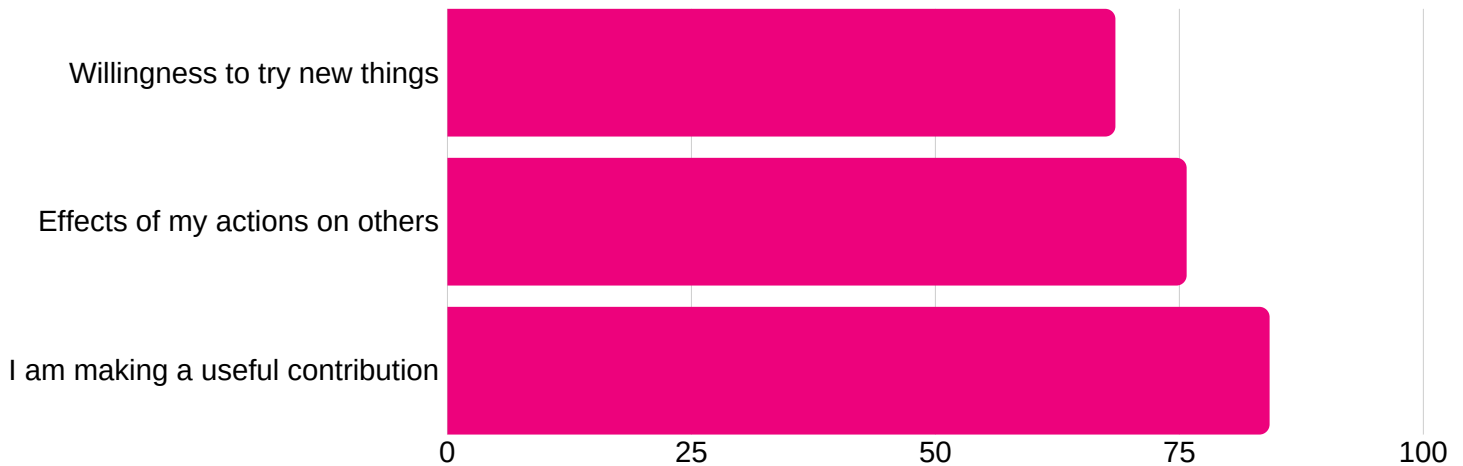
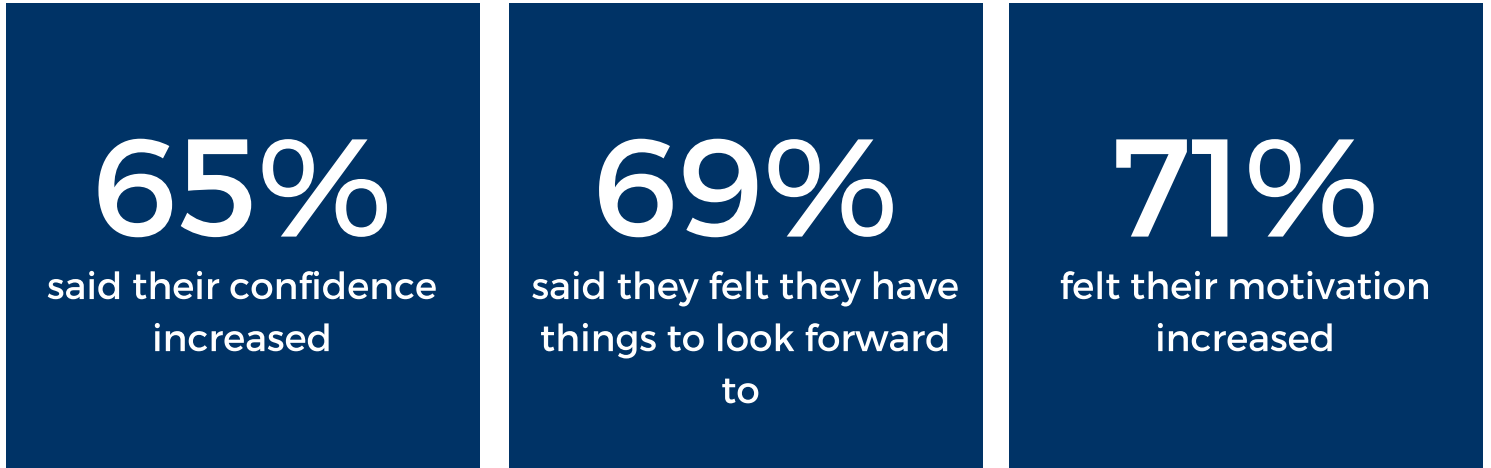
While there is nothing wrong with a volunteering opportunity making refreshments, it is important to realise that this may not be a desirable role for everyone. Claire has been hugely instrumental in assisting with office administration, as well as inputting data and sending out our Reward Cards; all very important roles that allow her to make a huge difference in the Ageless Thanet office. We really value her input and advice, meaning that she has shaped the day to day processes in the office.

Impact

The following is based on 39 volunteers who have completed 50 volunteering hours.

Psychosocial outcomes

Focusing on outcomes relating to people's confidence and self-esteem, the majority of people felt positive changes in these areas as a result of volunteering.



The graph above shows the percentage of volunteers who felt those aspects had increased. 71% said that their willingness to try new things had increased as a result of volunteering. Over 75% of volunteers said that they are more aware of the effects of their actions on others. More than 84% felt that they are making a useful contribution as a result of volunteering.

“I like being part of helping people and making differences to local older residents' lives.”

Our intention was to provide an avenue to promote a sense of purpose in the lives of the volunteers. These statistics show that people feel that volunteering has a positive impact on their lives.

Involvement in local activities

To what extent are volunteers more involved in local activities?



86%
said their feelings of
being part of the
community has
increased



52%
said their interest in
joining local groups
and clubs has
increased

Generally people feel more connected and a part of their community as a result of volunteering. More than half of volunteers feel that they are more interested in joining in with local activities.

“It’s made me get out more. I’ve made more friends and we have a good laugh and chat.”

Impact on social connections

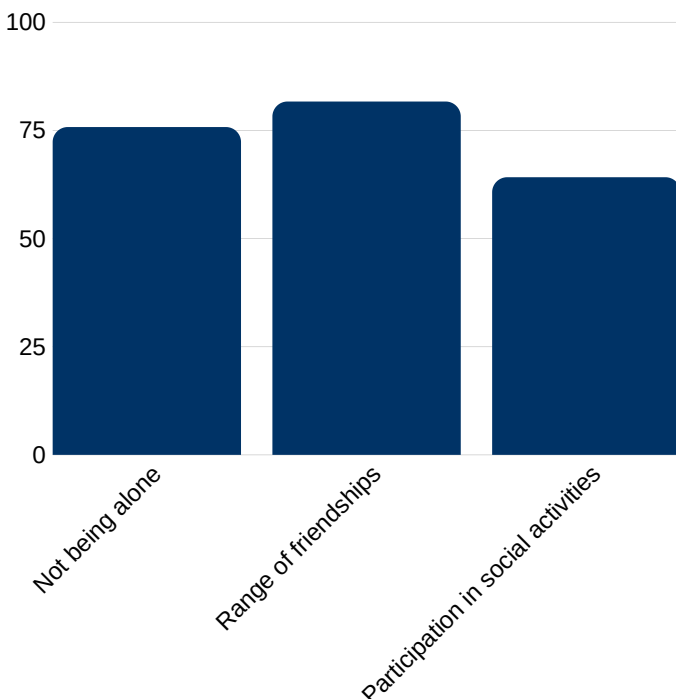
How have individuals gained socially from taking part in volunteering with Ageless Thanet?



73%
said their support and
information networks
have increased



76%
said the number of
contacts they can call
on has increased



This graph shows the percentage of volunteers who said that those aspects of their social lives had increased as a direct result of volunteering.

Overall the data suggests that volunteering has positively impacted their lives. Encouragingly over 75% of volunteers said that feelings of not being alone have increased since becoming involved with Ageless Thanet.

We are delighted to have been given the chance to test this theory of creating personal and bespoke volunteering opportunities. We are thrilled that our approach has had such an impact on our volunteers, but also our community.

Bibliography

NCVO. 2019. Equality and Diversity [online], Available at: <https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/your-team/volunteers/recruiting/equality-and-diversity>. [Accessed 4 Feb 2020].

Find out more...



If you would like to find out more about the other aspects to the Ageless Thanet project, please get in touch -

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SEK Social Enterprise Kent

Social Enterprise Kent, the lead organisation of the Ageless Thanet project, is a Community Interest Company (CIC), registered with, and regulated by, the CIC Regulator. We have been in operation for over 30 years, with the overarching vision of "Improving Lives, Supporting Communities".

Our key aims:

To provide support for people, particularly in areas of deprivation or for those most disadvantaged, to gain skills and employment

To support the creation, organisation and management of social enterprises and small enterprises; and to develop a way of making this sustainable

To support in the regeneration of deprived areas in Kent, by creating jobs and skills

If you would like to find out more about SEK, we would love to hear from you -

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