

Maggie Liu Brown



Maggie Liu Brown is a film production lawyer who lives in Beaconsfield with her husband and two sons. During the early stages of the pandemic, she became involved with a local organisation offering support to those in need in the local community. In the process of helping others, she and her family found it gave them a much-needed boost and speaks about how it would be a great thing for anyone to get involved in.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT WHAT YOU DO TO VOLUNTEER

Only a year or so before the pandemic, a charitable organisation called Better Connected Beaconsfield (BCB) had set up with the purpose of improving the wellbeing of our local communities by connecting Beaconsfield residents with services in the town to enable them to thrive and have a better quality of life. When the pandemic hit, and a lot of vulnerable people were starting to shield, BCB quickly realised that those shielding would need extra support and saw there was an opportunity to use BCB's network to help even more people. I answered a call-out for volunteers to come forward to provide shopping support and prescription collection/delivery for those shielding, plus anything else that they might need, and thus "The Buddy Network" was born.

We sub-divided the town into zones and each zone has a group co-ordinator. I am one of the group co-ordinators and my role really is to organise the group of buddies in my zone. I hadn't anticipated that I would get to use many of my "corporate life" skills in setting up systems to communicate with all the volunteers, assign people tasks, and ensure everyone is kept abreast of what's going on; effectively managing people, just on a volunteer level rather than a corporate level.

In my group, there are approximately 30 Buddies and we cover hundreds of households. In the initial phase, we dropped leaflets to every household explaining what support we could offer which essentially said, "I'm your local Buddy, if you want any help you can call me or you can call the central hotline". Any requests for help that were received were then allocated to the co-ordinators who would either respond directly to the request or could assign it to a Buddy in their group.

In addition to people needing the more practical support we were providing (e.g. shopping, errands), as the pandemic took its toll on people's jobs and incomes, we quickly realised that more individuals and families began to need additional support by way of food and essentials. So BCB put out a request for people to start donating food and other essential items on a weekly basis and The Buddy Network was activated to help. Anyone who wanted to donate could leave their donations on the doorstep, and the network of volunteers would go around the neighbourhood and collect it.

On my patch, the way I organised things, was to assign Buddies to certain streets, then each Buddy went around and collected any donations that were left out. They dropped



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it at my house as a central drop-off point. Then there was a temporary larder set up at one of the local churches and all the donations in the town went there. We also made sure that residents knew that if anybody who had a need could request a parcel and those parcels were then packaged and delivered. If someone in my area had a need or a Buddy suspected that a household they were supporting might be in need of food or supplies, we would help them request a parcel, and would then collect it and drop it off at their house. The Buddy Network was hugely instrumental in not only making sure that all donations were collected on a weekly basis, but also that such donations were then discreetly distributed to those in need.

As with many organisations who like to know how successful their various programmes and initiatives are, we also helped BCB track all of the various “acts of support” offered by The Buddy Network. We report on things such as how many households we are looking after, what we did for them i.e. 20% of shopping, 20% was prescriptions, we donated this many parcels of food to this many households. It was really nice to see how much positive impact our group of volunteers had within our community.

HOW MANY HOURS DO YOU SPEND?

When we were setting up it was probably 10 to 15 hours a week, just during the initial period to organise everyone. Also, for me, things took more time than I had anticipate because I had about 30 Buddies to manage and I wanted to get to know them. Some of them I did know, they were neighbours, but a lot I didn't know. Because we were going to be dealing with the public we also had to do references, safeguarding and data protection checks with everybody. Once we were set up, then I probably spent 3 -5 hours a week to help out. But you really don't have to commit this kind of time, even just an hour or so a week would be helpful. If lots of people do a little amount it can really make a difference.

WHAT DO YOU THINK BEING INVOLVED GAVE TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY?

I have two sons who are in secondary school and I think it was good for them to see people helping each other in their own community, especially during such unprecedented times. I think for them to see what we could achieve with people pulling together and helping each other was really good. In terms of wellbeing, in terms of supporting your emotional wellbeing and your mental state, I think feeling like you were empowered to do something was great no only for me, but for them too. In fact, my husband helped out where he could too and my volunteering became a family activity.

If I had leaflets to distribute, or some drop-offs to deliver, my sons would be (usually!) very happy to help. This also helped them learn about maintaining their social distance when they were out and about town, not to wait for the other person to move but to



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actively move out of the way yourself. Because my house was one of the main drop-off points, they could also see how much food and essential supplies were being collected on a weekly basis, which I think brought it home to them as to how many people must be in need, and it was more than they realised. But having volunteered, one of the benefits was that it made them feel better that they'd been able to help others. They said a couple of times that they were proud of the fact that their mum, and we as a family, were getting involved.

So it became this family awareness about what was going on. I think other families discovered it too, where one member of the family volunteered and then they got the rest of their family involved too. I have the sense that involvement in volunteering activities like this as a family unit is something less prevalent these days because we're all so busy. We're all on our devices or busy with our own jobs, school, friends, etc. So I think that this has been one of the unexpected benefits of volunteering during these COVID-19 times – that it's brought families together in different ways.

I also think volunteering brings a different dimension to one's life, it is a really beneficial thing to do. You're interacting with people you probably would not normally interact with. Partly the spread of the ages of people – men and women. In my workplace I don't get an opportunity really to work with pension-aged people, however in a volunteer environment I did. All of a sudden you're dealing with all sorts of people, all different generations, and it opens your mind to any preconceived notions of what you think people can contribute at different stages of life, which is good as I head into my older years. You just think, "Well, if they can do it, I can do it", because they were willing to get in there. They're in their 70's and they're doing it.

I think volunteering is a great equaliser as well, it puts everyone on a very level playing field. It's a humbling experience. It is great to know that everyone is doing it because they feel they want to do it, it's not because it's a job helping put food on the table. It's different and there's a different energy that goes into that and in return, there is a different energy you can get from it.

It's also great to be able to use, what I would say are my corporate skills, outside of a corporate environment. You learn completely different skills in the non-corporate volunteering environment, and I can carry some of those back into the corporate world, so I think it's a nice balance.

WHAT ARE THE PLANS FOR THE ORGANISATION NOW?

Now, we're trying to plan with a view to what's going to happen in the winter months. With all the uncertainty around whether there is going to be a second spike, we don't know what's going to happen. Furlough support is changing, as is the self-employed scheme, and there are many redundancies being announced regularly, which means



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that more households will be impacted. So we are trying to figure out what to do next.

We're having to work out ways of collecting and distributing the food/necessities rather than leave it on doorsteps during the winter months when it's going to be cold, dark and wet. So we're trying to establish more drop off points within the town.

HOW WOULD SOMEONE GO ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED IN THEIR LOCAL AREA?

We are organised through Better Connected Beaconsfield which the Buddy Network is a part of. It's likely that there will be similar organisations in most towns/villages so just have a look online for something in your local area. What's interesting is there are a variety of skills that they rely upon, IT skills, communication and PR skills, marketing etc. They have needed all sorts of different abilities and experience. Not just people with time, but specialist skills.

I think it's the fear of not being able to live up to the commitment which holds a lot of people back. Because they would like to do "this thing", but they're not sure about anything long-term. That's the challenge we see. But I think that the key is just to get your hands in and try something, and it will probably naturally evolve to fit whatever your circumstances are. It doesn't have to be a big commitment. And it's nice, it's nice to feel as though you're able to contribute, even though it's not really anything that big of a deal.

During the last few months, the Buddy Network set up something called **The Listening Ear**. Because they felt people in isolation might like to speak to someone. So they put in place trained listeners. Whilst the Buddy volunteers were out on the streets, collecting food, talking to people, supporting households who needed shopping, if we got a sense of anyone who could be needing that extra support we could direct them to The Listening Ear. We found a lot of people wanted to talk because self-isolating was very, very lonely. A lot of these people were elderly and not set up with technology, or they were but their friends perhaps weren't, so they couldn't communicate, particularly amongst the elderly.

They really do have a bunch of different facets to this group, and I'm sure to other groups around the country. So if anybody wants to get involved, which I would very much recommend they do, they could contact their local organisation or look on social media.



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