

Volunteer Lives – Ian Neville - Littlehampton Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club and the Littlehampton Veterans Support (LiVeS) Project

‘I started with nothing, so there was nothing to lose,’ Ian Neville explains. The founder and chairman of the Littlehampton Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club and the Littlehampton Veterans Support (LiVeS) Project, he is discussing his route into volunteering with VAAC.

Formerly in the army, Ian was medically discharged in 1995 and moved to West Sussex in 2014. ‘I knew very few people and because I worked in Hampshire I had little interaction with people locally. This made me socially isolated and, apart from my family being around, my circle was small.’ Ian had ignored his veteran status but in 2016 he stumbled across a veterans breakfast club in Southampton. He decided to reintegrate with military-minded people and found himself among similar souls with an instant connection of trust and respect, with no barriers regardless of race or gender. After attending and getting involved in events and volunteering opportunities, he decided to create something similar for Littlehampton, with help from the AFVBC network. In February 2018 the Littlehampton AFVBC Facebook group was launched with a venue to meet at every week.

‘I have always believed in being a strong advocate for people less able to represent themselves,’ he says. ‘Having been a union representative in the past, I continued to use the skillset to help those in need.’ Ian recognises the difference his volunteering makes in the local community. ‘It has encouraged other veterans to come together to create a safe space where we can all act and behave in the way we were rebuilt to be when we joined the military. Trust, camaraderie and honesty is a given and we know there is always someone that will have your back when there is a need.’

His efforts have grown into a group of local veterans that focuses on peer-to-peer support, with the additional intention of being an integral part of the community by working with and supporting trusted organisations in the area. They also liaise with various groups in other areas, placing Littlehampton on the map when people seek support. ‘We have found ourselves sharing our successful methods so other community groups can also thrive,’ Ian adds. He has also just secured funding of £30,000 for a minibus.

Ian still recognises the benefits to himself which volunteering brings. ‘Being a volunteer has a positive effect on my mental health, however time-consuming it may be, because the outcomes make me and the others feel appreciated,’ he comments. ‘For me that is enough. For other volunteers who are not as fortunate to have a family unit intact or who suffer poor physical and mental health, it gives them a sense of purpose and value.’

Ian’s relationship with VAAC has only just begun and he hopes to gain advice and information and to utilise VAAC to share their successes and working methods with other organisations. He clearly sees scope for making the volunteering experience better, too. ‘Creating informal partnerships with other local community groups to form a network that ensures that no one in need falls between the cracks would be good,’ he believes. ‘Sharing resources to avoid doubling up makes the volunteering community an efficient network. This ensures that we are all experts in our own field, signposting to each other when relevant.’

Volunteering often involves learning new skills and experiences and Ian has picked up some insights along the way. ‘One thing I have learned is that a promise is a prison. The best promise to make is that you will try. If you do that regardless of the outcome you will always be able to fulfil your promises.’

Interview by Marcus Waring. Based in West Sussex, Marcus has worked as a travel and lifestyle journalist, editor and managing editor since 2000, with work ranging from travel features for national newspapers and magazines to running editorial teams and projects. www.marcuswaring.com.