

KINGSTON COMMUNITY SHINES

Aysha Gilmore spoke to Kingston's community leaders, from doctors to food bank volunteers, to find out how they came together during the pandemic

Dear reader,

What a whirlwind couple of years.

There is no denying that the pandemic has been, and still continues to be, an extremely difficult time for everyone.

At the time of writing, 158,363 people have died of Covid, according to government figures. Since the first UK case was officially detected on January 29 2020, over 17 million people have tested positive, with the true extent of infections likely to be much higher.

We have grieved, we have craved social contact, and we have clapped for NHS workers. In one way or another, the whole world has felt the impact of Covid - and the KU community is no different.

But there have also been some good things to come out of the pandemic. We have become more resilient, and more willing to help those in need.

While it is important not to forget the difficulties people have faced, it is also good to learn from our experiences. impact., put together by the team at the Kingston Courier, focuses on a range of inspiring stories and people, from local community leaders to fashion students.

Part of a journey is the end. With the worst of the pandemic seemingly over, we hope this can inspire you to reflect on your own pandemic experience.

Yours sincerely,

Kieran Kelly

Editor of impact.



Paediatric A&E Consultant at RBKares HQ

Photo: BBC One Show

Kingston's community spirit grew during the pandemic as residents rallied to help the most vulnerable people in the borough.

This spirit has been highlighted through the formation of charities, food banks, community groups, and volunteering.

The Cambridge Road Estate community group (CREst) set up a food bank in response to the first lockdown for local residents who were unable to buy essential food items.

"It was everyone mucking in together," said Jill Preston, chair of CREst. "Someone's telly broke down the other day and in our group there was a telly going. It is all a bit hit miss at times, but we get there."

Preston said the Kingston community had always been generous. She said that last Christmas, when a box of donations left aside for presents was stolen, the community's reaction had been brilliant. Many pitched in to make up for the loss.

"The bricklayers, the residents... they all turned up with bits and pieces. We probably got more than we had in

the first place," she said.

There is also the Kingston Food Bank. This currently has 70 volunteers, taking between 800kg-1000kg of food every week.

Ian Jacobs, director of the Kingston

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Volunteering is helping me to be a better person

Food Bank, said: "In the pandemic, people had the opportunity to give their time because they were furloughed or working from home. They can actually get involved in the community and it really changes their perspective on what is going on in the community."

It has not just been those who visit the food bank who have benefited, either, with volunteers also getting something out of their work.

Naomi Foster has volunteered at the food bank since the start of the pandemic. She joined the food

bank to help with her anxiety and the friendships she developed with volunteers at the food bank have improved her mental health drastically.

"Volunteering is helping me be a better person and know where I fit in

because I really didn't know where I did before," she said.

Dr Kate Kenyon co-founded Sewing4Kingston in April 2020, also in the midst of lockdown. The group sewed around 5,000 items, including scrub masks and wash bags for hospital workers and carers.

"The community is made up of older people who felt quite useless, didn't feel they served a function in society anymore, so getting them to sew and help people, made them feel really good," she said.

The community has 1,500 members

on Facebook and was created to help front-line workers during the various lockdowns.

After witnessing the struggle in care homes and for carers in the first wave, Dr Kenyon also set up RBKares which creates kindness kits for carers and care home residents.

In addition they run projects with Kingston Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

"The pandemic made people a lot more interested in volunteering and being more aware of everyone around," said Dr Kenyon.

Kenyon said that Sewing4Kingston and RBKares gave all members a sense of community and friendship.

She said: "They are so kind. What is so nice, is some people have never met. We have people who are deaf, disabled... but people who also feel very low and it gives them something to do."

With Covid restrictions easing once again, Kenyon said she remained hopeful. She said: "I think the community spirit and checking on your neighbours will be here to stay."