



Ann Osborn and the Rural
Coffee Caravan
Picture: CHARLOTTE BOND

The Rural Coffee Caravan's leader explains how the charity plans on helping people this winter, and how the role has changed her life for the better. By Danielle Lett

ANN OSBORN: *'It's sad the work we do is needed in Suffolk'*

When Ann Osborn first moved to Suffolk 35 years ago, never did she think she would go on to lead one of the country's most quirky but effective charities.

Ann is the leader of the Rural Coffee Caravan, a charity that aims to help rurally isolated people in Suffolk, giving them access to local services and information in order to improve their lives, health and wellbeing.

Founded by the Rev Sally Fogden in 2003, the Rural Coffee Caravan was set up off the back of the work she was doing with the Farming Community Network following the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic and the effects it was having on rural communities in the region.

"Sally was working on the helplines, listening to people who were lonely and isolated and didn't know what help was available to them. Pubs and shops had closed, post offices were closing, and the places people could go for help and information were becoming fewer and fewer," she says.

"So she decided, with a few friends, to buy a caravan and take it out to the places that she identified as needing help. They went out and took with them coffee, biscuits, information, and friendship - and that's how it began."

Shortly after the caravan made its maiden voyage, Ann arrived, joining the endeavour in 2004.

"I never really had a career in my younger years, and I was fortunate that when we had a family, I was able to be a stay-at-home mum. But when the kids all grew up and went to university, I was quite lonely," she explains.

"I wanted something else to do, and it just so happened that one of the founding members was also the reception teacher at my children's school. I said I needed a job, and they were looking for a manager. I didn't have any qualifications, but they were brave enough to take a chance and on me, and we've grown the Rural Coffee Caravan from there."

Over nearly two decades Ann has dedicated her life to the charity and the people of rural Suffolk.

"It's not just a job - it's a lifestyle," she says. "We can be up at 10pm talking on our Whatsapp group - we just don't switch off, we are so passionate about it."

There are seven members of the Rural Coffee Caravan, and they all work flexibly, dedicating their time to the cause.

"It's wonderful to go out and be nice to people. Your job is to be kind to people, how could you not love that? I'm absolutely privileged to do what I do. It's given me confidence I didn't know I had - this job has been good to me, and I hope I've been good for it."

Since its inception, the Rural Coffee Caravan has been so well-received that it started to attract funding from a number of

organisation, which has since enabled it to expand to four vehicles.

"We make about 300 visits a year, so it's grown a bit," she chuckles.

The services Ann and the team offer local communities have proven to be incredibly invaluable, really providing people with a much-needed lifeline, and more importantly, a friendly ear.

"At our core are the visits themselves. We go out to places that perhaps don't have or don't use their social amenities, and we put on events that bring people together with no agenda. The idea is to bring neighbours together to spend time with each other, getting to know one another. Everyone is welcome."

The staff arrive and set up their free pop-up café and information centre, staying for a couple of hours at a time.

"We help people by giving them a route into services they may not know about, and we work with most of the support agencies in Suffolk to make sure we've got their information to hand. We can then signpost people to those services, or they can self-refer."

Just some of the services the Rural Coffee Caravan work with include Citizens Advice, Samaritans, Suffolk Libraries, Age UK, Inspire Suffolk, Dementia Adventure, OneLife Suffolk, Suffolk Mind, and many more.

And it's not just providing links to these services that the team do. Sometimes, all that's needed is a natter.

"Our volunteers try to practise active listening. Sometimes, someone says something to you and it's only the tip of the iceberg, and you know there's something else going on that you may be able to help with. We try to be kind and thoughtful, and remember what people say so when we go back, they feel like they matter because we took notice of what they said."

The group also encourages settlements to set up their own initiatives after a few visits, helping further strengthen those all-important bonds.

"We have a network called c-a-f-e which stands for 'coffee and friends events', and we help communities set these up so they can build strength and confidence within a village. Once set up, we continue to support them from a distance - it's our legacy."

C-a-f-e offers support such as information on neighbourhood safety and winter warmth initiatives, free training courses to volunteers, grant finding and funding for extra equipment or development of community spaces.

"We also have Meet Up Mondays," adds Ann.

"We work with local publicans and café owners, who offer up their businesses for a couple of hours so people who spend too much time on their own can come

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in and have a free hot drink in their lovely venue. Meet Up Mondays have to be in commercial venues, not village halls, as they're open every day of the week and offer a different experience to a community event.

"Once a Mondayer has a bit more confidence, we find they come in more any day of the week. We find these events often bring out men who won't come to community events. They've gone down a storm since we've started doing them - we call it 'Meet Up Monday magic'.

Everything was going great for the Rural Coffee Caravan - until early 2020.

Lockdown struck, and threw everything into chaos. Vital services across the globe had to close their doors due to social distancing measures, and the team had to get creative and adapt.

"It absolutely turned everything on its head," explains Ann.

"There are fantastic infrastructure organisations in Suffolk that picked up the big stuff straight away, but we had to think of ways we could still help our villages from a distance."

Putting their heads together, Ann and the group came up with a number of ideas that still allowed people to get the support they needed - all while still maintaining social distancing guidelines.

"Not everyone is online, so we had to be very cognizant. One of the things we set up was something called 'Backyard Buddies', where we encouraged people to remove a fence panel in their back gardens so they could sit two metres apart and still have a coffee and a chat. Or on Thursdays, when everyone was clapping for the NHS, we encouraged people to have a drink on their driveways while keeping two metres apart. We called it 'physically distanced, but not socially distanced'."

Ann and her team also set up 'telephone trees', so villagers could speak to each other over the phone during lockdown; and took flowers and care packages to people they knew were going to be alone.

"We were as creative as possible and tried to make ourselves useful. We used our vans to take donations to and from food banks, and one of our members helped in a vaccination clinic."

Thankfully however, Ann and co came out the other side, and are able to continue their efforts throughout hamlets, villages and settlements across the county.

As anyone in the charity sector will tell you, people will always need help. And now more so than ever, due to the looming cost of living crisis.

"It's harder for us to get funding now, and it's harder for people to survive. People have told us they won't put their heating on this winter, which is a huge worry. It's not sustainable. That's why we're asking village halls and churches if they're thinking about opening up this winter as warm spaces. They could open up once a week for a half day, offering free tea and coffee, and a space for people

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The Rural Coffee Caravan is always there with a cuppa and cake – a friendly ear



ABOVE: Ann and her colleagues visit some of Suffolk's most rural and isolated communities

LEFT: Ann Osborn and the rest of the team provide rural communities with advice, support, and information

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND



to get warm, and we'll put it on the map on our website. If we can find enough people across the county to provide a network of warm spaces, it'll be an important initiative."

In addition, the Rural Coffee Caravan is hoping to raise money in order to buy and distribute slow cookers, fleeces, and electric blankets to those in Suffolk who need them the most to help them combat this year's winter.

Inspired by a 2020 fundraising scheme saw she in Yorkshire, Ann says: "If you've got a hearty meal inside of you, you'll feel healthier. And children can't learn on an empty stomach, we want to raise money for these families."

Previously, Ann has organised fundraisers that have raised in excess of £20,000 which allowed her to buy 700 slow cookers - but times are proving just as challenging for the donors as well as those in need of donations.

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playing a board game. We'll put it on the map on our website, and if we can find enough people across the county to provide a network of warm spaces, it'll be an important initiative because it also offers so much potential for people to help each other."

No matter what life throws at the Rural Coffee Caravan - whether that be a pandemic, a cost of living crisis, or just general loneliness, Ann understands the importance of the work she does.

"When I first moved to Suffolk, I was extremely alone, so I could identify with what people were going through. Then my dad got dementia, and it was a really isolating and difficult existence. If you're bereaved or stuck in a village with no transport, it can be desperately lonely at times."

"One lady told me she had a couple friends before we started, but now she has 30. She feels so much safer, and her social life and overall quality of life has improved beyond measure. It's sad the work we do is needed. If anyone were to ask where we'd be in five years, I'd say 'not existing', but sadly that isn't the case, and the need for us appears to be greater than ever. If we're still funded, we'll still be here."

To find out more about the Rural Coffee Caravan, and how you can help, visit ruralcoffee caravan.org.uk

