

I was inspired to write this column by some amazing people I met last week. They were ordinary men and women, some of whom had retired, others who had not, joined by one common purpose – they were volunteers.

This week is Volunteers Week and it is a great opportunity to not only celebrate the enormous contribution that those who already give up their time make but also to inspire new people to the volunteering cause. Millions of people help out in their community every day, week, month and year with no expectation of any financial return and many do so without even thinking they are volunteers, for example the football coaches, trustees and school governors. But without these volunteers society would be much worse off. In 2015, volunteering contributed more than £22bn to the UK economy. This is about 1.2% of GDP. In 2016/17, 19.8 million (37%) people in the UK volunteered formally at least once a year and 11.9 million (22%) of people did so at least once a month. Yet it is not a one way offering.

There has been an enormous amount of research about the positive impact volunteering can have on the volunteer's health and wellbeing. In fact, one of the top tips I use during media interviews on my role as the Loneliness Minister is to try volunteering. There are hundreds of thousands volunteering opportunities within almost any sector or vocation you can think of. I cannot think of anything that a volunteer couldn't help support, from working within the hospital, reading books to children in schools through to supporting our local wildlife and teaching others a skill you were once or still are proficient in yourself. We have a week to celebrate and promote volunteering but really every week is volunteering week because the contribution it makes to our everyday lives should never be underestimated.