

Grant Boosts Service Access And Quality Of Life For Gateshead's Visually Impaired

Dozens of visually impaired Gateshead residents are getting better access to support services, and a better quality of life, thanks to a £1,000 grant from Newcastle Building Society.

The Gateshead Visually Impaired Forum has launched a new volunteer 'buddying' scheme, which aims to give Forum members an individual contact with whom they can speak about the services and support they need to live their everyday lives.

The Newcastle grant has paid for specialist training for the 50 volunteer buddies, many of whom are visually impaired, and Forum chairman John Storey, who is registered blind himself, believes it has already made a big difference to the lifestyles and confidence of everyone involved.

He says:

"When someone loses their sight, especially when they've been able to see throughout their life, it's natural that their confidence can take a jolt, and previously simple tasks, like shopping, using public transport or even simply leaving the house, can become too much to contemplate."

"We saw a gap in the existing service provision for a one-to-one support scheme of this type, where we would put people in touch with volunteers who had a detailed personal understanding of the participant's circumstances, and the results we've had so far have been terrific."

Established in 2003 and based at Bensham Hospital, the Forum provides a way for blind and visually impaired people in the area to work with the local authority, public transport providers and other policy and strategic bodies around their particular needs.

John Storey continues:

"Once an individual's needs have been identified and the right sort of support structures and services put in place, the results you see can be amazing – worry and doubt is regularly replaced by a real 'can do' attitude and people get the confidence back to get on with doing everything they want to do."

"Our buddying scheme wouldn't have been feasible without the training that the Newcastle grant has funded, and their support is making a positive difference to the lives of dozens of people across our community."

Amanda Douglas, branch manager at Newcastle Building Society's Gateshead branch, adds:

"Being able to support an organisation that does so much good work across our local area is a real pleasure, and their community-based approach very much matches the ethos and character of the Newcastle."

Newcastle Building Society supports dozens of charities and worthwhile causes across the region every year, through the Newcastle Building Society fund with the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland.

Projects need to be based within an area where the Newcastle has a branch presence, and grant application forms can be downloaded from the Newcastle Building Society's website (www.newcastle.co.uk). For further general information, please call Su Legg at the Community Foundation on 0191 222 0945.

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