



# December 2024

## Chat Central News

Chat Central is a National Lottery Funded project where we help people to find others with similar interests, to have fun, get out of the house, join in with a hobby, get involved with their community and to find new friends, tackling loneliness and isolation in all its forms in Coventry.

We help people to explore their interests and start doing the things they want to do. Our support is tailored to the person's needs and can be anything from a one-off visit to us for information to longer term support. We have a range of activities including welcome sessions, walks, arts and crafts, yoga, pool, bingo, group volunteering and health talks. Our aim is to reach-out and help anyone in Coventry who is 18 and over, especially if they are bereaved, retired, a new parent, just out of hospital, dealing with an illness or condition that limits their ability to get out, recently arrived in the city or just out of practice with socialising. We help people to:

**meet new friends**

**rediscover interests**

**Or find new ones**

**build confidence**

**volunteer**

We've had an incredibly busy but fun and productive few months at Chat Central. We've partnered with more organisations that ever as we've hosted mini fairs introducing Chat Central participants to many organisations who offer services and projects to get involved with. We've enjoyed festivals and exploring Coventry's rich heritage together as well as trying a range of sports, crafts and musical sessions. Our weekly litter picks and group volunteering sessions have continued to give participants the chance to make a positive difference to the community whilst getting out and meeting likeminded people. Read on to hear all about it!



## Enjoying Coventry's Parks

On a glorious summer's day, Chat Central enjoyed Bands in the Park at Spencer Park. The brass band entertained the crowd with a huge range of hits from Abba to hits from musicals like Evita, with an amazing James Bond montage and playing of the National Anthem to end the show. There was a wonderful atmosphere with people up dancing and enjoying being with others to appreciate the music.

Later in the month Chat Central visited Coombe Abbey, taking in the beauty of the historic woodlands and gardens. We enjoyed playing games in the arboretum with lots of new members meeting each other for the first time. As autumn arrived, we also visited the War Memorial Park. Whilst it wasn't quite the weather for playing bowls, it was great to catch up over a hot drink and find out about all the activities you can enjoy at the park.



## Sharing Coventry's Culture and Heritage

There was a real buzz around Coventry for the Heritage Days in September and Chat Central made the most of everything on offer! We explored the Blitz Museum before enjoying a powerful dance performance, Black Victorians, in the Cathedral ruins as part of the StreetsofCov festival. The Cathedral also hosted the Harvest Festival and it was fabulous to see the Priory Gardens filled with colour, music and people for the Dame Goodyvers Daye procession. Chat Central participants also enjoyed visiting the Weaver's House, learning about the weaving process and what it would have been like to live and work in this restored medieval house.



Chat Central responded to a shout out for volunteers for Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's River Festival which was held at FarGo Village. Once we'd helped set up for the event, we were able to enjoy everything the festival had to offer; live music, creative crafts, theatre performances, singing workshops, guided nature walks and hugs from their adorable otter mascot, Lady Good-Diver! Thanks to our volunteers who supported at the event.



In October we welcomed back local historian Scott Duffin for a walk of Coventry's medieval city wall. We followed the 2-mile route where the wall and its twelve gates once stood, taking in Cook Street Gate and Swanswell Gate and finding remains of the wall along the way. As always, Scott's enthusiasm for the history of our city captivated everyone as he described what the wall would have been like and told tales of significant events that took place along it before it was demolished in 1662.



## Minnie Hands Make Light Work!

Chat Central loves to introduce participants to the joy of volunteering and connect them to organisations across the city. In September we returned to Samaritans Purse to help them prepare for their annual Christmas shoebox appeal. The session involved unpacking and counting donated items, in this case almost 2000 cuddly Minnie Mouse toys, donated for children overseas who would otherwise not have a gift to open on Christmas Day.

A team of Chat Central participants supported Clothing Coventry by sorting items of clothing that had been donated to the clothing bank. Once the items are checked they are organised into ages and sizes which can then be distributed to those who have been referred to the charity based in Hillfields.

Chat Central also returned to Team Springboard's Zen Allotment in Chapelfields. The community allotment gives participants the opportunity to reconnect with nature whilst supporting the growing and harvesting of fruits and vegetables that are shared with food banks and charities across the city. One participant, Dan, commented on his first group volunteering session at the allotment, **"I really enjoyed myself, getting to learn new things and what they do and ever since then I've been going back to the allotment each week. It's changed my mental health a lot. I'm getting out a lot more than I was. I like being out in nature, hearing the birds tweet. I've met some decent people who I've become friends with."**

More recently we promoted a group volunteering session with Carriers of Hope at their Food Hub. Participants helped to set up the social supermarket and distribute donations. There was a great sense of

welcoming and community amongst the volunteers and participants felt happy to have helped so many people in such a practical way.



## Chat Central Keeps Active

At Chat Central we are always keen to deliver activities that boost wellbeing and so we have continued to offer a variety of sessions that enable participants to keep active. We partnered with No Strings Badminton who provided the equipment and expertise so that we could enjoy playing badminton at Sidney Stringer. For many of us we hadn't played badminton since we'd been at school, and it was a really enjoyable way to get us up and moving!

We welcomed back Carol who kindly volunteered her time and led a Tai Chi session. Sometimes known as 'meditation in motion' this gentle form of exercise is great for maintaining strength, flexibility and balance with many participants commenting on how relaxing and calming they found the session.

Mandy also returned with her energetic and uplifting 'Dance Energise' session. As with all sessions, seated options were available and complete beginners are welcome. Everyone enjoyed moving to the music with maracas and pom poms for added fun!

Chat Central always aims to introduce participants to groups and clubs with affordable opportunities that they can go on to attend independently, so it was wonderful to welcome Beth Storie from Coventry City Council's Adult Education. She spoke to participants about the wide variety of classes available throughout the city, as well as offering a taster session in Lyrical Contemporary Dance.



## Thanks to The National Lottery as it celebrates its 30th anniversary

Huge thanks and congratulations to The National Lottery, who celebrated 30 years in November. Chat Central got involved with the celebrations with a series of crossed finger selfies during their week of activities. The crossed finger is a symbol of the game but also a symbol of hope.

The Chat Central Project, which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, has been helping Coventry people combat loneliness for the last three years. By trying out new experiences, becoming community active and gaining friendships along the way, over 80% of participants have reported feeling more self-confident in recently conducted research.

Pictured below are our litter picking group, Beth Storie from Adult Education and George, John and Winnie the dog from Sky Blues in the Community. Sky Blues in the Community are also funded by The National Lottery and joined us to tell participants about other projects they could get involved with and the amazing work that Winnie does in the community.



## Give it a Go Thursdays!

Our 'Give it a Go Thursdays' offer the perfect opportunity to try or learn something new in a friendly, supportive and relaxed environment. We regularly meet on Thursdays at the United Reformed Church Hall, where there's always the chance for a catch up and a cuppa. Our wonderful volunteer John led a songwriting session in which he shared his musical knowledge and supported participants to write and record a song. Katherine Fear, who leads a singing for wellbeing session at The Albany Theatre, also led a sing-along. After some vocal warmups we were soon harmonising to tunes such as Scarborough Fair and King of the Road. One participant commented, **"What a wonderful afternoon! It's been so lovely singing all those old songs together. I've thoroughly enjoyed it."**

We also welcomed Creative Kindness and RE(YOU)S to our Christmas craft afternoon. There was a fabulous atmosphere as the festive tunes played whilst we created angels, snowflakes, Christmas cards and tree decorations. It was a wonderful opportunity for Chat Central participants to find out about the sessions which Creative Kindness run in libraries throughout the city, creating crafts with positive messages which are given away.

Natasha from RE(YOU)S described the community interest company that she recently set up as being all about community, connection, and sustainability. RE(YOU)S bring people, businesses, and communities together to share resources and so Natasha was able to support us in creating beautiful tree decorations from old wool and beads that had been donated.



## Mini Fairs to promote Support, Advice and Volunteering

Our 'Support and Advice' mini fair included stalls led by Mind, Red Card Gambling, National Energy Action (NEA), #Cov Connects, Change Grow Live and Carers Trust. Representatives from each organisation gave a short introduction to the services they provide and then participants were able to have more in depth discussions with services they were interested in.

Chat Central aims to support people by getting them involved with their community, so sharing Voluntary Action Coventry's new community engagement platform 'Get Involved Coventry' at our 'Introduction to Volunteering' mini fair was the perfect way for people to find out about volunteering roles throughout the city. We also welcomed Healthwatch, Improving Lives, Carers Trust, RE(YOU)S, Albany Theatre and St. Francis Employability so that participants could talk directly to organisations recruiting for volunteers.



## Celebrating International Volunteers Day with Chat Central's Litter Pickers

International Volunteers Day (Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> December) gave Chat Central the perfect opportunity to say a huge thank you to our dedicated litter pickers who meet up every Friday, come rain or shine, to help keep the streets of Coventry clean.

Over the past twelve months the litter picking group have welcomed 27 volunteers to join the weekly walks, together giving over 500 hours of volunteering and collecting an estimated 350 bags of litter.

Following the last litter pick of 2024 the group caught up over a coffee and talked about why they enjoy volunteering and what impact it has had upon them. Emma explained, **"I joined the Chat Central litter pick to meet new people, to get out and get some fresh air and exercise. I've made some good friends now and we talk outside the weekly meet up."**

Ermias, who has been litter picking since he moved to Coventry also shared his thoughts on volunteering. **"I've made friends and it's helped me a lot since I've moved here. I've learnt many things about Coventry and it's a good chance to practice my English and communication skills."**

If you haven't given volunteering a go yet, why not make it your New Years resolution for 2025?



## Christmas Celebrations with Chat Central

Coventry Building Society kindly gave Chat Central some tickets for their One Day at Christmas event which was held at the CBS Arena. Guests enjoyed a delicious three course meal and there was an array of entertainment to be enjoyed. Prabha thoroughly enjoyed the event and said, **"We felt very privileged and honoured to have attended the great Christmas event. The food, hospitality and entertainment were incredible...it gave us an insight into the different groups and organisations that attended... the sheer love and appreciation of all things good and celebrating the moment together."**

We were delighted to welcome guitar group, Animato to our 'Jingle Mingle' at the United Reformed Church. They entertained us with their beautiful playing of Christmas classics and led us in a specially written Chat Central 12 Days of Christmas. Hear the final version via our website or by following this link.

<https://youtu.be/RGJTIJTdqiQ>



## Goodbye and Good Luck to Sarah!

Chat Central is very sad to be saying goodbye to Sarah Taylor at the end of this year. Sarah has worked as the Project Assistant for the past two years whilst studying for her master's in social research and will be taking up a policy research role in the charity sector. We are so grateful for all the incredible support she has offered to participants and the amazing work she has done behind the scenes. Sarah will be sadly missed, but we wish her every happiness and success in the next chapter of her life.



## Merry Christmas!

Chat Central would like to express our thanks and festive wishes to all the organisations we have worked with this year, to the volunteers who have led and supported sessions and to anyone who has supported Chat Central by referring people to the project. We'd also like to thank our participants for making Chat

Central such a welcoming and supportive place for everyone who enters through our doors and wish you all a Happy Christmas and all the very best for the year ahead.

Facebook is a great way to stay up to date with Chat Central activities. Check out videos to find out more about our [Friday walks](#) and [how the whole project works](#).



Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ChatCentralVAC>

## Find out more:



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**Voluntary Action** Coventry

