

ENG

IVCO 2024 THINK PIECE

**BUILDING AND SUSTAINING
CONNECTIONS FOR CHANGE:
VOLUNTEERING FOR
SOLIDARITY IN GATESHEAD**

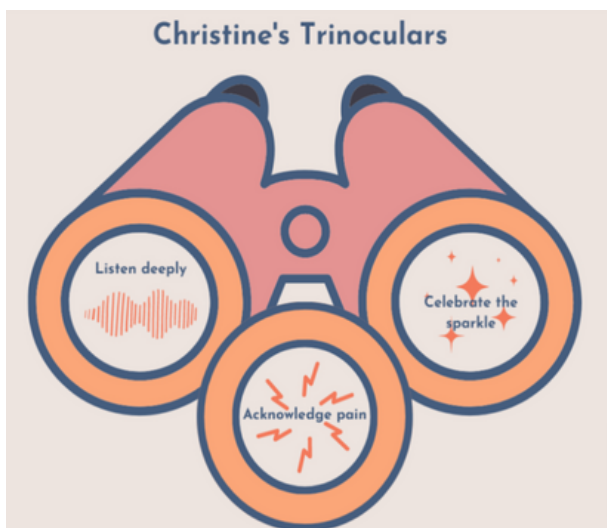
Christine Frazer

Gateshead: 'headland or hill frequented by (wild) goats'. It was Saint Bede, in his 'Ecclesiastical History of England', who first mentions this place in the North East of England in 1190. There are not many wild goats dotted around these days, but what Gateshead does have is a strong link to the people and stories that have gone before us. This town, directly connected to Newcastle by the iconic bridges crossing the Tyne river, has grown to become a diverse and colourful community with rich heritage and history and a safe haven for newcomers, particularly asylum-seekers. It is my home and I love it, but it's far from perfect. Many here are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, rising waiting lists for health services, rising unemployment, high levels of child poverty, un-acknowledged trauma and grief from the effects of the global pandemic, and one of the highest suicide rates in the UK. It often feels like a place that wants to thrive and grow but is continually being knocked down – calling each of us to be part of the changes we expect to see.

I am proud to be a Gateshead Community Bridgebuilder.¹ Through building and sustaining relationships, we seek to support social change and build community power. At its core, ours is a story of solidarity. It is a story of hope and the power of imagination. It is a story about the changes I have seen in a community empowered to make their own decisions and change their own lives. However, a good relationship has the ability to change both parties, so this is also a story about how I have changed; how I now see concepts of volunteering, solidarity and servant leadership from a different perspective and through a new lens.

A Shift in Focus: Putting on My 'Trinoculars'

We see what we are conditioned to look for. My previous professional experience had led me to always think about how to best meet needs and deliver solutions. We provide, they receive. If there is time to go the extra mile and build good relationships, that's a bonus.



After years of working from this perspective, the transactional model of volunteering and supporting marginalised communities was the only way I knew of to support and care for others. I now see things differently, recognising relationships as the first order goal, and discovering my 'trinoculars'. I currently lead a community-based project in two Gateshead villages (Teams and Dunston) to empower the residents to make change happen for themselves.²

(1) The Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders use their community connections, their lived experience and their insight to facilitate community-based projects and activities in the region, [more information here](#).

(2) The project is called [TADA - Teams and Dunston Alive](#) and it is funded by the [Lankelly Chase Foundation](#).

I had a lot of information about my community challenges, particularly after working as a local mutual aid volunteer. The truth is that I saw Teams and Dunston through my lens and, despite having a great understanding of where I lived, I realised that I had to broaden my focus. To walk alongside these communities, staying true to the principles of justice, equity and love I needed ‘trinocular’ lenses to listen deeply, recognise and acknowledge the grief and trauma and celebrate the sparkle. But what does that look like in reality?

Last year a storm came to Teams and Dunston, it was the worst storm I can remember – slates were falling off roofs and garden furniture blown around the town. At 4am, my first impulse was to request money from my team members and drive to the local supermarket to buy torches, blankets, food parcels and batteries to help the community. The team messaged back straight away pondering if it wasn't the best decision. I was very surprised – of course my community needed these things, what did they know? My colleague suggested using social media to communicate the community centre would be open from 6am and then, if anyone came down, we could write a list of what was needed and go shopping together later. I stomped down to the community centre in the rain. I'll never forget the mobilisation of the community that morning. No one came in for torches and blankets, some came for tea and coffee and a breakfast after their sleepless night, but most needed company and reassurance that whatever the damage, there was support available. We worked with the council and set up a helpline for storm repairs. I realised that, instead of designing a plan post-storm and making the community follow it, we rather needed to create a space to connect.

Realising that who you know is more important than what you know

As a Bridgebuilder, we work alongside volunteers, local council, community members, business owners, local charities and the universities to learn from each other about how to improve our villages, recognising that a web of support is intrinsic to what we do. Margaret at the Teams Life Centre knows that she has excellent links with food banks and accesses funds for food parcels and cookery courses. Angela at the Activity Centre in Dunston knows the local children and their families – the centre has a sensory room, soft play and staff have an excellent knowledge of youth and community. Chris at Bensham Grove Community Centre works through the arts, inspiring local people to reach their potential and upskill to learn new ways of expressing themselves and finding employment. Tapping into each other's strengths also means supporting communities to build their own resilience through threads of solidarity that are woven together to form a platform for collective growth.

(3) The “Bridge Builders Handbook” is a resource guide to thinking like a mediator and building bridges at the community level, [access it here](#).

In this work, deep relationship building is key, and investing time in people is of paramount importance. We recognise the importance of valuing the work of the volunteers who walk alongside us. This may be through providing educational training or giving groups or individuals the opportunities to manage change in their community.

I see now that the landscape of caring communities is vast and complex. Some volunteers are always there and come daily to support and help, others are more transient who support around a theme, or an incident. They are all incredibly important and necessary – and many of them resent needing a title or a formal ‘volunteer’ role.

Relational working is not easy, and we recognise the groundbreaking work that generations of people and organisations around the world have been doing with marginalised communities to overcome complex challenges of an uncertain future. The difference we are making in Gateshead involves connecting people and creating processes that empower communities to make decisions to change their futures. We don’t always get it right, but we do encourage learning and see challenges as opportunities to make creative change. In my experience, this involves looking differently at the roles and forms of volunteering happening at community level, seeing the sparkle, building bridges, and putting relationships first.

About the Author

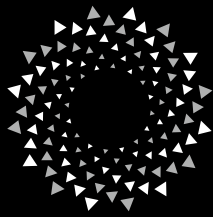


Christine Frazer

Christine Frazer is a Gateshead Community Bridgebuilder, working at Bensham Grove Community Centre in the North East of England. Christine trained as a teacher, specialising in working with children with special educational needs and disabilities and spent 9 years as a seconded teacher for the European Schools in Brussels, Belgium. She began her volunteering journey in Belgium when she worked alongside the UN on The Rights of the Child document, challenging procedures and policies for children with disabilities across Europe. She also volunteered regularly in Brussels organising arts festivals, bringing communities together to celebrate around a common theme. Christine is now working alongside communities in Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, focusing on a Lankelly Chase-funded grassroots enquiry into the devolution of decision-making in marginalised communities. She collaborates closely with the Relationships Project, an international group of people exploring the benefits and challenges of working in relational ways.

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