

## **Helen Armitstead**

### **CAPITAL Volunteer (Facilitating Community Groups, Events & Membership Support)**

#### **What is your name and what do you do at CAPITAL?**

My name is Helen and I volunteer for Capital. I do lots of different things but mostly I work with the community groups in Bognor.

#### **What's your experience been like as a CAPITAL volunteer?**

So I didn't actually want to start volunteering. I was quite depressed when I started and the only reason I applied to volunteer with Capital is because it was an online internet forum so I didn't have to talk to anyone. Which is very amusing but I'm incredibly glad that I did because it, this is going to sound very melodramatic but it has changed my life for the better massively. It has allowed me to do things that I've always been able to do but because of my mental health I have not been able to do them long term because there was not enough support.

Whereas at Capital you say oh I'd like to do this and they go we'll support you and if there's something you find difficult people will genuinely support you rather than doing it because they have to or saying they will but then not when you're not able to do something. So it's made a huge difference to me and my confidence and my trust in other people.

#### **What makes CAPITAL unique & what do you enjoy about CAPITAL?**

What makes Capital unique is that it is peer-led and that sounds like a catchphrase but it's not a catchphrase.

It genuinely means that when you walk through the doors you feel safe. When I walked through the doors for the first meeting at Capital I can still remember it I felt relaxed and safe and that's not something I felt for many years and all of the training that external companies do to teach each other to look after each other, to teach you to look after yourself, to teach people how to support each other, to teach people how to talk about mental health, all of it's done automatically at Capital because it's peer-led and it's fascinating you don't have to explain yourself to someone. You also know that if you do say I'm having a wobble at the moment, I'm having a bad day, no one will make a big deal out of it.

It doesn't become an embarrassing medical problem that you have to explain. It doesn't make them look at you any differently. They just go oh I know how you feel do you want anything no oh okay cool and I've never ever ever had that anywhere.

The complete lack of judgement and the kindness it's a genuine natural kindness because everybody had been through something similar.

## **What will the impact be in losing CAPITAL in the community?**

So from a personal point of view losing Capital would make me feel like life isn't fair because I was just starting to feel confident that it wouldn't be taken away and it is going to be so I'm very angry because I feel powerless and I'm also very very sad that the people who are meant to listen to us and provide us as people with mental health conditions a service are ignoring us and they are ignoring us and I thought it had got better over the last 10 years because there'd been a huge input into listening to people with lived experience having them on interviews having them on panels having them the peer support in hospitals and they are not doing that anymore the government and the NHS don't want that what they're doing is taking the name of peer support and whacking that on something that is not lived experience it is a kind of tokenism and it's offensive and there is nothing I can do it makes me feel like I have often felt in lots of situations with doctors and mental health professionals and just people in general that they do not listen to me they do not value my opinion because I have a mental health label wrapped around my neck and I think it is very short-sighted because it will cost the cost the NHS money because people will end up in hospital because of we don't have they don't have the support that we offer anymore and as far as the community groups go it's absolutely heartbreaking watching the people that I see twice a week every week knowing that they know it may possibly end that we're all desperately trying to raise funds to keep it open I just think that the service that capital offers is quite niche it's very small we cater to people who have been through the mental health system who have tried other charities and do not feel safe there and they feel safe at capital and if we lose that there are people that come to our groups and that is all they do all week there are people that come to our groups that have said to me that's what got me through last winter and I can't do anything about it I can't help them because no one will listen.

## **What would you like to say to Commissioners?**

If I had something to say to the commissioners it would be why have you not come to see any of the smaller charities in West Sussex why have you made this decision without talking to the people that you're making the decision for and what you are doing is you're invalidating the experiences of your service users by ignoring us and I am not the only person that thinks this and capital as a charity is not the only organisation that thinks this you are taking away people's because you have a mandate that was handed down by someone above you above you above you and that person has absolutely no idea what it's like to need those services so... think again.

## **How does Lived Experience make a difference?**

I think the community groups that capital runs the peer support that capital runs the lived experience advisory group the capital runs they work as a connected whole so you have people who are in hospital who then get better enough to be discharged they are then handed over to our community groups the members then have the option to slowly at their own pace with a huge amount of support grow into becoming volunteers or becoming staff in some cases or having their

voice heard so capital is set up as a system that is basically meant to support people to help themselves and that is what lived experience does it lived experiences allows people to go at their own pace because the other person that they're talking to has been there and they know what it's like to be pushed too hard they know what it's like to be given a lot of information that doesn't make any sense that they're not able to handle they know what it's like to feel like a burden they know what it's like to think I could have done this last year but I can't do it now that's what lived experience does it doesn't belittle people it gives people the power to help themselves without being told what to do and we are going to lose that.