

## **Commission Focus - Alistair Burt**

*This month we talk to Alistair Burt MP about his role at the Commission on the Future of Volunteering*



Alistair is MP for North East Bedfordshire, Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government and a member of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering.

### **Q Please could you tell us about your role at the Commission and how you came to be involved?**

**A** I believe David Cameron suggested that I should be approached to take on the role of a Commissioner. My role in the Local Government and Communities Team is built on a number of years of active involvement in community life, and the holding of a number of positions connected with this during my Parliamentary career. I jumped at the chance, being given an inkling as to who was likely to be involved under the leadership of Baroness Julia Neuberger who is a most admired figure on all sides of the House of Commons.

### **Q What does it mean to you to be part of the Commission team?**

**A** I am delighted to be involved with such a knowledgeable group of people. They come from all different aspects of the charitable and volunteering world, and their experience is extensive. I think we complement each other well, and there must be very few areas of the world of volunteering that someone on the Commission has not had a close relationship with.

### **Q What excites you about the current landscape of volunteering?**

**A** There seems to have been a real sea change in recent years about the contribution which volunteering can make to the community. I think there has been some outdated notions of who constituted a volunteer, which the evidence we are collecting shows to be out of touch with what is happening on the ground.

The well spring for volunteering can come from many sources, but at its heart is the sense that giving time to others is a reward in itself. I

think there is also a much wider range of services being provided by volunteers than in the past, and the question is just how far can this go? That throws up some perfectly proper challenges, so that the nature of volunteering is not undermined by extension, and it is just this sort of question that makes the work of the Commission timely and interesting.

**Q Which aspect of volunteering do you think is particularly exciting at the moment?**

**A** I began as a volunteer at University by giving students legal advice, which was an appropriate thing for a law student to do! Following university I became a Volunteer at the Bury Lads Club, helping to run a youth project for a very lively group of boys in the town. These early experiences gave me a good grass roots sense of commitment from the wide variety of people I came into contact with who were busy working both in those sectors and in a number of others.

As time has gone on I have appreciated that the role of a volunteer, and particularly that of a trustee have got more onerous. There seems to be so many more things to take into account, and whilst it is always right to have a good appreciation of the health and safety of those we are working with, at times the frustration of those with practical experience of volunteering is very tangible and they can become worn down by the pressures.

**Q Please could you tell us about you have gained from your role as trustee and patron for the many charities and organisations you are involved with or have been involved with?**

**A** I have benefited hugely from my contact with a variety of local agencies in my constituency, and I do not think people should forget that for the vast majority of people involved in politics theirs is also a volunteer pastime!

Almost all of my party workers are volunteers, and their time given up to public service through politics is as valuable to anybody else's.

**Q How do you think we can engage people in volunteering - whether they be younger, or older, or from BME communities?**

**A** Firstly I think we need to recognise and affirm those very many people who already engaged in volunteering. Many people volunteer and perhaps do not know they are doing it!

Secondly we should understand what makes people volunteer, and not try and make them fit into moulds of service delivery created by others.

Thirdly we should be continually upbeat about what volunteers do. I

think their individual stories, told to other people, are often very moving and uplifting and a real encouragement to others. It is much more sensible that volunteers encourage each other, than anyone in authority trying to tell people what to do. Volunteers have a great story, and we should be helping them tell their story more widely. This applies right across our very mixed and varied community in this country, and it is important to stress constantly that our volunteers come through every section of British society.

**Q What makes you smile in the morning?**

**A** What makes me smile in the morning? Home, family, dog, a win for Bury FC overnight and my running shoes sitting waiting for me ready to hit the road.