

First episode - Bolton Lions member Mandy Broadbent discusses the continued success of the club's annual Christmas Toy Appeal, and fundraising experts Amanda Horton-Mastin and Nick Gardner share tips to access grant funding

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer

Hello, everybody, welcome to the very first episode of Step Forward and Volunteer, a brand new podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Ben Mouncer and thank you so much for tuning in. It's a real pleasure to have you with us. Our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, offering them a platform to share their stories, and hopefully inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer. I'm delighted to say that for the first part of episode one, I am joined by Mandy Broadbent. Now more to come from Mandy in a minute. But because this is a new podcast, we want your help in getting the word out there. Tell your family, tell your friends, if you're a lions member, why not let other members of your club know about the podcast and how easy it is to listen. All you need to do is either go on the website, www.lionsclubs.co, where you'll see a link to the podcast. Or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts. You can listen on demand, or subscribe, so that you never miss an episode. We'll be publishing a new programme on the second Wednesday of every month. And we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can. Right let's crack on with it. This is something of a fundraising special. A little bit later on, we'll be hearing from experts, Amanda Horton-Mastin and Nick Gardner on grant funding and the best advice they would give to fundraisers. But first we're going to get into the festive spirit this December with Mandy and the Bolton Lions Christmas Toy Appeal.

So Mandy, I know you're heavily involved with Bolton Lions Christmas Toy Appeal. Tell us a bit about the history of the appeal.

Well, it's been going on now for oh 39 years. So it started back in 1982, when the members of the club, knew the community. And I think that's how I'd put it really. So we knew people that were in need. And we knew that Christmas and Christmas still can be a difficult time for families because there's a cost involved, and so the club members really got to know members of the community. They were around that time, 40 families you would say that

they were in need of support. And at that time, it wasn't just toys, it was hampers as well. And then as time evolved, we really come to focus on toys and as the years moved on, it went from 40 and moved up to roundabout to 200 families. And then over the years, it's just grown and grown.

Why do you think Mandy that it's been so popular and has grown so much? I mean, maybe tell the listeners? How big the appeal is now and how many children you ultimately make happy with this project?

Well last year, we supported 792 families, with 1571 children, and to some extent each year, the appeal has grown and involved working with more organisations, in terms of those that we support with families. So they could be children's services, schools, and social services, looked after children, a whole mix of different children from different backgrounds that we're supporting through the appeal that come through organisations, as well as individual families approaching us. So we've really become known in the town as the organisation that supports families with gifts of toys at Christmas.

And that's a really great thing, Mandy, and as I said, this is a real collective effort, isn't it? It's right at the heart of the community and it brings together businesses, charities, schools, and I know the local media provided a lot of support for the appeal as well.

Yes they do and that's going back from the earlier days, Bolton News, always kind of worked alongside Bolton Lions. And they weren't just a partner for drop off of toys. But it was back, as we'd say, perhaps in the days when people wrote a letter. So they'd write letters, and they submit them to the Bolton News, and those would be passed on to the club. And what's happened over time is that, you know, that's been replaced by emails and phone calls, and working through different partnering organisations, and that's just grown and grown. So the partnerships have evolved over time and we've embraced, different forms of technology and ways of communicating with us. But the appeal is still as needed today, as it was then, just on a much bigger scale.

And because of that, Mandy, there's obviously so much value, valued in this. And the scale of it as well, which we're recording at the beginning of December, Mandy, how is this year's appeal gone? Maybe talk a little bit about that?

Well this year, oh, it's going very well, we've been extremely fortunate. And around four weeks ago, we were approached by Bolton Marketplace, which is our shopping centre, to see if we wanted a shop. So we've taken over a shop for the receipt of toys. So it's now become almost like a place to drop off, a place to come and talk to us. And it's everything Christmas inside. So you can come and meet Santa there. It's beautifully laid out, full of Christmas trees all about what we do, not just at Christmas but at other times of the year. So it's really decked out, but it's a place that has given us that way to meet people, individuals coming in, dropping off toys, we've got children dropping off toys, we've got parents, grandparents, individuals, and then there's the opportunity for people to come in and talk to us about what we do, as a club.

And I guess Mandy, having that physical location really brings it all together for you, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. Because in many ways, we were kind of working with, as we've named this shop as the South Pole. So the North Pole we see is one that we are working behind the scenes, and the South Pole has actually given us that physical way of meeting the public, and really saying who we are. We're very fortunate because we're joined by Bolton FM, our radio station, and they are physically outside the shop. So they're playing tunes for us, which again, engages with the public. We've got stickers, balloons, with everything to get out. We've very fortunate. We've been joined by Bolton school students, and we've got them dressed up in the lion costume and engaging with the public. So it's been yeah, it's been fantastic, a fantastic addition to this year's appeal.

Really good stuff Mandy, and we sent you out with the microphone, didn't we to grab some time with some of those young volunteers involved in the toy appeal. We're going to hear from Rishi and Neerav, but first here's Anika, Alara and Megan.

Anika - So we're helping out with the Bolton lions Christmas toy appeal. We love Christmas a lot, and growing up we were very fortunate to receive lots of toys at this time of year. But unfortunately, not all kids out there have the opportunity. And we're very grateful that we did. So this is why we want to help all these young children out there have a fun Christmas filled with lots of toys and festivities.

Alara - And we all see Christmas as a time of year for family and friends, regardless of your age, or religion or where you're from, it's a time to come together. And that's why Bolton lions is great for us because it gives us the opportunity to spread this message to other people should they too can enjoy Christmas.

Megan - We always look forward to Saturday's volunteering with Bolton lions as we enjoy spreading the awareness about the charity. And it's a nice time to engage with the public and explain what the causes of the charity actually are. We also enjoy seeing people donate in the shop with toys to the charity that we are supporting and that we are raising awareness about.

Rishi - I think what the lions do is just really great for the community as a whole because they help you know 1000s of children every year with the toy appeal. These kids don't have the best going for them and it just helps bring a bit of the Christmas joy to the kids and I mean also volunteering with the lions doesn't feel like work or anything, it is a good time, and you know, you're doing good for the community, you know, you're helping people.

Neerav - Yeah, I agree with everything that Rishi said. And I think the work the lions do is like really good. And I've really enjoyed working with the lions over the past few weeks.

A massive thanks to those Bolton school students for sharing their experiences with us.

Mandy, maybe tell the listeners how Bolton Lions have made extra efforts to engage young people with the appeal this year?

Well, this year, we were asked to go to Bolton school to set out a stall. You know, in terms of why would students want to come and help Bolton lions? Why would they want to come and volunteer with us? So we put out a stall. We had members there to say what we did. We had a number of students came forward and signed up to volunteer. And now we have regularly eight students coming along each Saturday for a couple of hours to work with us. And we kind of well, we made a decision at the very beginning. We wanted them to take ownership of what they were doing. So we wanted to see what did they want to do with us? And really, that proved it was great. We said to them, what do you want to do as part of volunteering with Bolton lions. So they've helped by setting out the shop, they've dressed the windows, and they're engaging with the public.

Yeah. And how's the feedback been Mandy? It sounded great in those clips, they sounded really engaged with it.

Oh yes, they really have. I think it's certainly changed our appeal this year. It's helped us you know, broaden what we're doing. Engaging more young people, which they're nearer to the age group that we are giving the toys to. So that helps the club in terms of what toys are relevant for what age group, because toys are changing all the time. What we got as toys is different to what they get now. So I think that was a real, real plus, a real bonus. And their enthusiasm is just yeah, it's magic. It's absolutely brilliant for the club, and I think it gives a real lift to us. So they look forward to a Saturday and we look forward to a Saturday. And it's all about having fun. You know, we say that joining Bolton lions it's about having fun. Roll up your sleeves and get involved.

Yeah, brilliant stuff. Mandy. Now, what advice would you give maybe listeners, they might be a member of a lions club somewhere else in the country? They might just be somebody who's looking to get into volunteering? What advice would you give to somebody whose maybe thinking of setting up a similar initiative to the toy appeal?

I'd say it's working locally, and it's seeing you know, what partners can you bring on board and like with anything, it's about starting it small on a scale that you can manage. And then before you upscale, you can look, every town, every village, everywhere is different, because it's how we're made up as our communities. And it's really bringing those on, and who wants to join you in your appeal. It might be a local business, it might be local media, and it's taking it a step at a time and seeing how it goes. You know, we know there's a need in communities, and it's about setting ourselves up so that we can respond to the need.

Well, thanks so much for coming on, Mandy. It's a really inspiring story, and I'm sure there are going to be many, many children in the Bolton area who are going to have a much happier and better Christmas because of the work that you guys have been doing, so credit to you for that. Right, thanks so much for coming on. I hope you enjoyed it.

I did thank you Ben, thanks for asking me. Brilliant. Thank you Mandy, and I'll be back after this.

Never miss an episode of Step Forward and Volunteer. Listen via www.lionsclubs.co or subscribe to the podcast on Spotify, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

For part two of this very first episode of Step Forward and Volunteer, we jumped at the opportunity to get some time with Amanda Horton-Mastin and Nick Gardner. Amanda is CEO of Semble, a company that helps businesses connect with communities to support positive local action, and of which Nick was a co-founder. Nick is now Head of Climate Action for the National Lottery Community Fund. So both have loads of experience and knowledge when it comes to local community fundraising. In this pre-recorded conversation, Amanda and Nick give some valuable tips on how to best fulfil applications for funding. Both touched on the importance of highlighting your story when trying to access grants, and they discuss the future of fundraising. This is well worth listening to, believe me, I start by asking Amanda about ActionFunder, which is a brand new online platform which can match businesses with like-minded community groups and charities, anywhere in the country.

Oh, look, we're so excited about it, because I think we've always done grant funding. So when Nick first started up Semble, grant funding was absolutely at the core of what the organisation was trying to do, because we know that, you know, it takes money to get a lot of stuff done at the grassroots level. And so funding has always been very, very important to making communities thrive. And it always used to be done locally. So you know, we'd identify a funder, they'd want to do a programme somewhere, we'd go out and talk to the press and try and encourage community organisations to apply for funding, they'd have to fill out nomination forms, et cetera, which is replicated everywhere. And I think what we felt was, wouldn't it be fantastic, if, instead of a community organisation or a charity, having to fill out an application form every single time they needed to apply for funding, they could basically register themselves on a platform, have the due diligence done on them, in terms of having named people and a bank account and a few core elements, and then post up projects that they need funding for, and then show what it is they need funding for, rather than having to twist themselves out of shape to fit with what a funder might be wanting. And so I think this sort of stuff has probably been going on at a local level in a more organic way. And what's really exciting about ActionFunder is that it's on a national level. So you can be based anywhere, and you can post your projects on ActionFunder, or you can post a

project to ask for 500 pounds for thread in order to sew reusable shopping bags that are given away free. Or you could post a project for 5000 pounds worth of core funding, you know, you can post a project for whatever it is that's important to you. And then because we're doing the other side of bringing the funders onto the platform, that's where the beauty happens, the matchmaking happens. And it's ideal, because you don't have to keep repeating yourself, you do it once, and then you're there. And then you're visible to all of these funders. And because it's on a tech platform, it means that it can scale up really quickly. But also, matches can happen almost instantaneously. So instead of having to wait months to hear back from an application form that you've spent hours and hours slaving over and sent here, you literally you can go onto the platform, fill out a project, which is a sort of one side of A4, or a one and a half minute video. And we really encourage people to do videos, because then you get the passion and the energy from the person who's running the project. And for that investment of time, you could be matched with someone almost instantly and have the money in your bank account in a matter of weeks, if not days, depending on the window the funder wants to use and be off and running with that project. So I think the reason we're so excited about it, is that it rebalances the power. So here there's a level playing field between the projects and what they need money for, and the funders and the sorts of areas that they want to fund. And the speed of it is just fantastic. And it can be done. So if you're a funder, you could say, I want to fund within two miles of my headquarters, like Nick was saying. You know, if you decide you want to do something local to where your business was set up, you could agree one to two mile radius, and community projects within that radius get matched to your fund. So that's why I think we're so excited because it's just got that potential to be national, make the matches happen, very, very quickly. Get the money to where it's needed for the projects that have been identified that are needed, and make it happen really fast. And as part of it, we do ask that the projects, post updates, whether it's in social media or on the platform, and then complete a short impact report at the end, which is a very simple survey and some a little bit of data, because then we can spread the stories. And because it's on the platform, it's then also visible to everyone else. So actually, you're raising the profile of the great work that you're doing as a community group. So you can probably tell I'm quite excited about ActionFunder.

I think we all have been around, I think it's important to give a nod to my co-founder Marcus. While he's been really a driving force that sat alongside Amanda, taking this idea forward, it's something we've been talking about for 10 years is that power dynamic that exists between a funder who's got money and a community group who wants money. Whereas actually, what's increasingly interesting from the funders point of view is we're seeing funders who see that power dynamic working the other way. The community groups have something that they want, it's an interest story, it's solving a problem locally, etc. So it's not just a one way power thing that and I think shifting that balance by using the platform is just a very innovative way of doing things because now we've got community groups just saying exactly what they want, and then being able to be searched through, filtered through by the funders themselves. And actually, what's been interesting on the pilot phase of ActionFunder, of course, not every project that comes on is going to get funded, but a large proportion do. And the sort of most interesting ones, are the ones that grab the attention, the quickest, may have several offers from different groups, different funders, and then it's in their choice to which funders they want to align with. They may say, Well, no, I don't want to work with you, you're a big corporate, and I don't agree with your values, I would rather work with this small business down the road. And so that is a really different power dynamic from the point of view of where fundraising has been for the last several decades, at least since Amanda and I have been working on it. And so that pilot phase has been, you know, just great. And we've already seen hundreds of projects coming onto the platform, and already seen hundreds of 1000s of pounds going through the platform. So it's been a great testing period. And I think, in the vernacular, we've been proving the concept.

Yeah, I was gonna ask you, you know where you're at with it. Obviously, it appears it's still very nascent sort of platform and technology.

So we concluded the beta trial at the end of September. And it was really important to have funders supporting us through that trial, as we ironed out lots of the bugs. We haven't completed all of the exciting features that we want to have on the platform. But the very essential matching functionality is all there and it's now open to the public. And anybody can go onto the platform and set up a project or set up a fund. So that's all fantastic. It's all ready to go.

We should say what's the website Amanda? It's www.actionfunder.org Fantastic listeners. Right, Nick, we're going to move on now to your work with the National Lottery Community Fund. Why don't you give the listener a bit of an overview about that? And some examples of what has been funded through that?

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I mean, the National Lottery Community Fund is the biggest community funder in the UK, it's been operating for 26 years since the National Lottery was set up as one of the distributors of good causes money. And every year gives out between 500 and 600 million pounds to 10s of 1000s of community projects across the UK. So it's a big operation, I think, we probably don't have time in the podcast to go through everything that we do. Other listeners may know it as the Big Lottery Fund, which it used to be known as. Basically when people buy lottery tickets, some of that money goes to good causes. And some of that is distributed through a number of organisations. And our organisation, the Community Fund really focuses, as it says in the name, on giving money to good causes in local communities. The particular part that I oversee is the Climate Action Fund, which is a commitment since 2019 to. It's a significant commitment of 100 million pounds, over 10 years to support community led climate action projects. What that means is that, that's supporting communities to do things that are very important to them in their local communities around addressing the climate emergency. So it may be food waste projects, it may be transport projects, encouraging people, away from their cars and onto bikes and walking. It may be about improving energy efficiency in a set of housing or different housing estates. Or it may be looking at helping people to reduce in their communities, their wasteful ways and address sustainable consumption. But broadly helping people to waste less. And think twice before buying new stuff all the time. We're also supporting a number of projects around the natural environment. So supporting tree planting projects and exciting things like farming, the farming sector, and peat bogs. So really covering every aspect of what communities can do for taking climate action.

Okay, really good. Nick, if I'm a lions member, or running a lions club, and I want to get access to some of this money, what advice would you give?

Yeah, I suppose one important thing to say is that the climate emergencies is very rapidly gaining prominence and a real understanding of how important it is for communities. So very important thing to say is that it's not only the Climate Action Fund within our wider

organisation that is giving money to climate projects. If you're interested as lions group to take action locally, in whatever way you're you think is fit for your community, then there will be other parts of the organisation as well, who might be able to fund you. So if the Climate Action Fund isn't open, and it is open only at certain periods during the year, then it's worth still speaking to our organisation.

And, Nick, what support can groups get when making applications for funding from the National Lottery Community Fund?

I think we recognise that communities are out there doing their work every day and application forms can be challenging anyway. So we're trying out a new range of different ways of making the whole process easier for groups out there, from our small grants, which only asked three questions, to the larger grants, where we do actually obviously ask a lot more detail about it. But we have the application process happening in two phases. So the first phase is just a statement of your overall idea. And then if that looks like it's got potential for funding, we'll ask and encourage the group to spend a bit more time talking that through with us and answering a few more questions in detail. So there is that sort of opportunity to talk to the team that we have around us at the community fund. There's always people at the end of our advice lines as well. And the other thing we've been trialling this year is doing more webinars. So for our recent fund that together for our Planet Fund, which was around the build up to the Cop 26 Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, we ran four webinars, and we had over 1000 people who are interested to take part and listen to that. And it just goes to show the scale of level of interest in this topic, but also in securing funding for your exciting ideas. And there are so many exciting ideas about projects and communities generally, as we've been talking about throughout this podcast, but particularly in recent years around the climate issue, and how communities can address that locally.

Brilliant, Nick. Amanda, I'm going to come back to you and maybe ask you more generally around what advice you would give to community groups who want to seek funding and access funding? What's the best way of going about it, would you say?

Well, I mean, it really depends on who you're talking to, and who your audience is for whom you're asking money from. But I think the most important thing is probably to have real

clarity in your own head of why do you need the money? Why do you need it now? Why can you be trusted to spend the money? And what difference will that money make? Those are sort of the most important facets that you need to have really, really clear and direct answers for, and have examples of where you've been able to do fantastic work in the past. And I think you change what you say, depending on who your audiences and how much money you're asking for. So you know, if you're asking for a little bit of money, then you don't need to go into so much detail. But if you're applying to a big foundation, you might have to have a lot of evidence up your sleeve about the work that you've done in the past and the impact that you've had. But I would say that probably everybody in the transaction between asking for money and giving money, they want to know that it's going to achieve something really important. So telling the story of what your money is going to achieve is a really, really important fundamental reason why and how you should be asking for money.

If I can build on that as well, I think one thing community groups have told us over the years is that they have been concerned that others with a more professional, say fundraising team are much more readily available to access the funds or, you know, it's very highly competitive space, how can we do it, we've never achieved funds before it et cetera, and increasingly within the funding sector, but certainly within Semble and the National Lottery Community Fund, we're really wise to that and aware that people are applying from a range of different backgrounds and experience. What's really important, I think, is to use your authentic voice. And just to say, why it is that your group needs the money and the challenge and the issues that you're going to tackle with it. I think that authentic voice linking to that story that Amanda was saying, is so important to get across and funders are not silly. They do understand when looking through applications, that some people are better at explaining what they want and want to do or more succinct and more pithy than others, and they're able to see through that to the core of what would be ultimately a great idea.

And a final point, guys, really, how positive are you about the future of your work in the future of fundraising? Given that, you know, through ActionFunder, you can see the potential of technology to play its role. You know, storytelling, there are so many platforms now to get your story out there. What does the future look like? And maybe in the context

of what we've been through with the pandemic as well, where do you see this going? I will come to you first Nick?

Gosh, right, firstly, incredibly positive, I think that all of the mood music is right, that people are now taking back the power about the changes that they can make in the communities, in their own communities. But even right down to the very local, and very recent history, you know, throughout the pandemic, people have been spending longer in and around where they live and commuting less to work, for example, and getting to rediscover what it means to them what their local area means to them. Rediscover the power of nature, and what it means to be out outdoors, and how important that is for people's mental health, etc. So I'm very positive about the fact that more and more communities are going to be taking action to make the place where they live better, I think that's the first thing to say. Second thing is specifically on the climate issue. As we know, it's a growing area. Unfortunately, it's not one that's going to go away in the short term. But it's definitely one that everyone can play their part in, everyone can play a part in tackling climate change, even small steps can make a big difference. So I think there's an increasing need for people to get involved on that front, but also increasing opportunities. And the more people do, the more the more people see other people around them, their neighbours, their friends around them taking action locally, the more likely it is that they'll follow suit. So I'm very positive.

And I share Nick's positivity. And what we're seeing is that companies of all sizes, whether it's the local accountants on the high street, or the law firm in your village, or, you know, the medium sized businesses up to the really big conglomerates, they're all having to think about this now because it's becoming such an important part of who they are and how they operate and how they hold on to their staff and their customers. So I guess my positivity comes from that pressure that is being applied as a result of the environment that we are currently living in. And I guess I would say that, you know, I think things like the National Lottery Communities Fund is unbelievably important in playing a role to disperse that money out across the entire country. And hand in hand, I would say ActionFunder, we want ActionFunder to be as big as the National Lottery one day, giving out similar amounts of money from companies to complement what the national lottery is doing with money from

the lottery. So, you know, I do feel very positive, I do think there is amazing work going on at the grassroots level, driven by passionate individuals. And it's those people that we want to unlock and unearth. And like Nick was saying, we need their passion to come through. And I do think technology really helps us because with technology, you can use videos to convey that passion. And you can get stuff across in a way that people might struggle with in the written form. So I think the combination of technology and the environment we're living in means that there's a real positive environment to grow the support we can give to local communities.

A massive thank you to Amanda and Nick for giving up their time for Step Forward and Volunteer. I really enjoyed the conversation and I think you'll agree that they gave some really open and thoughtful answers in the interview their inspiration, I think for anyone looking to get involved in local community volunteering. If you're a Lions member, you can read more from Amanda and Nick in the Autumn Winter edition of The Lion magazine, where there's also a feature on the Bolton Lions Christmas toy appeal and much more. And that's about all we have time for in this month's podcast everybody. So the last thing for me to do is to once again thank this month's guests, Mandy, the Bolton toy appeal volunteers, Amanda and Nick. And of course to all of you who tuned in and to everybody indeed who has done their bit for that community this year. If you're celebrating, have a very Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and we'll be back in 2022.

Thank you for listening to step forward and volunteer. If you want to get involved in local community volunteering, visit www.lionsclubs.co to learn more.