

HITTING IT OFF: Volunteers are proving good companions

Buddy scheme is just what friends are for

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By
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A SCHEME to help people with disabilities get out to pubs and shops has turned out to be a good way for Worthing people to make new friends.

The Sussex Buddy Scheme was set up to find volunteer people," said Karen, who has suffered from Spina Bifida all her life.

"The only alternative to the buddy scheme is a carer, who probably won't have anything in common with you. If you're going around with someone all day, you want to be able to have a conversation without them thinking, 'what are you going on about?'"

Karen was on the waiting list for two years before being

assistance for disabled people who have difficulty using local facilities on their own. The philosophy behind the scheme, which is run by Sussex Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (SASBAH), is that people should be matched only with "buddies" up buddy partnerships they think will hit it off.

Elisabeth agrees with Karen that the pairing has worked well.

"I don't feel like a volunteer. I feel like a friend," she said.

SASBAH matched the two women because they share a post code and a love of art. Karen is a qualified jeweller, with an HND in 3D design, and Elisabeth has just finished a degree in fine art at Bath Spa university.

Since their meeting, though, Elisabeth has also started to share Karen's love of Buffy the Vampire Slayer computer games.

"When you sign up to the buddy scheme, they ask you to commit to a minimum of one day a month, but I usually see Karen once or twice a week, even if it's just for a cup of tea."

"I'd recommend the scheme to anyone who wants to do something worthwhile and make a new friend."

There are currently about 40 partnerships in the buddy scheme, but SASBAH is always looking for new volun-

who want to do the same things.

It's an idea that works well, according to Karen Atkinson, 33, of Fairfield, West Tarring, who was matched with her buddy in September.

"A lot of places still don't have good access for disabled teens. If you think you might be interested, call the office on 01903 507000 or email sasba-hoffice@tiscali.co.uk

FactFile

■ The Sussex Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

■ Spina Bifida occurs very early in pregnancy. It is a defect in the development of the spine, when one or more vertebrae fail to close properly, leaving a gap.

■ Hydrocephalus is caused by an excess of cerebro-spinal fluid in the head. Excessive swelling can cause accelerated growth of a baby's head and damage the brain. Resulting problems include learning, communication and co-ordination.

"I don't feel like a volunteer. I feel like a friend."

ELISABETH GOODHIND
BUDDY

matched with Elisabeth Goodhind, 23, of Offington Gardens. The long wait was partly down to a shortage of volunteers, and partly because SASBAH is careful only to net

PICTURE: MILA CANNING W04287

■ PERFECT MATCH: Karen Atkinson with her buddy, Elisabeth Goodhind

