

There was some sort of incident around Dingwall yesterday. I saw a helicopter, search dogs, the lifeboat and the coast guard vehicle. I'm not sure what they were doing, but these kind of things happen more often than we spot. If I hadn't decided to go shopping that day, I doubt I would ever have been aware what was happening.

And who were the people carrying out this search that I saw? The police and the RAF; who do these duties as part of their job. Although I never saw them yesterday, I am sure that the ambulance drivers and others in the health service often become involved too.

But you can bet there were more volunteers helping than there were paid staff. The organisations helping out – the lifeboats and the coastguard are largely made up of volunteers who give up their evenings and weekends to train for what they do, and then drop everything when the call comes to put it all into practice.

Their employers too should be acknowledged for giving them the time off to help out when required. Although some make their staff take unpaid leave, many allow people to volunteer in work time and we should applaud their community spirit for doing so. A very few even encourage their staff to volunteer, recognising how such activities can enhance their staff's skills and leadership qualities.

I used to work in a hotel where the local mountain rescue team would meet. After a rescue, the bar owner gave away free pints to the volunteers as a thank you for their efforts. It was a small gesture, but that – along with the fundraising activities he regularly organised – were much appreciated by the team. Of course, he had the side benefit that the team then drank in the pub with friends at other times, and it gained a reputation as the mountaineer's pub; which didn't do him any harm in the tourist seasons. This doesn't lessen his generosity in any way.

Of course all of these voluntary occupations are quite glamorous. You can't but be impressed by the sight of these people coming back from their rescue in all their gear or when you see the retained firemen & women in uniform. Even if they are doing something quite unglamorous like guarding a dead whale from souvenir hunters or fitting a smoke alarm to a pensioner's house.

There are other volunteers in the community who are not so visible. They are the ones who trudge out in the middle of winter to attend committee meetings in draughty old halls or who spend their evenings writing letters and grant applications, or keeping books for a local organisation.

The National Trust for Scotland has recently announced a freeze in seasonal staff and a reduction in permanent employees. If the beautiful buildings and special wild places they are entrusted with are to survive, they will only do so now with the support of volunteers in their communities. I wonder if the people of Poolewe will forgive their treatment at the hands of the NTS and give of their time to keep the wonderful gardens open. I suspect they will, but the future of this charity will very much depend on the managers on the ground.

The lives of the people in our communities are interlinked. Neighbours call in on each other, staff in our local shop drop off supplies to the elderly on their way home, car owners pick up newspapers for others when they go into the town. When we go on holiday, there are lots of people willing to look after our cat. The same people wheel out my bin when I forget and take in parcels for me. Small things, but life just would not be the same without them.

As I look around the people who live in my community, I struggle to find a single one who does not do something for others. The lady who carries treats to give to dogs she meets on her walk, the householder that sells the local paper from her

house when the shop is shut, the young mum who is a retained fire-fighter and the people keeping the youth café, the bowling club and the arts society going.

Some of them save lives and some of them make life worth living but every single one of them is a hero.