

Steve Whitmore

Outstanding Contribution Award

Describe the work of the individual being nominated

Steve Whitmore has made an outstanding contribution to the welfare and integration of minority communities into mainstream British society over the 28 years of volunteering. Steve initiates and develops practical projects that have helped bring communities together and improved the lives of thousands of people, particularly those from minority groups. His unique combination of understanding, empathy and practical solutions make him an inspiring individual. Steve left the British Army in 1989, age 23, after serving for five years as a combat medic in the Royal Engineers. Initially homeless in London, he was able to turn his life around with the help of Central YMCA where he has since volunteered an incredible 5,000 hours on a variety of community projects, tirelessly championing those less fortunate than himself in society. In 1997, Steve co-founded Central YMCAs Positive Health scheme, supporting members of the community living with HIV and AIDS. He took this further lecturing on YMCA fitness in training Level 3 – Living with HIV training course for YMCA volunteers and as a senior lecturer on Positive East's *Newly diagnosed HIV* course. Working as a cardiac exercise specialist in 2005, Steve initiated a community programme for patients with neurological disorders and started healthy heart workshops in the community for outpatients. Steve fundraises every year for the Royal British Legion and The Not Forgotten Association. In 2011, Steve started patrolling the very streets where he himself was homeless as a Metropolitan Police Service Special Constable. In 2015, Steve arrested a young man who asked if he could have a book to read whilst being detained at Brixton Police Station. Unable to find any suitable reading material, Steve gave him his own book, *Catcher in the Rye*, and said he could keep it. It was the first book he owned. This simple act of kindness broke down barriers, creating greater rapport between the two, providing a less stressful and isolated stay in police custody.

Give examples of the projects or work the individual has done

Steve helped co-found the Positive Health scheme in 1997, for people living with HIV and AIDS. The scheme allows NHS HIV specialists to refer their patients to the Central YMCA where they receive individualised health and wellbeing support. Steve's understanding of the condition and empathy with those living with the virus has been fundamental to the scheme's enormous success. Despite medical advances, HIV remains an incurable life-long condition with a lot of social stigma attached to it. Steve continues to volunteer on the scheme, making people living with HIV feel as normal and as accepted as everyone else in the gym. Steve, a former British Army triathlete and BTA triathlon coach, initiated a triathlon programme for 16 members of the Positive Health scheme – some of whom had been living with HIV for over 20 years – were supported and trained to compete in the London Triathlon. Steve designed and delivered over 120 hours of voluntary support and was instrumental in everyone successfully completing the London Triathlon. This was seen as an exceptional contribution to the YMCA's Positive Health scheme. Working as a cardiac exercise specialist at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, Steve instigated – in his free time – a community-based stroke and neurological programme where patients were supported with functional group exercise programmes. He was able to take into account each patient's specific diagnosis, fostering supported inclusivity. Steve also started a community healthy heart clinic which allowed over 500 cardiac rehabilitation out-patients (who had difficulty attending hospital appointments) an opportunity to access lifestyle, medication, hypertension, smoking cessation and

mental good health workshops. Steve founded Books in the Nick in 2015. Its core aim is to provide free books to all detainees in police custody, focusing on children and young, vulnerable adults. Over 10,000 books, comics and magazines have been made available to approximately 600,000 detainees in all of the Mets 27 custody suites and ten national police forces.

What has been the impact of the projects or work that the individual has contributed to?

Every year, around 170,000 detainees pass through the MPS custody suites; 22% are youth offenders who have committed crimes. Books in the Nick focuses on these young children aged twelve to 17 years and vulnerable adults. The average time in a police custody cell while a case is investigated is between eight and eleven hours, anything that can keep the detainee calm and less anxious is welcomed. Each of these detainees have been given a chance to not only self-empathise whilst reading a book in the holding cell, but also time to reflect on the impact of their alleged crimes. They are able to keep the books they are reading; for some the first book they've owned, and take it with them on their journey. This is a unique teachable moment during the pathway through the criminal justice system and seen as an invaluable opportunity to encourage detainees towards community based organisations that can support them back into mainstream society. Book markers are placed in each book signposting Barnardo's, Combat Stress, St. Giles, and Divert offering alternatives to knife crime, homelessness, gangs and criminal activity as well as building some level of trust with the Police. As the project has grown, braille, large print books for partially sighted readers, foreign language books and Barrington Stoke novels for dyslexic readers have been added. Prompted structural and procedural changes. Custody inspectors promote the availability of books to detainees on their mandatory welfare checks. Independent custody visitors endorse the project. This has directly led to an improvement in the relationship between police staff and detainees. Over 90% of the Designated Detention Officers have noticed a positive change in the detainee's behaviour, attitude and emotional state. "Calms me down." "Time goes faster." "Stops me talking to these four walls." This remarkable and far reaching scheme was recognised in 2019 with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the MBE of volunteering and Steve was awarded as 2018 European Diversity Hero.