

Neil 'Butch' Evans Getting Fired Up About Dementia



Neil Evans, Station Manager at Brecon Fire Station, has been working with the Brecon Dementia Supportive Community Group since its inauguration in 2012. Here he explains how the fire service can help to make a difference to the lives of those living with Dementia through its extensive activities as a Community Safety Partner.

Welsh-born Neil Evans, known as 'Butch' to his friends and colleagues, due to his earlier training as a butcher, joined the fire service 25 years ago. He's the Station Manager at Brecon Fire Station, having transferred to Powys in 2003.

Powys is something of a challenge for the fire service, being the largest county in Wales, covering one quarter of the country's land mass, including a substantial part of the Brecon Beacons National Park. Powys is twice the size of the next largest county in Wales, with a population of a little more than 131,000, making it the most sparsely populated county in either England or Wales.

Neil's immediate area of responsibility is South Powys, which includes Brecon and Radnor. The challenges of providing any service in such a large county, inevitably impacts the way in which the fire service operates. "It's evolving into a community service" says Neil. "With the austerity measures implemented by the government resulting in cutbacks to services, there are fewer firefighters, fewer police etc, etc. If we work collaboratively, then we maximize



On wild fire training in Catalonia

Young people engaging with the fire service over Easter to learn about the responsibilities of being a firefighter.



the available manpower. In Powys this is done via the Community Safety Partnership (CSP)” explains Neil.

The CSP operates on a number of different levels, with information on those issues affecting Powys being filtered down to local committees. Neil is Chairman of the Land Management Group, which deals with incidents such as grass fires, anti-social behavior and road safety, to name a few. The group involves representatives from the fire service, Brecon Beacons National Parks Authority, Powys County Council, the police, land owners and National Resources Wales. Activities and events are run jointly to educate and advise communities to try to prevent incidents from occurring. “From a firefighter’s perspective, if I can reduce the likelihood of incidents occurring, then the fire engines get called out less” says Neil. “For example, during Halloween and bonfire night, we work alongside the police running patrols, handing out

posters, offering advice on safety and good practices.”

Neil is no stranger to Dementia, having been much involved in the care of his grandmother, who was diagnosed with the disease. He has been a member of the Brecon Dementia Supportive Community Group since it’s inauguration. He was trained as a Dementia Champion in November 2014 and, together with his colleague, Jason Harris, has now trained all 150 on-call firefighters in all 9 stations in South Powys to be dementia friends. “Because all our firefighters live and work in their communities, they can play a vital role in identifying those people living with Dementia” says Neil. “It is part of our role to offer fire safety checks to people in their homes, but we can’t do this without an invitation. We currently carry out approximately 2,500 fire safety checks per year. If we can also identify those living with Dementia, then we can provide them with a more bespoke service. For example, if we know that someone is forgetting to turn the gas off on their cooker, we can install a control mechanism that will switch it off automatically. We can also supply and fit standalone sprinkler systems, which is particularly useful for smokers.”

The fire safety check is a comprehensive service. Firefighters inspect each and every room, supply and fit smoke alarms where required, provide advice on overloaded sockets, misuse of smoke materials, misuse of candles, leaving cooking unattended and what to do in the event you have a fire or hear a smoke alarm.

Neil is working with local community groups, local councils, care homes and those organizations involved with the elderly. “I’m already talking to these organizations to establish how we can help each other. As a firefighter and a Dementia Champion, I can go along and present my usual fire safety talk, but I can also offer them a Dementia Friends training session and advise them on how the fire service can help them to help us to identify and support those in our communities living with Dementia. And just maybe in so doing we can stop that electric kettle being put on the hob and starting a fire!”