

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

I was sad to hear the recent news that Suffolk Age UK was closing for lack of funds.

The charity, which cared for more than 8,300 elderly people in Suffolk last year, has had its fundraising efforts hit hard by the Coronavirus pandemic, which is a tragic irony given the disproportionate impact the virus has on older members of our communities.

And this has happened in a county with a significantly older population than the rest of the country - 23.6% of the population is more than 65 years old, compared with 18.4% nationally.

It is not just Age UK that has been hit - 60% of Suffolk charities have said they could close in 12 months if they do not receive urgent help.

A few weeks ago the Suffolk Community Foundation launched its "Rebuilding Local Lives" appeal, to raise funds from individuals and businesses to help struggling charities across the county.

The appeal received a real boost with a substantial donation from Suffolk music star Ed Sheeran.

Their target is £2m, and that will go some way to helping our charities, but the extent of the crisis that Age UK's collapse reveals indicates that much more will be needed.

So why should any of us help?

For me it goes back to the saying, charity begins at home, which is so often misunderstood.

We hear people treat the saying as if we should only care for those close to us or known to us – that charity begins *and ends* at home!

But the saying is getting at the very opposite.

The first time the saying in the form we know it is recorded in print is in 1642 in a book by Sir Thomas Browne, a doctor, philosopher and botanist who lived and worked in Norwich from 1636 until his death in 1682.

In the book he explores, in his distinctive style, what it means to be human and the relationship between medicine and the Christian faith.

"But how shall we expect charity towards others, when we are uncharitable to ourselves?" he writes, before he goes on to say, "Charity begins at home."

Which of course conveys a rather different meaning than "it begins and ends at home".

He is reflecting on the need for our capacity to love and care to be developed in us so that we can then show love and care for others.

We learn love – charity – he says at home, and that is what enables us to fulfil our loving responsibility towards others.

For me, why we should help charities, goes back to the way Thomas Browne shows the connection between our love and care for others and the love and care we learn at home – whether that is the home we were raised in, or the home we have made with others.

The word “charity” means love, and love is the foundation of a good home. It is the power that builds relationships and makes us place others before ourselves.

Love means that we go out of our way to make sure that the lives of those around us are the best they can be.

And because love is always about others, and this is Thomas Browne’s point, love doesn’t stop there but reaches further and further out to help the lives of those far beyond us be the best they can be.

Once it starts, love doesn’t want to stop.

And groups and organisations that have come into existence to help those in need are one of the ways that love is embodied in our society – which is why they are called charities.

Many of these are connected to churches, or church members, because churches exist to embody God’s love and share that love, making a difference to other people’s lives.

That was Jesus’ core message – love God, and love your neighbours as yourselves.

Which is where Thomas Browne got his message from - love others because you have learned the importance of love yourself, at home.

And we have seen that in the huge extension of care and practical help to those in need across our county during the past four months.

Much of this will continue, as people become aware of the extent of people’s needs across Suffolk, when in so many of our communities the needs have not been evident before, have been hidden.

And this will be in addition to the charitable work of so many organisations that are now seeking urgent help.

But that is the right way round – it means that we are getting our priorities right if that happens.

It means we have learned what is really important through this dreadful time.

Charity - love - not only begins at home, it is the foundation of everything that is good and worthwhile, and reaches out to embrace everyone.

So from the love of our homes, let's help our charities help others, in Suffolk and beyond.