

THE BEYOND WORDS

BIG PADDLE CHALLENGE 2022

Words: Gary Coulton

This year I embarked on the biggest challenge of my life. With a crack team of charitably minded paddlers, I've set up the Big Paddle Challenge 2022 to raise £10,000 for book clubs for people with intellectual disabilities, run by the wonderful charity Beyond Words. www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk

OUR BIG WHY?

On a cold, damp day in December 2021, I sat at home pondering my challenge for 2022. I do this every year, not so much as a New Year resolution, but as something new to test myself with over the next year. What to do this time?

In previous years I'd committed to long paddles like the Thames Ultra. Two years ago, I was determined to write a book.

A one-off long paddle didn't attract me. I needed something to stretch me all year. Then it clicked. I'd paddle 1,000 miles through the following year. A quick calculation reassured me it was possible. Even accounting for my other commitments. It also revealed how much further I'd need to paddle than my average year. I'm what I'd call an obsessed recreational marathon kayaker – paddling once, maybe twice a week. Going from the pontoon at Richmond Canoe Club up to Teddington Lock and back, about five miles. Sometimes, I've gone mad making the round-trip of 28 miles to Shepperton and back. I often paddled with a group of like-minded people in the 'Zen Paddling Group'.

I thought, "If I'm going to make myself this uncomfortable, I might as well do it for a good cause." To my mind, there was only one charity I wanted to support, the charity 'Beyond Words'.

This small charity supports people living with intellectual difficulties. Arising from three decades of research and practice by Professor now Baroness Sheila Hollins, 'Beyond Words' publishes an excellent library of life skills storybooks based on pictures without words. Our Big Paddle Challenge supports the expansion of their community book clubs network: <https://youtu.be/oqV8AeCPmIc>.

ANTIDOTE TO A NATIONAL SCANDAL

There's a hidden national scandal in mainstream society that treats children and adults with intellectual disabilities (LD).

- One million, or 2% of British people, live with an intellectual disability. It is impacting hundreds of thousands of families.
- The learning challenges of people with Down's syndrome, autism, communication and other intellectual disabilities result in isolation and exclusion from many things the rest of us see as our natural rights.
- Tragically, people with LD are five times more likely to die in a hospital, end up in prison, or live on the streets.

Mencap recently reported that 60% of people with LD in the UK are lonelier after the pandemic. Only 5% of people with LD in the UK find work, and only 25% with LD attend social clubs and recreational activities.





THE BEYOND WORDS ANTIDOTE

The wonderful team at Beyond Words are quietly revolutionising the lives of people with LD.

Its mission is to empower people to understand and express their thoughts and feelings through the universal language of pictures. Their word-free picture books and community book clubs bring storytelling to people with intellectual disabilities, autism, or who find written words difficult.

Stories aid our understanding of the world. Their picture books and resources cover everything from ordinary, everyday events to challenging subjects like death and domestic abuse. They make complex topics easier to understand, help to support conversations and enable readers to make their own informed decisions.

OUR CHALLENGE MATURES AND GROWS

I let the general idea of doubling my annual distance ferment in my mind until after Christmas. Could I get my friends and family to sponsor me and raise a few hundred quid?



During a New Year paddle, I mentioned my idea to some Zen Paddling Group members. Several said, "Can I join in? What do I have to do?" Without thinking too much, I said, "Yes".

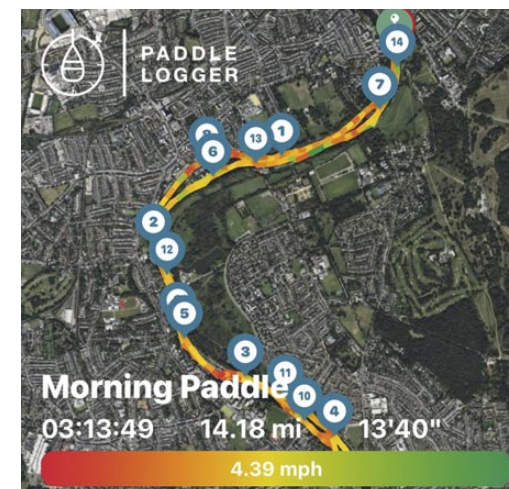
WHO ARE OUR PADDLERS?

We're a growing group of paddlers, mostly recreational marathon kayakers and canoeists, and recently sea kayakers. We're all committed to supporting the fantastic efforts of 'Beyond Words'. We're 30-strong now. Coming from across the UK – www.bigpaddlechallenge.co.uk

Our 'Beyond Words Big Paddle Challenge 2022' secures funds to support Beyond Words' efforts to grow a network of 'Beyond Words Community Book Clubs'. Community book clubs improve the happiness and well-being of people with LD. People who're restricted in their opportunities to socialise, share experiences, and have fun.

WHY IS IT A YEAR-LONG CHALLENGE?

To reflect the daily life-long challenge people with LD face, we initially committed as a group to paddle



10,000 miles during the next twelve months. A one-off event didn't seem to do the cause justice.

Members of our group usually paddle a few hundred miles each a year. We've committed to paddling at least that, with many people doing much more. Several of us have set individual targets of over 1,000 miles. Every month paddlers submit their mileage. We update our donors and social media followers on progress. And keep paddling!

It's true, we are used to paddling regularly. Some of us race. But none of us is a professional athlete. We're ordinary people who hold down jobs, look after families, some study. Some, including me, are well stricken in years, with several in our sixties. Our commitment will be difficult and is stretching us physically and mentally. However, all of us are committed to going above and beyond for a good cause this year.

For those who're not in the marathon community, to give you an idea of the challenge, 1,000 miles involves paddling more than 20 miles a week, rain, wind, or shine. Some of us paddle shorter distances up to five times a week, and others must paddle further, twice a week, to make the distance. Persisting for 12 months will test our resolve and mental and physical endurance. There's no denying it; we'll also enjoy ourselves! Who said we couldn't have a smile on our face when we're doing a good thing?



WHERE DOES ALL THE MONEY GO?

Everyone asks me, "What happens to all the money donated?" All monies raised go to Beyond Words supporting the expansion of their network of community book clubs. Volunteers carry out all fundraising efforts (publicity and social media).

WHERE CAN YOU DONATE?

We have one point where people can donate: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/beyond-words-big-paddle-2022>.

MAKE YOUR MILES MAKE A DIFFERENCE – JOIN OUR TEAM

Our Big Paddle Challenge Team is independent of any club or organisation. Meaning paddlers from all paddling disciplines are welcome to join us.

The only qualification needed is that you paddle appreciable distances. You can be a marathon paddler or canoeist (K1 or K2, K4). We welcome outrigger paddlers, surf skiers, sea kayakers, dragon boaters, and stand-up paddlers. Essentially anyone who uses a paddle to move their boat!

We welcome adults (of all ages) and juniors (with parental permission and following all safety and safeguarding rules and guidelines).

You can be from any nation. We're receiving donations from generous donors in Hong Kong! Books Beyond Words are word-free, so don't need translating! After all, pictures mean the same thing to people with intellectual disabilities, no matter where they are!

All your miles count. You can include training, racing, and paddling for fun. Every mile counts, even if you have a lean month! Many of you already log your trips via GPS devices or apps like Paddle Logger. Alternatively, you may paddle regular trips where you can estimate your total mileage. You send them to the team via bigpaddlechallenge@gmail.com each month, and we announce the team's cumulative total to the world.

There's no individual league table because every mile makes the same contribution.

PROGRESS SO FAR

February was brutal for the challenge, but we still managed a respectable mileage despite storms, illnesses, and injury. March was a bumper month of over 2,000 miles paddled, and our cumulative total so far in mid-April is over 6,000 miles.

At the time of writing this article, we passed our first two donation targets of £1,000 and £3,000 and are well on our way to our next one at £10,000.

This will fund at least 20 new community book clubs!

Because of the extra distances we're paddling, we feel stronger, more resilient, and generally happier. When you can paddle against 40-knot headwinds and do it with a big silly grin on your face, you know you've discovered the meaning of life!

WHERE NEXT?

I did a back of a cigarette packet calculation. Now the team is 30 paddlers, we're able to change our slogan to, 'Paddle the World with us and make to make a difference'. That's a challenging total of 24,000 miles! With more paddlers, maybe we can go around twice!

WHO'S DONATING?

Friends, family, and professional connections were the first to donate. Businesses are also seeing the wisdom of nailing their colours to our flagpole. The first to donate was Swimscafe (www.swimscafe.co.uk). Next was Six Red Squares (www.6rs.co.uk), a great web design and branding company. Then Techrelate, an IT



Beyond Words Big Paddle Challenge



6rs.

techrelate



services company. Westminster Insurance Ltd came on board as our amazing premier donor in March.

We want to work with more companies, especially businesses essential to our paddling community. The Big Paddle Challenge team uses boats, paddles, spraydecks, life jackets, cagoules, wetsuits, drinks systems etc., from a wide range of suppliers. We're like a growing flotilla of brand awareness. Our range of corporate donor benefits packages can be found at www.bigpaddlechallenge.co.uk/business.

WHAT'S COMING NEXT?

We have a brand new Beyond Words Big Paddle Challenge 2022 blog.

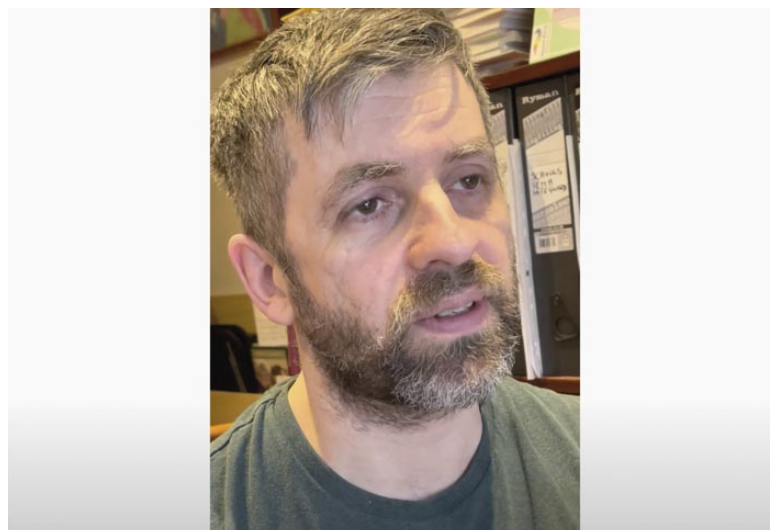
www.bigpaddlechallenge.co.uk/blog, telling the stories of many of our paddlers and why they're doing the challenge and updates on new Beyond Words Community Book Clubs.

A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM NIGEL HOLLINS

Nigel is Baroness Sheila Hollins' son, and when he was little, his mum was a child psychiatrist specialising in intellectual disabilities. You see, Nigel has autism, and like many autistic people, simple things to the rest of society could overwhelm him, especially since he had few spoken words. So, one day Sheila sat down and began to make matchstick drawings for Nigel, describing what it would be like for him to go on an adventure holiday. Nigel understood and became less anxious. Books Beyond Words was born.

Sheila became Head of the Mental Health Department at St George's Medical School in London, was president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and was elevated to peerage several years ago.

Today, Nigel is an author, trainer, book club facilitator and volunteer for 'Beyond Words'. He used to be an actor with the Baked Bean Company and has appeared in the film 'The Rewrite' starring Hugh Grant and on stage at Sadler's Wells Studio Theatre. Nigel recently authored 'The Drama Group' with Hugh Grant and Sheila Hollins. He runs a book club in Epsom Library. He loves to go swimming every week and go to the theatre. He supports Chelsea and is a big fan of Marilyn Monroe.



See what Nigel says about our paddle challenge – https://youtu.be/K2Gaf6Jt_Xs

Nigel is a shining example of what people can do if society makes a little accommodation for them. 'Beyond Words Community Book Clubs' give people autonomy. From there, who knows what good things they could bring to the world?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can help in four main ways:

- Join the Beyond Words Big Paddle Challenge Team. To do so, contact us at bigpaddlechallenge@gmail.com. We'll send you a one-page paddler's briefing.
- Donate <https://www.gofundme.com/f/beyond-words-big-paddle-2022>
- Follow our social media and share our posts: www.facebook.com/groups/beyondwordsbigpaddlehq and [@bigpaddlechallenge2022](https://twitter.com/bigpaddlechallenge2022).
- You, a friend, or a connection could volunteer to organise a new Beyond Words Community Book Club – contact us at bigpaddlechallenge@gmail.com to learn more.

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