



HUB

Volunteering Insight Report



Introduction

An online **Insight Seminar on Volunteering** took place on Wednesday 10 November 2021, bringing together members of the Tackling Loneliness Hub to share expertise and knowledge about volunteering and loneliness, specifically how volunteering can be promoted as a means of tackling loneliness and what additional support is needed to help lonely people access volunteering.

Thank you to our panellists Nancy Hey (What Works Centre for Wellbeing), Roxi Rustem (East London Cares), Abi Murray (Chatty Cafe Scheme), Mike Niels (B:Friend) and Diane Claridge (Befriending Networks) and to all members of the Tackling Loneliness Hub who attended the event and got involved in the discussion on the Hub.

Background

In October 2020, What Works Centre for Wellbeing and Spirit of 2012 published a review on volunteering wellbeing which not only highlighted the benefits of volunteering but suggested that people who benefit most from volunteering may not be able to volunteer. For example, people may lack social connections to introduce them to volunteering opportunities; or the means to travel to volunteer; or they may have access needs that the volunteering opportunities will not meet in their case. The report also indicated that volunteering may be particularly good for people during life transitions or life crises such as retirement or bereavement, when volunteering can bring a new sense of purpose, identity and belonging.

Volunteering Opportunities

At the event we heard from East London Cares, The Chatty Cafe Scheme, B:Friend and Befriending Networks.

The Chatty Cafe Scheme started in 2017 and runs 3 services to reduce and tackle loneliness: volunteers making 30 minute weekly calls to people experiencing loneliness; volunteers helping to run 'virtual chatty cafes' run during a lunchtime slot for anyone over the age of 18 which is designed to replicate an in person cafe feel; and encouraging cafes around the country to designate 'chatter and natter' tables where a venue puts a sign on a table with volunteers being available to start a conversation on any topic. The Chatty Cafe Scheme will soon be starting a project with Coventry University where they want to test theories that improved social confidence and interaction can improve someone's health and wellbeing.

East London Cares is a new community network of younger and older neighbours hanging out and helping one another in a rapidly changing city. Working across the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, East London Cares connects people across different venues and spaces through a variety of activities. The organisation has 3 programmes: social clubs which offer a chance for older and younger Londoners to get together; Love Your Neighbour which is a friendship matching programme bringing older neighbours aged over 65 together with younger neighbours to spend 1:1 time; and a proactive outreach programme to identify and introduce older and younger neighbours to the network.

B:Friend works across South Yorkshire in Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham, bringing the community together through social groups in local areas and via 1:1 befriending where a volunteer visits once a week, although the friendships often last a lot longer.

Befriending Networks supports over 370 befriending projects across the UK and they estimate that through membership they are supporting over 24,000 colleagues and 80,000 individuals to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Barriers to Volunteering

Polling¹ during the seminar asked organisations what they thought were the biggest barriers for people who are lonely to access volunteering:

- 56%** lack of awareness of opportunities
- 33%** time constraints
- 22%** physical health / disability
- 22%** caring responsibilities
- 11%** mental health

Additional comments from the group said that a lack of confidence and low self-esteem also acted as a barrier for lonely people to access volunteering. This lack of confidence can also be linked to not having the confidence to find volunteering opportunities and being aware of what is out there. Moreover, people may not make the link between the benefits of volunteering and feeling lonely.

¹ Data captured from 10 respondents to this poll.

Benefits of Volunteering

The group recognised that volunteering is a two-way thing, and volunteers get so much out of it too. Anecdotal feedback from the panel showed that volunteering has helped volunteers to feel more connected and less lonely, whether that is through the activities they have been involved in or by making friends with other volunteers. Volunteer inductions can also be mini socials in themselves, enabling people to create new friendships.

In the case of befriending projects, intergenerational befriending can be beneficial for the younger volunteers and older beneficiaries. In larger cities for example, older neighbours who have lived in areas for longer and have deep roots in their community can often feel disassociated and unwelcome amidst rapidly changing environments, whereas younger neighbours who move to larger cities for work often leave friends and family behind which can be isolating in itself. By bringing these groups together through volunteering opportunities, people can see they have a lot more in common than they might think.

Promoting the benefits of volunteering more widely and highlighting the positive impact it can have on physical and mental health, could help to encourage those who would benefit the most to take part.

Recruiting Volunteers

Panellists said they did not have difficulty recruiting volunteers for the most part. However, they noted a difference in recruitment for volunteer opportunities where people could dip in and out more freely, as opposed to volunteering opportunities which required a bigger commitment. For the latter, a larger number of volunteers needed to be recruited to help fill the gaps.

Factors which may deter people from volunteering:

- They think volunteering is not aimed at them and is better suited to someone else.
- They think they lack necessary skills and qualifications to volunteer.
- They feel uncomfortable with taking on a more formal volunteer role.
- The volunteer training can be overwhelming and off putting.
- They may lose interest whilst waiting for DBS checks.

The panel noted that a lot of people presume you need to be confident, extroverted and comfortable introducing yourself to strangers to be able to volunteer as a befriender. What tends to happen as a result is an organic flow of volunteers from the same friendship group, which is good for volunteering numbers, but can sometimes lead to a lack of diversity in recruitment.

Factors which can help with volunteer recruitment include:

- Easing people's anxieties around volunteering and helping them to feel more confident to take part.
- Breaking down stereotypes, not making assumptions about who will get on, and trying not to be too restrictive when matching people for befriending activities.
- Using social media to promote volunteering opportunities and making sure there are easy steps for people on first seeing a social media post to sign-up, get involved and join the induction, was found to be a good way of getting volunteerings.

Retaining Volunteers

The key challenges the panel faced was keeping volunteers signed-up and actively engaged. Some ideas the panel shared to help with volunteer retention included:

- Being clear with volunteers from the outset on what they are signing up for.
- Encouraging volunteer pledges, particularly in the case of befriending when they are getting involved in someone's life.
- Keeping volunteer training informal and interactive.
- Having a supportive Volunteer Manager who can help to establish familiarity and trust.



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Pathway to Volunteering

The panel recognised that social prescribing has an important role to play in linking people up with volunteering opportunities. As well as referring people who are feeling lonely to take advantage of services and activities run by volunteers, social prescribing can be quite an effective source for volunteers.

By encouraging social prescribers to come along to social clubs or activities, they can in effect become outreach advocates, making it much easier to refer to these services. However, the panel highlighted that often by the time someone gets as far as social prescribing, they may not be in a position to volunteer.

A potential pathway to volunteering that the group thought could be explored further was engaging people as they approached retirement. This would require working closely with employers and would need dedicated logistical support that should ideally be systematised.

The panel recognised that people who have experienced the benefit of support from a volunteer often go on to volunteer themselves.

Helpful Resources

Chatty Cafe Scheme <https://thechattycafescheme.co.uk/>

Befriending Networks <https://www.befriending.co.uk/>

B:Friend <https://www.letsbfriend.org.uk/>

East London Cares <https://eastlondoncares.org.uk/home>

Centre for Ageing Better <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/TILL-combined-full-report.pdf>

Time to Shine <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media.timetoshine.co.uk/Trigger-points-time-to-shine-report-PRINT-v2.pdf> Trigger points: How might older people fall into social isolation and loneliness?

TACKLING LONELINESS HUB

East London Cares: Creating intergenerational connections through volunteering <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/east-london-cares-creating-intergenerational-connections-through-volunteering/>

Opening Doors London: Befriending services for LGBTQ+ people over 50 <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/opening-doors-london-befriending-service-for-lgbtq-adults-over-50/>

WHAT WORKS CENTRE FOR WELLBEING

Volunteer wellbeing: what works and who benefits <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/volunteer-wellbeing-what-works-and-who-benefits/>

Retirement and Wellbeing <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/retirement-and-wellbeing-what-works/>

Mental health interventions at work: evidence from Britain's Healthiest Workplace survey <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/mental-health-interventions-at-work-evidence-from-britains-healthiest-workplace-survey/>