

Loneliness in the
time of Covid-19

Volunteering in the pandemic

Practical ideas for supporting people who help

#LonelinessInCovid

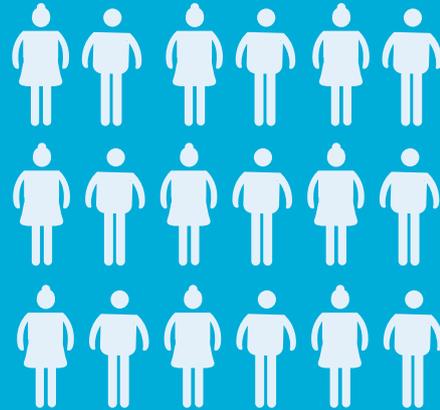
Campaign to
EndLoneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE

Volunteering during Covid 19

Volunteers have been fundamental to supporting people experiencing loneliness and isolation during lockdown – and long before.

Whether in “new” forms like NHS Volunteer Responders or mutual aid groups, or more established befriending schemes and support groups, volunteers provide vital practical, emotional and social help to some of the most vulnerable and isolated people in our communities.

But providing this support month after month can take its toll. At the Campaign to End Loneliness’s recent *Loneliness in the Time of Covid-19* webinar, 75% of participants who work with volunteers said they were worried about volunteer burnout.



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Key stress factors for volunteers involved in befriending



Telephone support is more intense

You can't see each other's expression, there are no natural breaks, and it's often more tiring than face-to-face.



Mental health problems are coming to the fore

Volunteers are increasingly encountering more serious mental health issues, which they often feel ill-equipped to handle.



Sustaining conversations has got harder

With nothing new to talk about, and many people feeling increasingly anxious and distressed, especially as we embark on an uncertain winter.



Commitments are harder to sustain

As some volunteers need to return to work or study, while others don't feel ready or able to return to pre-lock-down volunteering activities.

Six principles to making volunteering opportunities age-friendly and inclusive

The fundamentals of good volunteer management haven't changed, but we need to adapt them to our new circumstances



1 Flexible and responsive



2 Enabled and supported



3 Sociable and connected



4 Valued and appreciated



5 Meaningful and purposeful



6 Makes good use of my strengths

The Centre for Ageing Better has produced [guidance](#) for inclusive, age-friendly volunteering, which emphasises a range of key issues to consider in supporting volunteers.

Source: Centre for Ageing Better, 2018

Solutions

Participants told us about a range of different approaches they were taking to support volunteers.



Providing remote support



Sustaining conversations



Managing stress



Enabling flexibility



Addressing mental health



Supporting inclusion



Fostering mutual benefit

Providing remote support



People told us about the ways they are trying to deliver quality **remote volunteer management and support** when it's harder to meet face-to-face:

- **Communication is key** to good volunteer management - **individual and group phone and Zoom calls, newsletters or magazines** are helping volunteers feel connected and involved
- Providing **volunteer supervision and mentoring by phone**
- Shifting **volunteer training online** – with training videos, courses over Skype or Zoom, and even enrolling volunteers in an online 'volunteer university'
- Deploying experienced **volunteers to recruit and train new volunteers** while staff are on furlough

Helpful resources:

Befriending Networks free [online training toolkit for befriending volunteers](#)

[Telephone befriending guide](#) from Time to Shine in Leeds

Ageing Better programme [learning report](#) on telephone befriending

Sustaining conversations



Here's what people told us they are trying to do to help their volunteers **sustain conversations**:

- Providing **training** in having a conversation – helping people to find the right tone of voice, and think through how to navigate potentially difficult conversations
- Sharing **activity packs, ice-breakers and prompts** to help stimulate conversations – including posting out crosswords to work through together on the call; or offering prompts, like both choosing a favourite book to discuss
- Producing **conversation guides** with questions and ideas for topics to discuss
- Sending out **newsletters** with topics for conversation

- Providing volunteers with up-to-date **information on local services** so that they can signpost people to other sources of help (health, food banks, helplines etc)
- Many organisations are also exploring how they can support people to return to **face-to-face conversations** if they want to

Helpful resources:

[Questions](#) designed by academic psychologists to build closeness and establish reciprocal relationships in a structured way.

Wellbeing and activity packs from Age UKs in [Bradford](#), [Sutton](#) and [Wakefield](#)

[Creative activity](#) pack from Ambition for Ageing in Greater Manchester

[Conversation guide](#) from Time to Shine in Leeds

Managing stress



Organisations shared their techniques for helping volunteers to **manage stress** – these included:

- Arranging **phone debriefs** – after each call, volunteers can phone a supervisor to give an update and hand over any issues they are concerned about
- Moving **volunteer buddying or mentoring schemes online or over the phone**
- Establishing **peer support groups for volunteers** over Facebook, WhatsApp or Zoom
- Offering new kinds of support, such as **online mindfulness training**
- Helping volunteers **share stories**: for example sharing anonymous tips, ideas and feedback about the best (and worst) conversations people have had in their volunteer newsletter

Helpful resources:

Free online [resources](#) from The Ella Baker School of Organising, including one on [self-care](#)

[Training resources](#) from ActBuildChange

Enabling flexibility



Giving volunteers more control and **enabling flexibility** can help them manage stress. People told us about how they are trying to keep their volunteering flexible:

- Providing **call slots out of working hours**, or moving from one longer call to two **shorter calls**
 - **Matching more than one volunteer to a single service user**, to provide back-up and enable flexibility about who provides support
 - Making clear it's fine to **pause or stop** volunteering without feeling guilty
 - Helping volunteers find **alternative ways of helping** – for example sharing their experiences and stories to help with recruiting or training others
- Being explicit about **valuing whatever volunteers can do** – e.g. making sure that people who are happy volunteering from home, online or over the phone, don't feel pressure to change over to face-to-face provision

Addressing mental health



Here's what we heard people are trying to support volunteers who are encountering **mental health** issues:

- Providing basic **training** such as mental health awareness or mental health first aid, to help volunteers understand what they are encountering, keep themselves and others safe, and identify when people need additional help
- Offering **specialist support or supervision** from staff with mental health knowledge and expertise
- Supporting volunteers to **manage boundaries** during calls, for example by having **clear guidance and processes for referrals** to professional support

Helpful resources:

Ageing Better in Sheffield's [guide to talking to people with mental health issues](#)

Mind's [mental health awareness e-learning](#)

Paid-for mental health first aid courses are available from [Mental Health First Aid](#) and [St John's Ambulance](#)

Supporting inclusion



Organisations shared the things that they've been working on to **support inclusion** of volunteers:

- **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic** groups may have different traditions or norms for helping out, and may not see “volunteering” as an activity for them – linking to existing groups and activities within the community where people are helping each other can be one way of engaging people
- Practical barriers such as **English tuition** or supporting **access to the internet** need to be addressed before people can engage with volunteering
- Some people with **disabilities and long-term health conditions**, which restrict them getting out the house have been able to volunteer and have more contact through lockdown
- **Speech, language and hearing difficulties and cognitive impairments** can make it much harder for people to give or receive support over the phone

- Some people with **learning disabilities** are uncomfortable meeting people online (e.g. on Zoom calls) when they haven't met in real life
- **Face-to-face alternatives** are sometimes needed to support full inclusion

Helpful resources:

Overview of [equality and diversity](#) in volunteering from NCVO

Community Matter's [guide](#) on inclusion in volunteering

[Conversation](#) and links to resources on the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic volunteers hosted by the Association of Volunteer Managers

Many organisations offer paid-for training and resources on diversity for the voluntary sector, including NDTI's [Social Inclusion Training Pack](#) and [Diverse Matters](#)

Fostering mutual benefit



Covid-19 has reminded us of the value of neighbourliness, and helping each other through simple acts of kindness. Many older volunteers have had to limit their own social contact, and keeping in touch with someone over the phone has helped them as well as the person they are befriending.

Here's how organisations are trying to encourage a culture of **mutual benefit** rather than a divide between helper and helped:

- Talking about **the value and benefits of being involved**
- Encouraging more reciprocal approaches such as **mutual befriending** between people who are isolating
- Encouraging **neighbourliness** – giving people the tools and encouragement to help out however they can

- Some organisations have encouraged service users to join **mutual aid groups** as another way of keeping in contact and getting involved. It's worth considering any potential concerns about risk or safeguarding, as informal community groups often won't have the same procedures or protections in place.

Helpful resources:

Age UK's [neighbourly volunteering](#) scheme - simple online training to help people offer help and basic information to older neighbours.

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