

What happened to volunteering during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic

October 2020



Following lockdown older people's organisations in Leeds reacted quickly, changing delivery to support the most vulnerable clients in their own homes. This required a different approach to volunteers, especially as for many organisations many of their volunteers were in at risk groups.

Most organisations had volunteers supporting them in three or four work streams before the start of the pandemic, however what happened to each group of volunteers was different:

- Office based volunteers took phone calls, and helped with paperwork, record keeping and so on. **Volunteer work paused as it was necessary to limit the numbers working in offices.**
 - Events or activity support volunteers help with the practical arrangement and supported individuals at coffee mornings, lunch clubs and similar events. **All these events were cancelled with immediate effect and this volunteer work was paused.**
 - Drivers and bus buddies supported the transport provided in organisations with minibuses. Organisations that used other transport methods had volunteer car drivers and walking buddies. **Some of these volunteers were shared with other organisations or used by the older people's organisations for emergency food deliveries. Most of the other work was paused.**
 - Befriending volunteers who worked either on the telephone or more commonly by visiting individuals at home. **These volunteers were the ones who kept working, they were shifted to telephone-based befriending, and some took on additional befriendees.**
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Covid volunteering experiences:

In Leeds the local authority quickly identified and funded voluntary organisations to act as leaders or local hubs for the coordination of emergency help for residents. Some of the Neighbourhood Networks were hub leaders, or very closely involved with the hub delivery so this affected what happened to volunteering within their organisations.

In one organisation almost all of the face-to-face befrienders transitioned successfully to working as telephone befrienders. The organisation was able to recruit a handful of extra volunteers and support a few additional befriendees but they found they were unable to extend the service further as the pairs needed were making more connections and needing more support from staff than had been the case earlier.

Another organisation identified that volunteer befrienders who were in fact having to shield themselves found the telephone check-ins they were making with others to be helpful.

Some organisations did repurpose volunteers or encourage group members to step up to volunteering. They then acted as telephone befrienders supporting older members who were now being asked to stay at home rather than attending activities. This significantly reduced the load on the staff members and enabled them to undertake other activity. Not everyone took this opportunity for a variety of reasons, some people did not like contacting people on the telephone or did not want to work one-to-one.

In some organisations where staff were undertaking face-to-face garden visits or socially distanced walks, volunteers were then encouraged to undertake this role too, following appropriate risk assessments. Risk assessments for other organisations meant they were unable to undertake these visits with staff or volunteers.

One tight knit group recruited additional volunteers from amongst its membership and they have shared the task of organising zoom calls, enabling the group to move from fortnightly to weekly support meetings. This would not have happened without the volunteers.

Organisations who became hub leads had many specific and urgent physical tasks that needed doing, the hubs delivered food parcels, collected prescriptions and undertook other tasks for those who had been asked to remain at home either because they were shielding or older. They were able to

undertake some of these with existing volunteers and, in addition, recruited large numbers of local volunteers, often younger people who were furloughed from their workplaces. They were recruited via VAL (Voluntary Action Leeds) and Leeds City Council's Community Care Volunteer programme which worked as a central collection point for volunteers.

Different hubs have had a different experience in terms of partnership working, depending on the locality, but all were now trying to get the new and previously recruited volunteers to engage when possible rather than functioning in separate groups.

Whilst volunteer roles were on pause the volunteers have generally been supported by staff in the organisations where they volunteered; this seems generally to have been via telephone calls, although some organisations have recently offered face-to-face meetings in secure settings like cafes. Other organisations have set up closed Facebook or WhatsApp groups to allow volunteers to socialize amongst themselves. Some volunteers who were undertaking roles like befriending around paid work were in fact on furlough during this first part of the pandemic; some of them needed additional support from their volunteer managers.

Organisations are still demonstrating concern for inactive volunteers and are continuing to support them.

What happens next

Some organisations are considering limited re-opening, subject to changing restrictions. Some organisations are starting to recruit new volunteers for telephone befriending and hub work. In one organisation, to free up staff time and support more individuals who need befriending, they are going through a process of signing off some individual pairs as friends – rather than befriender/befriended. This will enable those relationships, which have grown into friendships during the pandemic, to grow. Volunteers will be able to meet individuals if they wish and they will be able to get together (following government guidelines) in a way the charity's guidance does not allow.

Organisations are having to plan for online training and management before they can recruit.

Another organisation who had partially re-opened in outdoor ways was unable to re-open further as they had been unable to identify suitable larger premises. As a result they were looking for more telephone befriending volunteers for the winter.

The small group whose volunteers were successfully running zoom calls have worked in a very cooperative way to decide what next, some people are planning to meet in small groups in covid secure settings like cafes, others choose not to take this risk but will continue online.

VAL is still proving a good volunteer recruitment route, as are organisational Facebook pages. Local recruitment, which was generally used for recruitment of 'events' type volunteers has been suspended for the present.

Where organisations are restarting they are considering actions like putting volunteers in bubbles with the older people to reduce potential for disease transmission.

The organisations who are closely involved with hubs are starting to look at gearing up the hub work again, this will entail recontacting those who they worked with during the first few months, and more volunteer recruitment as many people have returned to work.

There seems to be no evidence of bringing back office volunteers, this is probably due to limited space, but it will I am sure be putting more pressure on paid staff as they are now having to do everything needed.

Although getting people to be digitally active was a key activity there seems no evidence of recruiting volunteers to help with this very time-consuming task in the organisations who have spoken to us. Digital champions training for staff and volunteers is available and the current volunteers are being trained.

