



AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

Involving volunteers in Age Better in Sheffield: learning so far

Introduction

Coproduction is a key and integral part of the Age Better in Sheffield (ABiS) Programme and one aspect of this is co-delivery: involving the people who might benefit from a service in its delivery, often through volunteering and many of our projects have committed to recruiting and involving volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, but particularly older people who have experienced loneliness and isolation. The recruitment of older volunteers is a particularly important aspect of ABiS because of our focus on strengths based working and because volunteering is a recognised way of reducing loneliness and isolation.

This digest shares some of the challenges that Sheffield projects have experienced as well as the approaches and techniques that Sheffield projects have found successful. It has a Sheffield focus, but the principles may apply elsewhere too.

The benefits of volunteering for people experiencing loneliness and isolation

“Helping others has made me feel that I can still contribute to the community.”

(Peer Mentors volunteer)

- Volunteers were motivated by the opportunity to help others, to have structure in their life and to feel like they could give something back. Volunteers who had been a participant in a scheme often wanted to pass on their positive experience to others in the same organisation.
- Volunteers involved in Age Better in Sheffield projects have reported a range of benefits including increased confidence, feeling more connected to their community, feeling more valued and appreciating the structure that regular volunteering can bring to their lives.
- The Together project worked with families of people living in residential care. Family members were often very reluctant to take on formal volunteering roles or to be labelled as a “volunteer”. However, a number of them reported feeling the benefits of being able to share their experiences and to help other families in a same position.

“Having fixed dates and times that I know I’m going out has helped me when I am feeling low.”

(Age Better Champions volunteer)

Those receiving support valued the company and support of the volunteers.

“M (volunteer) visited me a few times. He raised my confidence so much that from being on the verge of suicide I am more socially active again.”

(Peer Mentors participant)

Top tip

- Giving positive feedback is very important as it can help reduce depression in older volunteers.

Recruiting, managing and retaining volunteers

- During the first three years of the programme there was a particular focus on involving older volunteers who had experienced or were experiencing loneliness and isolation. As a result, many of the volunteers that have been involved in ABiS have experienced a range of barriers and challenges during their volunteering experience. These are often not directly as a result of their age but are due to other issues which had led to their isolation and loneliness.
- Recruiting older volunteers who experienced loneliness and isolation was **particularly challenging in some BAME communities** where the barriers faced, in particular by many older women, are high (language and cultural expectations often means that women have largely lived their life within the family home for many years).
- Recruiting people who had experienced loneliness and isolation to support those who were at risk or currently experiencing loneliness and isolation was challenging as often **people who had experienced loneliness and isolation did not particularly want to talk about it**. They also **often continued to face the challenges that led to them being lonely and isolated** (such as poverty, caring roles, language barriers, poor mental or physical health) and were **unwilling or unable to take on formal volunteering roles that created additional responsibilities for them**.
- Volunteers who have experienced loneliness and isolation often need a high level of support and supervision. **Some may experience periods of being able to volunteer followed by times when they do not have the capacity**

for various reasons. This can be challenging for both the volunteer and the organisation working with them.

- Smaller lesser known community groups and organisations may experience a disadvantage when recruiting volunteers as **many people naturally gravitate towards larger better known organisations when looking for volunteering opportunities.**
- **Well-resourced and highly skilled volunteer management** is particularly important in working with people who may experience multiple challenges - dedicated contact person and/or volunteer coordinator to help and give advice to volunteers, has been shown to improve retention.
- If there is a high risk that a volunteer's circumstances may prevent them from attending reliably or if they need to build confidence, **involving the volunteer as additional capacity rather than acting alone** mitigates risk and can in a more positive experience for the volunteer.
- The word "volunteer" itself can be a barrier to engagement and therefore providing **informal volunteering opportunities that allow people to 'help out'** can be more accessible for people who face multiple challenges. People might also prefer **micro-volunteering** opportunities. This could also address the issue of limited time which was a factor in volunteer drop off.
- **Project participants can and do naturally transition to become volunteers.**

Top tips

- Formal recognition of the volunteer's contribution through a certificate, awards ceremonies and celebration events can really help to make volunteers feel valued.
- Make volunteers feel part of "the team" by inviting them to events such as team lunches and socials and sending birthday cards.

Intergenerational volunteering

- Although Age Better in Sheffield initially sought to focus primarily on involving volunteers who are aged over 50, and particularly those who identified as lonely or isolated, several projects found that there are particular benefits to involving younger volunteers as well.

- Projects working with women aged over 50 from some more traditional BAME communities who are not confident communicating in English have found that **involving younger volunteers as interpreters allows participants from a range of different countries to communicate better** with each other in a group.
- Another project has recognised the value of involving younger, second generation volunteers from BAME communities who are **in a good position to ‘open doors’ to the older community because the younger generation are often much more integrated within the broader community.**
- Projects have found that younger volunteers are often more willing and able to travel outside of their local area, and particularly are less concerned about visiting people in their own homes.
- Age Better in Sheffield commissioned RVS to deliver a project, *Intergenerational Skills Swap*, which was specifically focused on intergenerational volunteering. The model sought to bring people under 50 together with those over 50 by pairing a university student with an older person. Volunteers shared skills across the generations, for example a younger person shared IT skills with an older person whilst the older participant might have shared their experience of being in the workplace or skills learned through hobbies.
- **The definition of older people as being 50+ disguised the fact that there are at least two generations within the 50+ age group in this project, and a wide range of life experience.** Many people in their 50s and 60s who did not identify as ‘older’ wanted to volunteer with people a generation older than themselves rather than be matched with a younger volunteer.
- Lai Yin’s *Smart Phone Smart Friends* project involved young Chinese people, many students who had recently come to the UK, as volunteers and found that this was particularly valued by participants whose children had left Sheffield and who did not have extended family living locally. Volunteers also benefited from relationships with the older generation.

Further reading

- The Centre for Ageing Better has a [work stream focused on age friendly volunteering.](#)
- Bournemouth CVS have produced a [leaflet](#) about recruiting older volunteers.
- [Volunteering in Retirement](#), report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.