

Community Champions Impact report 2022-23



“She’s enriched my life. It has improved my life being part of Community Champions. It’s very uplifting.”

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is Community Champions?

Community Champions recruits volunteers to connect with older people (over 60) living alone in the Harborough district to increase their social connections, reduce isolation and loneliness and improve their wellbeing. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. The first Community Champions project ran for five years, with the second starting a year ago, so this is the first-year report.

Activities include volunteer befriending, support from digital volunteers for clients to connect online, monthly Community Gatherings with accessible transport provided to bring clients and volunteers together in a community venue, and other small group social and learning activities.

For this second project we have more of a focus around proactively helping to move clients on from Community Champions by helping them make stronger connections including with existing family and friends as well as with new people and groups. Two Next Steps courses have been delivered to support this.

1.2 Outcomes

This document sets out our impact against the outcomes we set ourselves. These are also included in boxes across relevant section of this report:

Outcomes for clients

- Clients have been able to make progress towards rebuilding their lives and to recover after Covid
- Clients will have been able to participate in small or large group activities inside or outside Community Champions
- Clients feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community.
- Clients will have reduced their loneliness and isolation
- Clients will have developed their independence, resilience and agency
- Clients have made progress towards achieving their goals that they identified in their initial client assessment (or subsequent updates)
- Digital Volunteers clients will have increased their digital connections and ability to access online services
- Clients have more information about activities that are appropriate to them and / or know where to go for further sources of information.
- Clients and volunteers will have become “Community Friends” with their volunteers, continuing the relationship outside of the project

Outcomes for volunteers

- Volunteers will feel that their involvement in Community Champions is meaningful and rewarding.
- Volunteers feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community.
- Volunteers will have become “Community Friends” with their clients, continuing the relationship outside of the project (see mirror outcome above for clients)
- Volunteers over 60 will have reduced their loneliness and isolation

Outcomes for Community Champions, VASL and other organisations

- Steering group members have been able to work with a range of other stakeholders to influence the direction of the Community Champions project
- Community Champions will share learning through regular newsletters, and local media
- Clients’ needs are better met through Community Champions working effectively with other organisations
- VASL and Community Champions will be working more effectively to relieve loneliness and isolation

1.3 Community Champions in numbers

25 new befriending clients.

41 new relationships (**39** befriending and **2** pen/email pals).

54 people have been supported to connect digitally.

89 “Community Friends” relationships since the start of Community Champions, pairs who now have an ongoing friendship and meet outside of the project (**6** relationships in the last year).

8 volunteers were recruited this year to support befriending and group activities, with **52** volunteers being involved in total over the year.

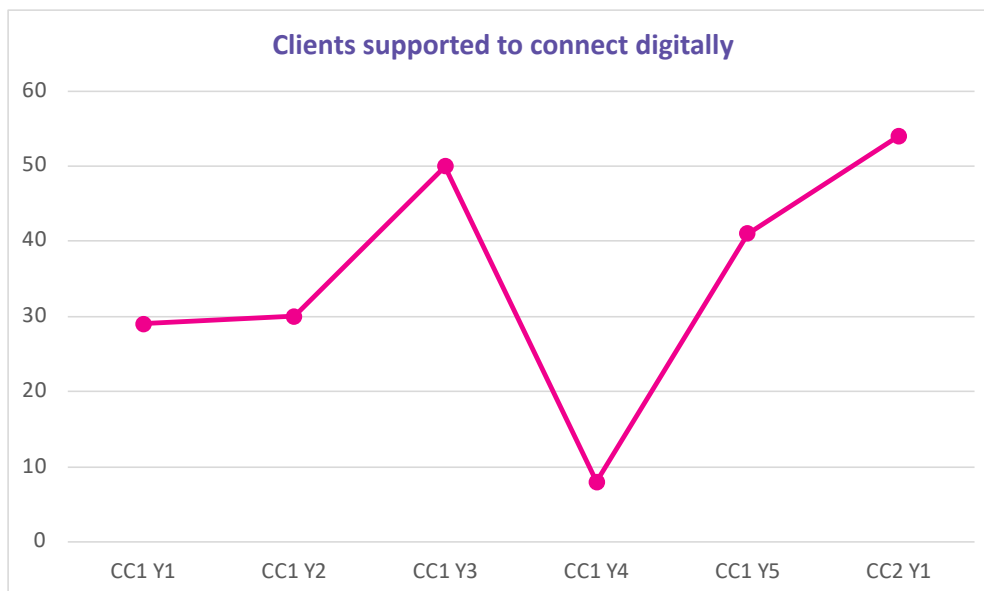
In addition, there are **13** volunteers in the digital team, including **3** new volunteers recruited this year.

1.4 Digital volunteer sessions

54 people have been helped by our digital volunteers:

- **18** clients have had home visits
- There here have been **21** library digital sessions in total, **11** in Market Harborough and **10** in Lutterworth, helping **36** people through **90** appointments.

There has been an **86%** increase in the number of clients supported to connect digitally between the first year of the first project, and the first year of this second Community Champions project. This is shown in the chart below, with a decrease in numbers in year four because of Covid. It then took a while to build back up to previous levels.



2. Events and activities

2.1 Community Gatherings

Community Gatherings continue to be extremely popular and a key part of how we create a project community. We held **11** Community Gatherings this year involving **218** attendances from clients and volunteers.

- In October 2022 we went to secondary school **Welland Park Academy** where health and social care students welcomed us, made refreshments and chatted, with one student playing her violin to entertain us.
- November's Gathering was at **Market Harborough Golf Club** and included a talk from Age UK's Warm and Wise project, which gives older people energy advice, plus the u3a about the learning opportunities and groups that they run.
- We returned to **Welland Park Academy** again in December for a Christmas celebration with students decorating the tables and providing refreshments, there was a gift for everyone attending, and a performance from their musical, Footloose. Comments included,



Attendees at Community Gathering at Welland Park Academy

Talking to the students is such fun, it's good to know what young folk are up to these days!

It is so lovely talking to local older people; this event has helped to improve my communication skills.

- In January 2023 we went to **The Roebuck** pub. We hope that by visiting community venues with Community Champions, people may then feel confident to visit them on their own. A community and wellbeing officer from Harborough District Council spoke to participants and explained the local activities on offer for older people, including walks, Twilight Games, cycling and JUST, an activity programme for women.
- February was a Valentine event at **Welland Park Academy** with a cream tea and students playing the piano and flute. One participant commented,

The Valentine tea was just beautiful. The care taken was outstanding. can you believe that young people are so amazingly switched on to our generation! The school and parents should be very proud of them. Lovely to feel spoiled.

- In March we were at **Market Harborough Golf Club** again, there was no external speaker, but people were updated about future events and had the opportunity to socialise together.



Two Community Gathering attendees with a King Charles III figure

- The April Gathering was run jointly with Age Concern, our first joint Community Gathering in the **Wycliffe Rooms, Lutterworth**, and enabled clients to find out what activities Age Concern run that they could join. Some guests here also enjoyed having their photos taken with a King Charles III figure, linking in with the Coronation.

- May had us heading to **Buttercups Tearoom** in the rural north east of the district, where people saw alpacas, goats, pigs and cows on the farm. There was a clip of a television appearance from a Community Champions client talking about the Queen's Coronation, and people shared their own memories.

- We were in Oadby, just over the boundary to the north of the district in June at **Glen Gorse Golf Club**, where our room had big windows and good views. A worker from the Canal and River Trust attended to talk about the wellbeing activities that they organise and asking for ideas. People mixed from Market Harborough and Lutterworth, one client commented,

I am so glad I came today; I've chatted to two ladies from Lutterworth where I used to live, and we discovered so many people we all knew! It was great to remember these people after so long.

- In July the Gathering returned to Buttercups Tearoom where Community Champions staff updated participants about a range of activities.

- August's Gathering moved over to the other side of the county to **Lutterworth Golf Club** where two volunteers talked about setting up a social group in Lutterworth.

2.2 Other group activities

Zoom Mini Gatherings

These are volunteer-led and run by the digital volunteers. They are particularly good for people who prefer socialising in smaller groups or are unable to make the journey to our Community Gatherings in person.

This year we have held 11 Mini Gatherings involving 11 different people, topics discussed include weddings, holidays without a car, Easter traditions, card and board games, and old-fashioned remedies.

Zoom Book Club

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of every month. It has met 11 times involving three to four people, allowing people with limiting health conditions to join a group activity. It has read books by Anita Shreve, Sally Page, Jodi Picoult, Ruth Rendell and Graham Norton. Rather than choosing a specific book, we often select an author and discuss any of their works so that people have more choice over what they can read and may be able to attend to discuss a book they have read in the past rather than feel pressure to read a new book each month.

Breakfast club

This is a long-term volunteer-led activity, with six to eight volunteers and clients meeting in a local café once a week for breakfast, an opportunity that has a significant proportion of male clients. The members kept in contact during Covid, which helped to keep people connected so that it could start again afterwards. One member of the project who developed dementia as now collected from a nursing home to attend, maintaining his old links and routine.

2.3 Intergenerational work

We have continued our intergenerational work with Welland Park Academy, reported above. We have also coordinated postcard exchanges with young people, and Community Champions members have heard local children read.

Human Library

This is a new initiative, where Community Champions volunteers and clients have given short talks to students at another secondary school in Market Harborough, Robert Smyth Academy, topics from participants included having an assistance dog, involvement in scouting, wartime memories, and being a district nurse. It is a significant innovation this year that has enabled Community Champions volunteers and clients to feel affirmed and their life experience valued whilst raising students' aspirations.

Feedback from the school was very positive, the principal wrote that it has,

Proved to be an exciting and memorable experience for our students...I have heard from the students and staff involved about how the talks are stimulating the enquiring minds of many students. They have all expressed how valuable and memorable the talks have been and that they have very much enjoyed being part of the Human Library experience.



A Community Champions Human Library participant with the school librarian (who is dressed as Medusa)

The principal has also written to each individual speaker to thank them for sharing their experiences. He wrote to the Next Steps facilitator,

Thank you for taking the time to speak to our sixth form students – our business students were intrigued when you passed around a Kit Kat and fruit pastilles as a link to employee welfare. Your advice to have integrity, humility and the courage to challenge will stand them in good stead.... The teacher commented on your inspiring and brilliant talk.

The principal also praised Community Champions project manager,

I would like to personally thank-you for the extraordinary visionary thinking, planning and organising so many cross-generational activities. Human Library has proved to be an exciting and memorable experience for our students. Staff have also reflected how the talks are stimulating our students' enquiring minds. Thank you also for writing about all the sessions.

2.4 Learning sessions

These are open to all clients and volunteers, and sessions this year have been delivered on:

- Safeguarding.
- Five Ways to Wellbeing, delivered by VASL's wellbeing befriending manager
- Bladder health – delivered by a Community Champions volunteer who is a retired specialist nurse.
- Self-care delivered by VASL's wellbeing befriending manager and the coach who also delivers our Next Steps programme.
- Wombling – a session led by a member of the South Leicestershire Wombles, who pick up litter in the area.
- Shopmobility training – see picture



Participants at Shopmobility training

3. Causes of loneliness

3.1 Why do people become lonely?

Volunteers were asked about their perception about why their clients and others became lonely, many of these confirmed by clients' comments. The majority of responses told a story of bereavement of partners and friends, family moving away and finding it difficult to have the time to visit, and a loss of physical abilities due to health conditions or purely old age.

Physical disabilities and health conditions	Recovery from illness affecting mobility and ability to go out. Lack of mobility due to health issues. Illness and health problems preventing participation.
Isolation and lack of social contact	Living alone and far from family members. Loss of spouse or partner. Lack of nearby family and neighbours. <i>It's really good to have someone to talk to, I really don't see anyone else.</i> Old friends have died or are themselves isolated by infirmity. Limited family contact. Losing family members, leading to nervous problems.
Transport challenges	Lack of transport options, the difficulty of taking someone out in a wheelchair was specifically mentioned.
Age and mobility	Extreme old age and reduced mobility. Advanced old age leading to isolation. Physical inability to go out unaided.
Modern lifestyle and digital isolation	Busy children or family members living far away. Lack of digital awareness, inability to use digital communication, or unable to afford it at home.
Emotional and personal factors	Grief and mourning over the loss of a partner or loved one. <i>I'm really missing my husband; farming is 24 hours per day and we were always together.</i> General lack of confidence.

Issues with family members causing psychological issues.

Financial worries Financial worries reducing social contacts.

3.2 Loneliness and recovery from Covid

Clients have been able to make progress towards rebuilding their lives and to recover after Covid.

Covid inevitably had an impact on people's social connection and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Although Community Champions now has online options, benefiting those who can't or don't feel able to get out, many of the face-to-face activities have now resumed. We held a large event to celebrate the end of the first Community Champions project and to highlight the next. Many people who had only been in contact via telephone or online because of Covid met each other for the first time.

My thanks to you and your wonderful team for making this afternoon happen. There was such a lovely, warm atmosphere and so much conversation and laughter. (volunteer)

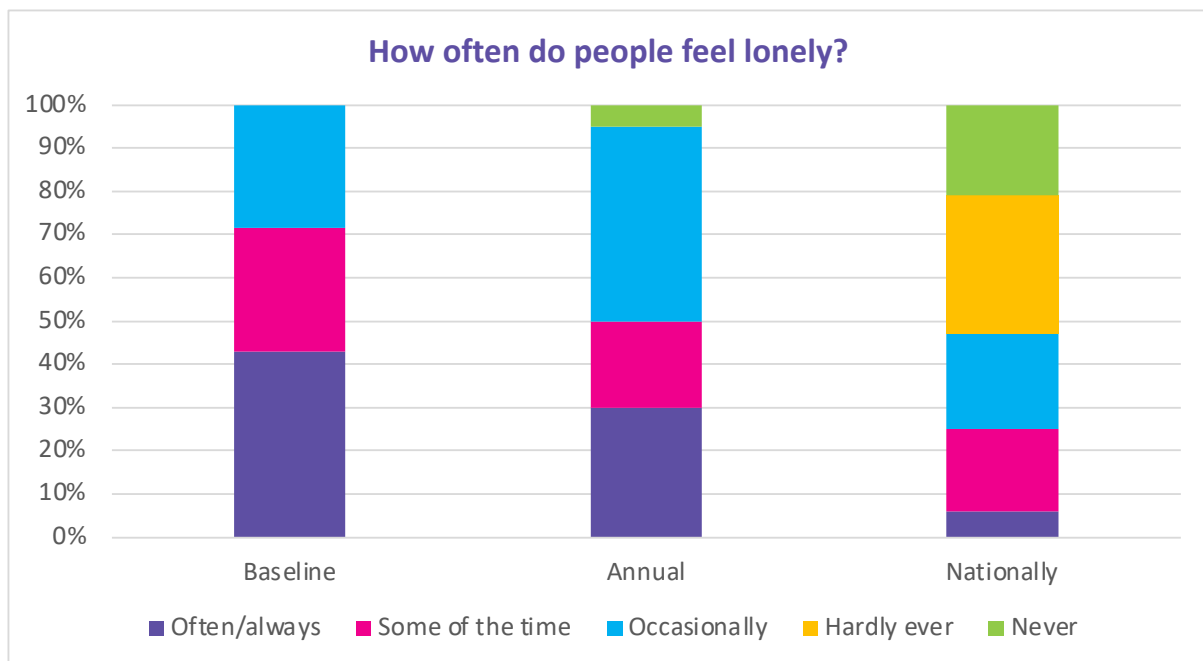
So amazing to have our friends together, lovely to chat to so many people. Those art works are just fabulous, such talent. Just a big thank you. I loved today but then all the meetings we have make me feel special. (Volunteer/Client).

4. Changes for clients

Clients feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community and reduced their loneliness and isolation.

We have selected a number of measures from inter/nationally validated surveys to demonstrate change across the project. Because we are transitioning from one set of measurement tools in the previous project to new ones more relevant to the current aims and some clients started with the old measures, averages between the baseline surveys and the annual survey have been used to demonstrate change.

This is the single loneliness question taken from the recommendation in the Government loneliness strategy¹. The graph below demonstrates less loneliness at the end of the first year than when clients first joined. The final column shows the national average for this indicator, demonstrating that Community Champions clients are considerably lonelier than the general population².



¹

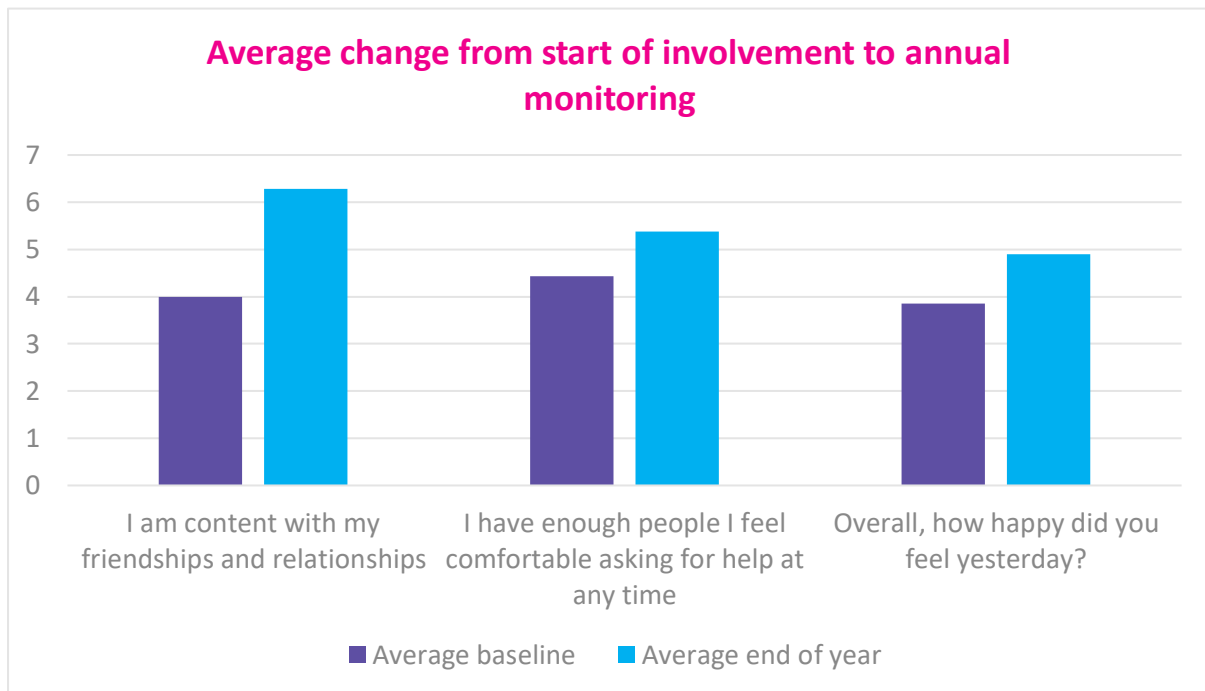
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/measuringlonelinessguidanceforuseofthenationalindicatorsonsurveys>

² Taken from the Community Life survey 2020-21, available from

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-wellbeing-and-loneliness#loneliness>

The next set of results are from a range of scales, Harvard’s Flourishing measure³, the Campaign to End Loneliness scale⁴, and one of the Office for National Statistics four wellbeing questions⁵. They were all measured on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high) and demonstrate improvements across each:

- I am content with my friendships and relationships
- I have enough people I feel comfortable asking for help at any time
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?



Finally we asked a question from the Community Life survey⁶ about whether clients had someone to listen when they needed to talk. This one shows a worsening of results, unlike the other indicators. It is not entirely clear why this may be the case, one explanation could be that people are feeling more positive at the point of entry into Community Champions when they are about to get some help, but the day-to-day reality can be that with the client’s health conditions and medical appointments (and similar and holidays for volunteers), volunteer visits can be less regular than people had originally hoped for. Further factors include that inevitably some people’s health and mobility can decline during the project, or the health of family and friends

³ VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A., 31:8148-8156.

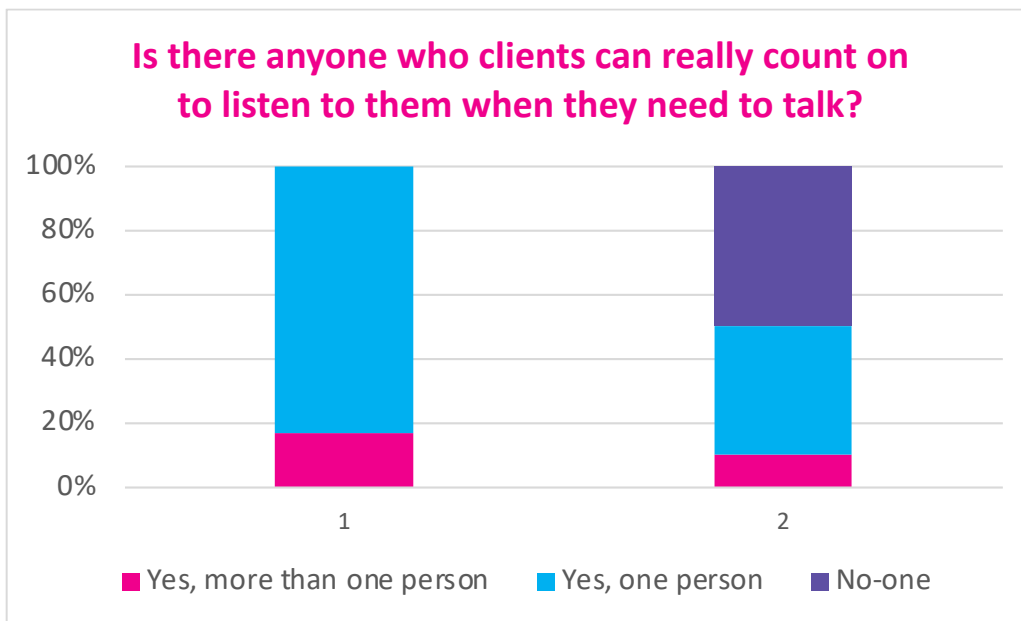
⁴ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/evaluation/>

⁵

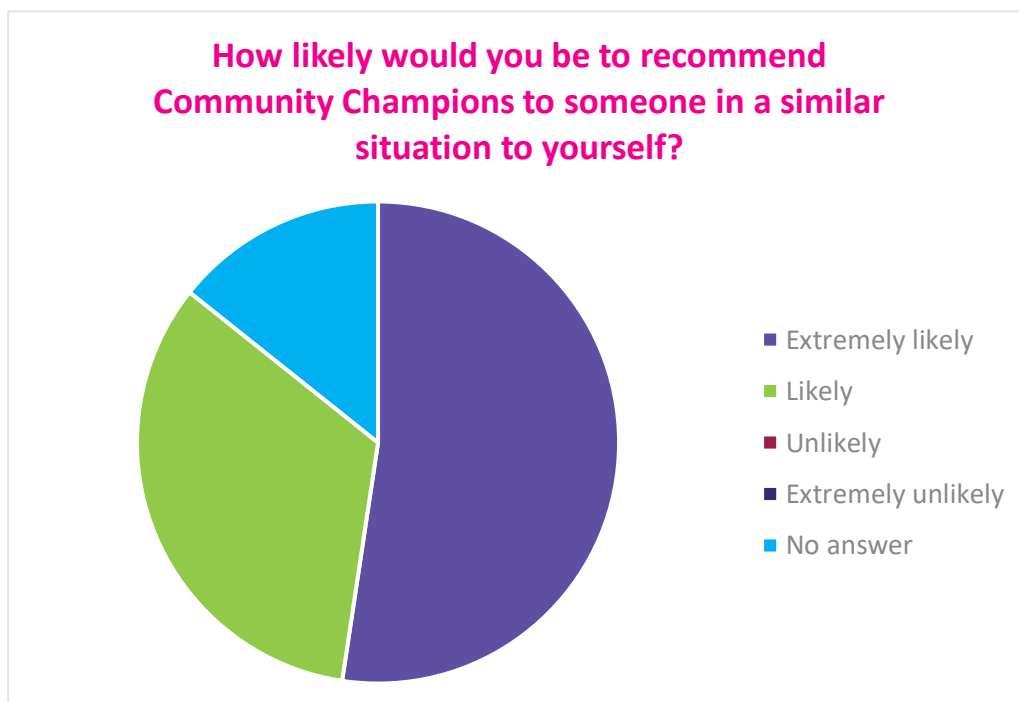
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingssurveyuserguide> - although note that these are currently undergoing further development

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-identity-and-social-networks>

can worsen or there are bereavements, which mean clients lose people to talk to. Some clients forget that they have a volunteer to talk to, and we find that clients that come to us via social prescribers have a higher level of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, which affect their experience. It may also be that clients feel more willing to state that they have no one to talk to with a closer relationship with us. On the other hand, the effect may be due to changing monitoring systems and the effect of reduced data. It is something we will review this year.



Clients were very positive about recommending Community Champions, with no one saying that they were unlikely to recommend it.



4.1 Changes for digital clients

Digital Volunteers clients will have increased their digital connections and ability to access online services.

The number of clients accessing digital support via the libraries and at home has increased this year.

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OPINION

VASL *Volunteering* with VASL

Help is available for your IT queries

When I left school I started working in payroll and every one of the 800 employees I looked after had an individual card with any alterations to their pay handwritten on it, and updating each one with an annual pay rise took hours.

Now I would just press a button all the records would be updated in a second.

In those days the payroll information was entered by the date processing operators who 'punched' punch cards which were fed into a machine which filled a large room.

Technology has changed so much and the changes just keep coming, sometimes it can be very frustrating.

During lockdown things moved on even more, I kept saying 'No that's it, I can't learn anything else, my brain is full!'

But then I'd have another go and work it out.

We are fortunate in the office because we have an IT support team we can ring, but at home it isn't the same.

However, if you are over 60 and you live alone in Harborough district you can come along to the library on the first Wednesday of the month in Market Harborough and the second Monday of the month in Lutterworth and ask some questions.

Some of the questions we hear are straightforward.

Can you show me how to sort my emails so that I can put all my utility bills in the same place?

How can I send a photograph of my winter cactus to my daughter?

I've got to go to a hospital in Coventry, can I use my phone to give me directions?

Is Windows 11 any different to Windows 10? or 'What is a QR code?'

At other times people ask us bigger questions - 'What does the internet do?'

How can I be sure that I won't get scammed?' 'Where have my emails gone?'

Sometimes we can answer the question in one session, sometimes we set up regular meetings either in the library or at home.

There is no charge for this service as we are funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Our digital volunteers are very patient, and they understand that we don't all learn in the same way and some of us need to go through things several times before we get it.

So if you (or an older member of your family) could do with a bit of IT support, get in touch with our Community Champions team on 01835 439262 or email champions@vasl.org.uk and we will find out what you need to know and make an appointment for you to see one of our volunteers.

*Jenny Young
Community Champions
Befriending Officer*



Digital support for people has been publicised in the Harborough Mail – click the picture for a link

The requests for digital support this year have moved towards **smartphones** and away from tablets and computers. Volunteers have requested training on comparisons and differences between Android and Apple products and customising a phone for people with disabilities.

As a result of the digital support clients have been able to:

- Read and send texts to friends.
- Send and manage emails and email folders.
- Order takeaways online.
- Do online shopping.
- Use technology as part of a job search.

Volunteers commented on the differences in clients that they had seen as a result of their support,

She has a new mobile and I taught her how to use the phone call function, text function, input new contacts, add favourites and how to do airplane mode.

More confidence in using IT for easy communication with friends and family.

4.2 What changes have volunteers noticed in their clients?

We ask volunteers what changes they notice in clients, sometimes they have noticed something that the client has changed and started to take for granted or forgotten about.

My client has said that she feels much more confident and feels she has made lots of friends and embarked on new adventures.

They are grateful for the opportunity to share their concerns with someone who is not a family member or close friend. They value impartiality.

During our chats on the phone we have exchanged ideas about things that are happening in our area, and shopping tips.

Their wellbeing has improved as they are able to chat, discuss difficulties and have a laugh.

We have enjoyed similar craft hobbies and enjoy our get together and bring back memories of years gone by.

Below is a summary of volunteers' comments about changes they had noticed for clients,

Positive impact on wellbeing

- Clients looking forward to telephone calls and visits, enjoying chats about life.
- Feeling important and valued due to the presence of volunteers.
- Clients feeling their visits are crucial to their wellbeing.
- Increased happiness and improved wellbeing.
- Greater sense of belonging and community spirit.
- Feeling less isolated and happier.

Improved technological confidence and skills

- Increased confidence in using ICT and digital communication tools.
- Improved ability to operate devices and technology.
- Learning new skills, like using mobile phones, texting, and social media.
- Boost in confidence in using technology for communication with friends and family.

- Improved wellbeing due to chatting, discussing difficulties, and sharing laughter.
- Feeling of happiness and anticipation from visits.

Increased personal connection and companionship

- Building relationships and rapport with volunteers, providing companionship.
- Feeling someone outside their immediate circle cares and takes an interest.
- Value in sharing concerns with someone impartial.

Broadened horizons

- Exchanging ideas about local events, shopping tips, and activities.
- Embarking on new adventures and forming new friendships.

Increased social engagement and enrichment

- Enabling clients to engage in activities and conversations, reducing social isolation.
- Offering opportunities to attend gatherings and virtual sessions.
- Access to group meetings and increased enjoyment from them.

Lack of change

One volunteer felt that some clients might still remain lonely and another thought that their involvement with one client had been more successful than with another.

4.3 Community Friends

Clients and volunteers will have become “Community Friends” with their volunteers, continuing the relationship outside of the project

After a year we ask volunteers and their clients if they feel their facilitated volunteer-client relationship has become a friendship. We see this as a real success. If both agree, we send them a letter or email confirming the change in status. We then ask volunteers if they have the capacity to take on another client as a volunteer.

This year fewer volunteers have felt comfortable becoming Community Friends than in other years because of the fear of having the sole responsibility for their client, many of whom have long-term illnesses,

I would rather stay within the confines of the project so I know I can call on the Community Champions team for any help and support I need. This really helps my peace of mind.

Some volunteers have agreed to become Community Friends and take on another client which is excellent. The majority however say that they will use the time to now

see their Community Friend, so we lose that volunteer from the project. Community Friends can still come to project events and receive a project newsletter for a year but the pattern we notice is that Community Friends tend to drift away.

This loss of Community Friends volunteers puts pressure on the project as we have a steady stream of client referrals, and like other charities we have challenges in recruiting volunteers. The result is a client waiting list, which we manage through “kindness calls” where a volunteer rings unmatched clients for a check in. A staff member also calls and signposts them to other services like Silver Line or Lifeline.

4.4 Changes on the Next Steps course

Clients will have developed their independence, resilience and agency, and have made progress towards achieving their goals that they identified in their initial client assessment (or subsequent updates)

Clients will have been able to participate in small or large group activities inside or outside Community Champions

Clients have more information about activities that are appropriate to them and / or know where to go for further sources of information.

The Next Steps course has been a new initiative for Community Champions. It came out of previous learning that we wanted to take a more proactive approach to supporting people to take positive steps, providing a peer group to encourage them. It was designed and co-facilitated by a former Community Champions volunteer, trained coach and facilitator, Wendy Aspland.

Loneliness

- How is loneliness affecting your life and what would you like to be different?
- What one thing would you like to try that perhaps you've not done, for whatever reason?

Experimentation

- What experiment could you try?
- Thinking about the one thing you identified earlier, is there an experiment there for you?

VASL

VASL

Slides from the Next Step sessions

Twelve people, clients and volunteers, completed the first course and seven took part in the second. Participants' comments on how they would use the learning were:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| To keep me moving forward | Stay positive | Make sure I do the rummy club |
| Help others | Try to take up new experiences and make new friends | To look for new avenues |
| To try new things | To promote groups | By keeping in touch with people |
| To keep my brain working | Listen more but don't take things personally | |

Actions that people have committed to as a result are:

- Starting a radio broadcasting course at Hfm
- Joining the leisure centre
- Volunteering at the Christmas Day lunch
- Setting up a card games group that has been joined by some Community Champions clients and some outside the project
- Taking clients out for lunch
- Going out with neighbours
- Joining the u3a
- Setting up a WhatsApp group so people on the course can stay in touch

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HARBOROUGH MAIL

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OPINION



Volunteering

with VASL

Helping others take the next steps

During 2023, I had the pleasure and honour of being part of the design and facilitation of the new Next Steps course with VASL.

This learner-led course is aimed at helping clients take their 'next steps' after being part of the community champions project.

Over the three sessions that we met, we explored how loneliness was impacting our lives and what might be possible for us in our future in ways that felt right to us.

We used some key principles to support us in our exploration, such as openness, courage and trust.

By sharing our stories, we created an atmosphere of trust and openness, built on the

agreement of safety and confidentiality.

You can imagine the amazing tales from a group of people with the level of life experiences that was in the room. Just incredible.

We used the concept of experimenting to look at ideas of things we could try.

By using experimenting rather than goal setting, we open ourselves up to possibilities we might not currently know, rather than limiting ourselves to one predetermined outcome.

Add in some courage, and we can stretch ourselves out of our comfort zone, again in a way that feels right for us.

We also learned some techniques to help us with confidence and momentum.



We looked at how our mind gremlins can get in the way of our decisions but that we get to choose how to respond to them.

We looked at practising gratitude as a way of bringing joy into our lives.

We looked at how to deal with setbacks, when the reality of life is not straightforward! And we shared many ideas for activities in our resilience jars, that we could take home

The new VASL Next Steps course taught techniques to help people with confidence and momentum

and use whenever we wanted to.

Running this course was a highlight of my personal development career.

The level of trust in the room was heart-warming, the personal stories shared served to set the tone for possibilities.

Nothing was right or wrong, ideas for experiments were shared and the support and encouragement provided to one other was inspiring.

We had tears and laughter, confidence and nerves, joy and sadness.

All of it was welcomed and underneath it was a determination to take a next step.

It was truly humbling to be part of the magic that is created when a group of people with a shared sense of purpose get

together.

By the time we finished session three, there was boldness, confidence, empowerment, inspiration, ideas and creativity.

A WhatsApp group had been set up to keep in touch, people had their 'next steps', and we applauded and congratulated each other for being part of this incredible experience.

Wendy Aspland, course facilitator

Harborough Mail report about the first Next Steps course – 26 January 2023

Comments included,

Thank you so much for this course it has really helped give me ideas and meet new people. Life has setbacks, but don't give up, everything has cracks, but they let the light in!

VASL has changed my life, it's given me confidence and direction.

We reported progress in the *Harborough Mail* to publicise the work that we are doing to others, which might encourage them to get involved (see above and below). There is also more information about Next Steps on the [VASL website](#).

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OPINION

VASL INCLUDE • INVOLVE • IMPROVE

Volunteering

Rohini Corfield
Community Champions
Manager

Having courage to tackle loneliness

We know from the media that loneliness is prevalent across society, for all age groups. We also know that loneliness is detrimental to our physical health and well-being at an individual level and leads to isolated communities. What can we do to tackle loneliness?

VASL's Community Champions project has developed a course called Next Steps, to help clients think about what they can do to make more social connections.

The course is delivered over three sessions by Wendy, and each session has a theme – the first one explores what loneliness is, and how it affects each person in their own context, in session two we explore what tools we can use to address our fears – comparing our perceptions with reality, and choosing our beliefs and mindset.

People are encouraged to try an experiment that will bring them in contact with a new person, or someone they have not been in contact with for a while – maybe talking to a neighbour, ringing an old friend, joining a community event to talk to a stranger or sending a contact an email or text.

Clients feedback about their experiment in session three, where we also signpost people to a variety of local activities suitable for older people (eg, coffee mornings, lunches, quizzes, exercise groups etc) and discuss developing a social fitness plan – thinking of concrete things we can do to make new connections and grow our network of contacts.

Seven people (five clients and two volunteers) took part in the second Next Steps course.

The group were also inspired by Diana, who talked about how doing the first Next Steps course gave her and Annie the confidence to set up a card playing group.

This time people's experiments led to them meeting a new person for lunch, being taken out to a garden centre by neighbours who were doctors, and re-considering joining the University of the Third Age.

Some people who had health, emotional and mobility challenges shared how difficult it was to get out and try new things. "I have had two hip operations and just can't get out without help"

At the last session certificates were presented to celebrate all that people had learnt and contributed. All reported how much they enjoyed the company and contributions of all group members.

"To my surprise the course has had a transforming effect on my life – it was something that Wendy said, if you are lucky enough to have climbed step by step to the top of your ladder the challenge is not to try even more challenges but not to fall off and accept as the years go by you may have to go down a step and perhaps try and do more for other people"

What can you do to improve your social fitness?

People are encouraged to try an experiment that will bring them in contact with a new person



VASL's Community Champions project has developed a course called Next Steps

Harborough Mail report about the second Next Steps course - 22 June 2023

5. What makes a difference?

5.1 What do clients say has made a difference to them?

The companionship provided by volunteers has helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness. Having a volunteer with similar interests to engage in meaningful conversation is valuable,

There's lots on offer and it can really help, although unfortunately I can't do all of it because of physical limitations. My volunteer has similar interests we get on really well and have lots to talk about.

The regular interactions provide a structure to people's weeks and gives people something to look forward to,

My volunteer is lovely, and we have lots of conversation, I look forward to visits.

It helps to talk to someone, we chat away, I update my volunteer on my week.

It also helps to have someone who checks in on clients and genuinely cares about wellbeing, particularly for people without family connections,

It's good to have someone that checks on you and you can laugh with and they come to see how you are.

It's nice to have a call, I have no family locally, my daughter lives a long way away.

For some clients the relationship becomes a friendship,

We've really hit it off, we get on really well, I really look forward to her visits, she has become a true friend.

Telephone befriending has helped for some clients, allowing them to engage in conversations and updates about their lives. Some clients prefer telephone befriending because of mobility issues, it's easier than going out, they don't want volunteers to come to their homes, or because they just like talking on the phone.

Community Gatherings (reported in section 2.1) are always popular. The minibus is essential for clients who cannot travel there otherwise, but provides a further function, as in previous years clients commented on the opportunity to chat on the minibus as they travel in,

Community Champions is very good, I enjoy going to Community Gatherings - coffee and cake and conversations on the bus and table.

5.2 What do volunteers think makes a difference?

Volunteers gave similar answers to clients about what makes a difference to people's loneliness, although were more likely to mention psychological and emotional factors important in clients having a greater sense of wellbeing.

The connection between volunteer and client	<p>Finding common interests that make conversations easy.</p> <p>Improved talkativeness and enjoyment of visits.</p> <p>Feeling engaged, cared for, and having someone interested in shared interests.</p> <p>Building relationships that become more pleasurable over time.</p> <p>Appreciating support, understanding, and non-judgmental relationships.</p>
The social engagement provided through the volunteer and group activities	<p>Providing companionship and a non-medical, non-family presence.</p> <p>Stopping isolation through gatherings, clubs, and meetings.</p> <p>Knowing they will receive regular visits, adding companionship.</p>
Psychological stimulation	<p>External stimulus from reading selected novels in book groups.</p> <p>Gaining knowledge and adapting to restrictions during lockdown.</p> <p>Enhanced confidence, willingness to learn, and adaptability.</p> <p>Sharing knowledge about local areas, changes over decades, and everyday life.</p>
Feeling "held" and kept in mind	<p>Feeling safer in the world and having a little more security.</p> <p>Bringing care and attention, especially when family members are involved.</p> <p>Providing regular telephone calls and digital sessions.</p>
Sparking interests and activities	<p>Offering practical advice, like cooking tips and suggestions.</p>

	Offering suggestions for enhancing social life and suggesting places to visit.
Digital connection	Improved confidence and willingness to use devices like smartphones and WhatsApp.

5.3 Where positive change is difficult

Whilst Community Champions is valued whilst people are involved, there are still issues around long-term changes for some clients – for many this may be inevitable because of illness or frailty, particularly for people with no family and limited financial resources. For some there genuinely are very few options for people to get out and longer-term support is needed.

It was good to get a visitor, but I haven't seen them for a while now, so it feels just as lonely as before. I haven't got any friends or visitors.

I'm devastated that my digital volunteer can't still visit.

It helps at the time but it's not a lasting feeling, getting regular calls does help, I know you're there if I need you.

What do volunteers think hinders changes for clients?

Five volunteers said that there hadn't been any hinderances, of those that mentioned things, health challenges were the most common.

Health and physical limitations	<p>Health problems affecting clients' abilities.</p> <p>Hearing problems affecting communication.</p> <p>Inability to do activities due to physical limitations.</p> <p>Isolation and limited ability to get out and about.</p> <p>Specific learning needs posing challenges.</p>
Technological and practical challenges	<p>Technological glitches impacting progress.</p> <p>Transportation challenges affecting participation – not only challenges for the client, one volunteer said that she thought both of her clients had waited a while for a volunteer who was able to travel.</p> <p>Difficulty in buying small portions of food in supermarkets (note: this is presumably in relation to eating to keep healthy or possibly to cost of living worries, which may affect mental wellbeing).</p> <p>Decreased attendance to groups due to life situations.</p> <p>Caring for pets becoming difficult.</p>

Time and commitments on behalf of client and volunteer

Not having enough time to fully engage
Irregular contact due to volunteer's other commitments or client's health or other factors

Psychological factors

Grief and emotional challenges affecting engagement.
Shyness and hesitancy to attend group meetings.
Clients finding that they know fewer and fewer people at each Gathering (this could be due to health issues or bereavement, or could be because people are moving on from the project)

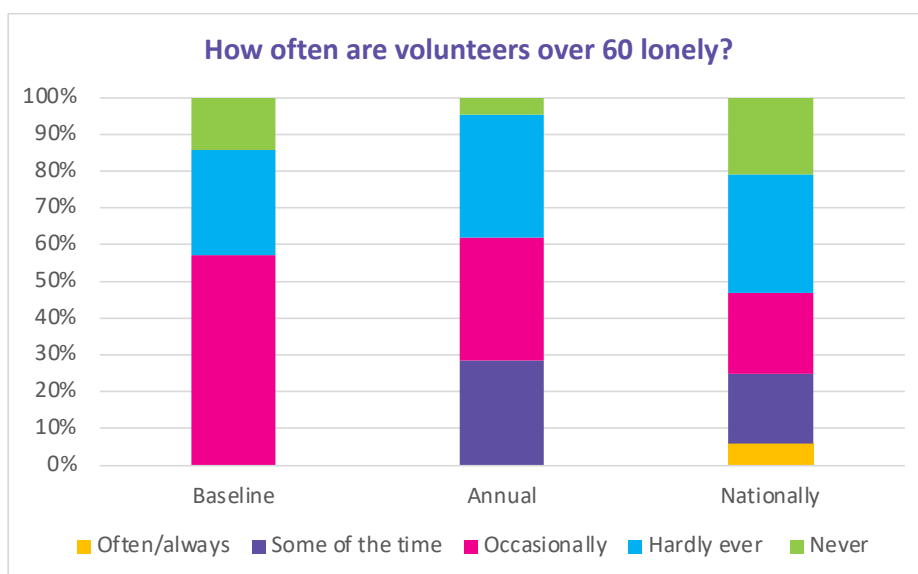
6. Changes for volunteers

Volunteers feel that their involvement in Community Champions is meaningful and rewarding.

Volunteers feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community and volunteers over 60 will have reduced their loneliness and isolation.

We ask volunteers the same survey questions as we ask clients, so that we can track changes for volunteers over 60 in particular, recognising that volunteering can be a good way of reducing loneliness and isolation. Because of difficulties linking up answers from baseline to annual surveys (existing volunteers don't complete a baseline survey each year, and new volunteers don't always complete an annual survey) we use averages from each survey.

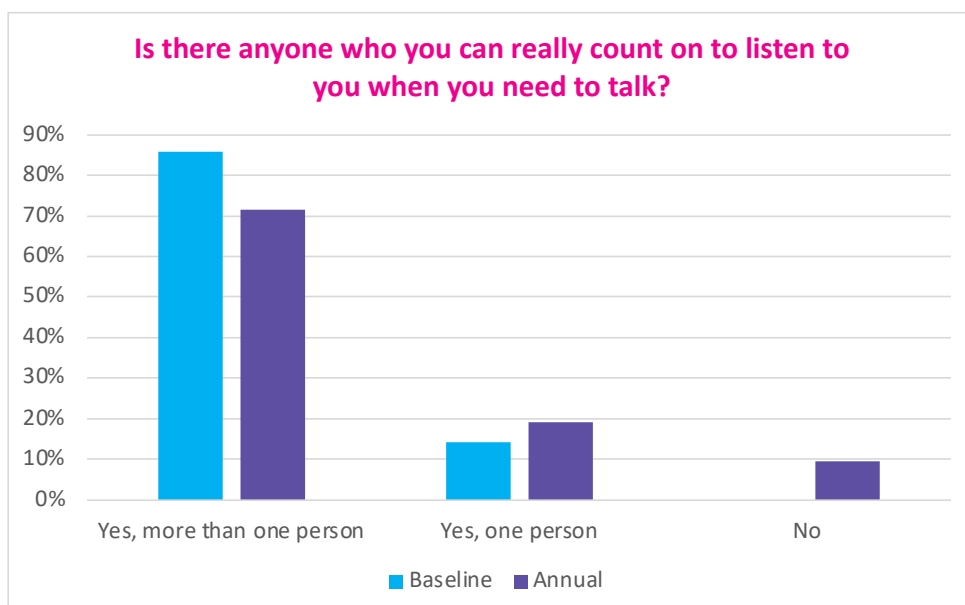
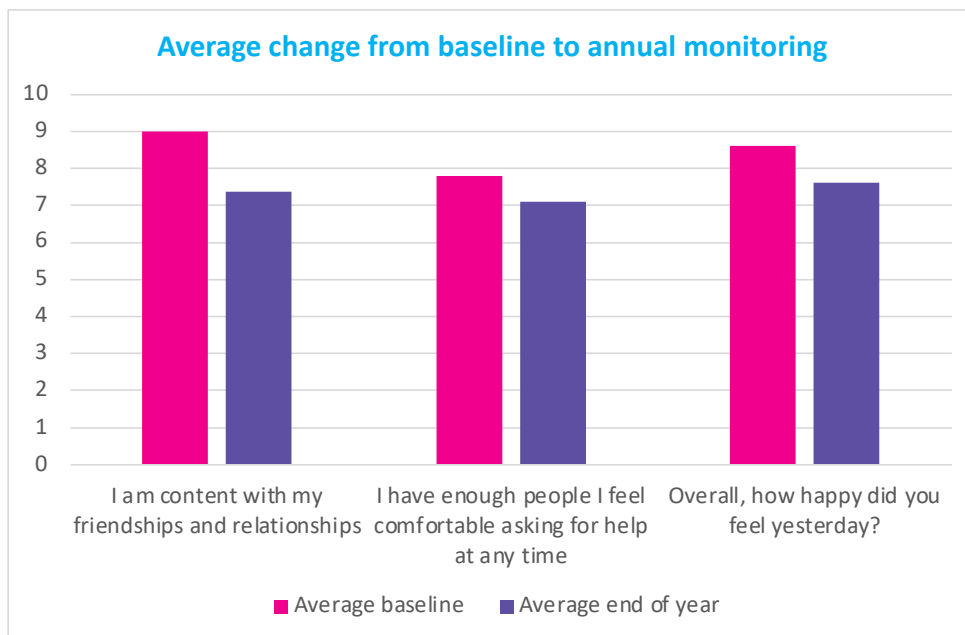
The results of the questions for volunteers over 60 show generally a positive picture, our volunteers, unlike our clients, are less lonely than the national average. However, the results across the questions show a worsening over the year. Again, this could be because we are working with small numbers, and so a problem with measurement, as they contradict the positive responses we have had from the qualitative questions. Another explanation could be that working around issues of loneliness and isolation could make volunteers feel more aware of their own situations, either now or in the future.



Community Champions previously ran a five-hour face-to-face volunteer training session, this has moved online which works effectively in terms of the training but

may have an impact on volunteer connection. Another effect of the pandemic has been that more clients than volunteers come to Community Gatherings, which may be related to the demographics of volunteers. An option could be to run more socials for volunteers, there are opportunities for volunteers to meet together and to come to wider Community Champions events, but this needs to be balanced against the aims of the project as a whole. As volunteers are generally answering positively to these questions, even with decreases, there is perhaps not a significant problem to solve, and with limited resources, the focus is, rightly, on clients.

For the statements below we asked volunteers on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely”, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement:



6.1 How did volunteers hope to help?

This question was asking about the impact that volunteers might have on others.

Reduce loneliness and increase wellbeing	<i>Provide company on a regular basis and thereby help to alleviate loneliness. Make them feel better.</i> <i>To help enrich their lives so their confidence/skills/sociability/mental health/quality of life can grow by them achieving a goal.</i>
Link people with others	<i>If possible, to help the client to be more active in the community by joining events and meeting others.</i> <i>To reduce their isolation, involve them in VASL's activities, encourage better online confidence - to help them feel part of a community.</i> <i>I hope in some cases it will build confidence for them to socialise and meet other people.</i>
Give people something to look forward to	<i>Provide company and hopefully an interesting conversation. Something for them to look forward to.</i> <i>I hope that it will reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation and bring something for them to look forward to each week.</i>
Help clients with technology	<i>Instilling confidence in the use of technology.</i> <i>Teach digital skills to enable communication with friends and family thus helping to reduce loneliness. To enable clients better deal with the needs of modern life.</i>

6.2 What did volunteers hope to gain from volunteering?

Reasons that volunteers gave in the baseline survey about what they wanted to get out of it were sometimes similar, but also focused on the purpose and reward that they get from volunteering.

Enhancing someone's life	<i>To feel I've made a lonely person's life happier.</i> <i>Helping people who are lonely and giving them something to look forward to</i>
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	<i>Making a small difference to my client's day. This will improve my day too</i>
Increasing skills	<i>More confidence in talking with people</i>
Enjoyment, purpose and satisfaction	<p><i>To feel useful and purposeful.</i></p> <p><i>Doing something worthwhile in retirement.</i></p> <p><i>Satisfaction in contributing to my community in a positive way and more awareness of possibilities open to clients that may enrich their lives in any way.</i></p> <p><i>I very much enjoy writing to others and the conversations and communications and rapport building that happens with pen pals and getting to know another human and find commonality. I hope to help enrich the lives and support vulnerable and isolated people in the community.</i></p>
Giving back	<p><i>I would like to broaden my world with clients and volunteers and give back to others.</i></p> <p><i>I used to be a secondary school teacher and have always wanted to give something back to the community.</i></p>

6.3 How has volunteering impacted volunteers?

Volunteers described a mix of skills and other changes as a result of their volunteering.

Interpersonal skills and empathy

- Improved listening skills and learning from conversations.
- Understanding different people's needs and challenges.
- Developing relationships and rapport with isolated individuals.
- Enhanced communication and interactive skills, including empathy.
- Increased confidence in interacting

Having an impact and contributing

- Feeling lucky and happy to contribute to others.
- Feeling needed and valued by the community.
- Increased awareness of loneliness and happiness in helping.
- Feeling useful and making a difference to others.
- Making a difference and stopping

with various people.

- Patience and empathy, especially with challenging clients.
- Boost in self-confidence.
- Positive impact on mental health by meeting people and exercising listening skills.

Learning and growth

- Learning about Android smartphones, iPhones, tablets, and iPads.
- Increased understanding of the challenges of aging and infirmity.
- Widened knowledge of different volunteering opportunities.
- Learning from clients about their jobs and skills.
- Gained more knowledge about the local area.
- Gaining insight into various health issues, disabilities, and people's skills.

Awareness and understanding

- Increased understanding of people's health issues.
- Expanded knowledge about topics like First Aid, mobility scooters, wheelchairs, and hospital parking.
- Becoming aware of various health issues, disabilities, and people's skills.

loneliness for both volunteers and clients.

- Contributing positively to the community and helping the elderly.
- Adapting to diverse disabilities and challenges.
- Truly appreciating the value of community networks.
- Feeling of giving back to the community and being part of something worthwhile.
- Sense of fulfilment and satisfaction.

Connection and engagement

- Sociability and better communication with volunteers, clients, and staff.
- Increased engagement with older people.
- Expanded social circle with new friends and acquaintances.
- Feeling part of a team and community networks.
- Engagement with like-minded volunteers and joining activities like a local choir.
- Engaging more with members of the book group online.
- Feeling valued by staff.

6.4 What would volunteers have done otherwise?

We ask what volunteers would have done if they didn't volunteer for Community Champions to find out whether the community connection focusing on older people would be likely to exist without this project.

Interestingly there were more volunteers who said that they would have volunteered with a project not specifically with older people than a project with older people, perhaps because of a lack of other opportunities with older people in the district

depending on which part of the district that people live in as Harborough is geographically the largest district in Leicestershire, covering 230 square miles, which is nearly a quarter of the county.

Without Community Champions, the opportunity to connect volunteers with older people in much of the district would be lost.

Volunteer for another project with older people



Volunteer for a project not specifically with older people



Undertake more social or leisure activities



Don't know



Volunteers answering the baseline survey just after training were very positive about the induction and welcome that they got from Community Champions,

It was nice to be invited to the Xmas lunch when I had only just become involved - this felt v welcoming.

Everything seems to be so well organised. I have been able to join the monthly book group already!

Seems very efficient and well organised.

I am impressed with the Community Champions team. The staff are friendly and efficient, and the work appears to be very well organised.

Very positive, efficient, welcoming, professional, friendly, kind, fun team.

6.5 The best thing about Community Champions

Volunteers are asked what they think the best thing is about Community Champions. Answers relating to connections with other people are mentioned most.



Volunteers' comments included,

Feeling useful

The thanks we get and the clients' happiness after an event

Smiling faces

Contributing to the community and meeting like-minded people

Giving me a routine to my early retirement and a sense of purpose.

Getting to know more people in our local area

Talking and meeting like-minded people.

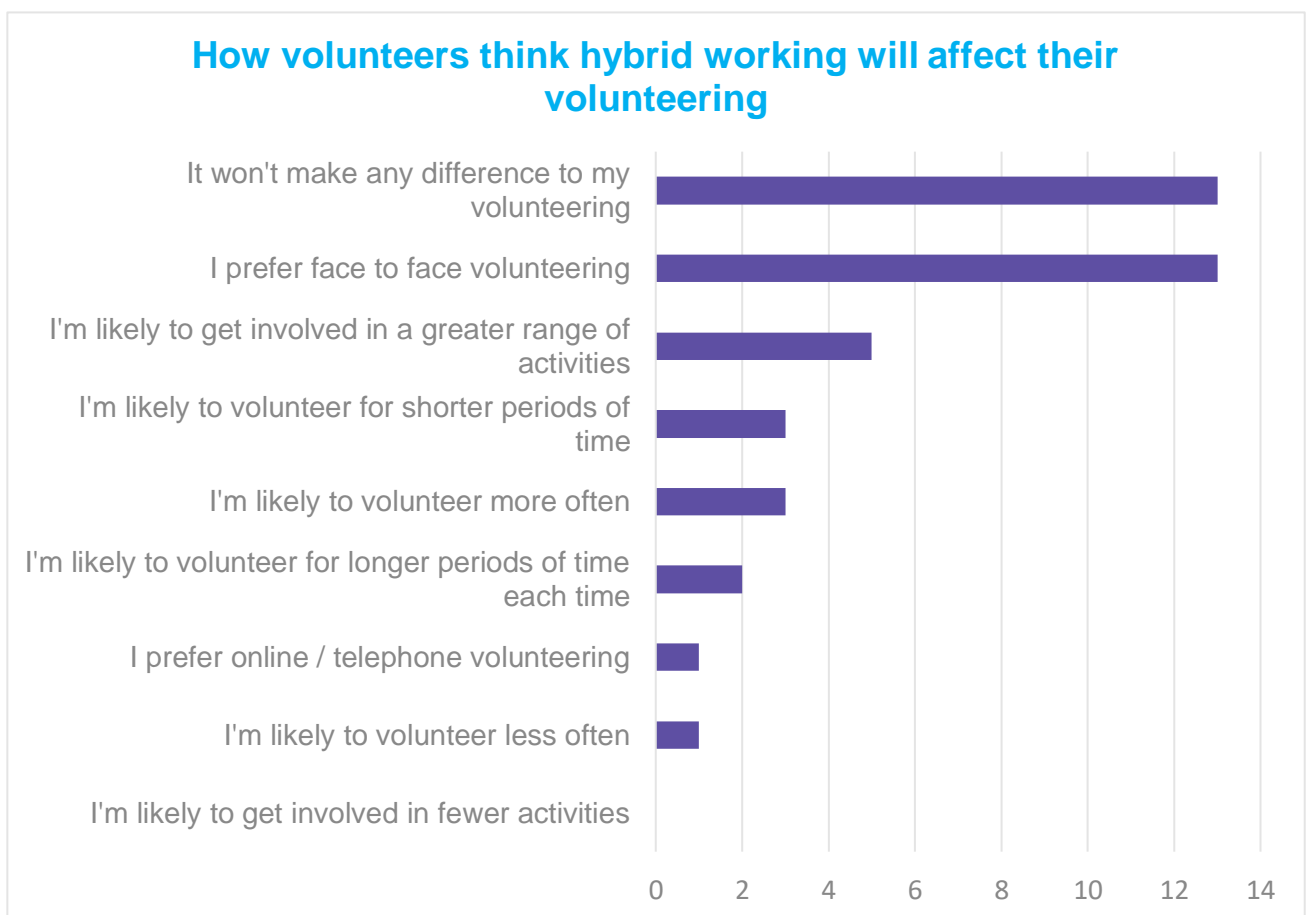
7. Systems and partnerships

7.1 Hybrid working

Hybrid working seems to be working effectively, giving both clients and volunteers different options to suit their personalities and situations,

Hybrid working is going well

The mix of hybrid working seems to work well.



The results above and the comments emphasise that many volunteers feel that face-to-face communication is best,

I think face to face is the most effective.

The Gatherings are the thing clients like best if transport is available for more trips.

I think the personal visits are very important and encourage conversation.

There were a couple of comments about how one-off or occasional opportunities for telephone clients might help with strengthening a relationship over the telephone,

Get togethers, face-to-face, for those who are telephone clients; to take place in the local vicinity i.e. not just Market Harborough.

I am interested to see if meeting face-to-face at least once can help with the telephone contact.

There was one suggestion that starting by telephone might lead to face-to-face visits in the future, this would mean flexibility from volunteers in relation to methods of contact. The individual needs of each client were mentioned by other volunteers,

Have more air time on Harborough FM to let people know about Community Champions and they can start with a telephone call before progressing to home visits if they so wish.

It seems to depend on whether the client prefers regular or occasional home visits and how often they like to speak on the telephone. Some like routine others are happy with ad hoc contact.

Canvas clients to find out what their expectations are.

A couple of volunteers mentioned problems they have with the telephone,

Telephone calls often do not work so well due to the hearing problems that I have.

I enjoy face to face interaction; I would find phone calls more difficult with my social anxiety.

The opportunity to attend Mini Zoom Gatherings was also highlighted, run by the digital volunteers, both for people who prefer to socialise in smaller groups and for people who cannot get out of the house but still want to socialise in a group larger than just their volunteer,

Mini Zoom sessions work well, especially for those who are not so mobile.

Some people prefer smaller groups.

One volunteer said that it would be nice if volunteers were allowed to take clients out of the house for a coffee – it's unclear about whether this is an issue with a particular

client's circumstance or whether it is just a telephone relationship, as many volunteers do take clients out to a number of different places, as integrating people into communities is a key aim of the project.

7.2 Suggestions to recruit more volunteers

You are doing great as it is, I wish I could motivate loads of people to do this work.

We were at u3a meeting and they spoke about VASL, and we were inspired to join. We also got a neighbour to join so I think word of mouth is the best way.

Most comments from volunteers were in relation to how Community Champions advertise roles, including:

- Use websites such as Nextdoor to get the message out.
- Open days or recruitment events at VASL, in local community buildings, and one request for recruitment events in Lutterworth.
- Have digital sessions in which potential volunteers can talk to each other (there were a couple of comments about pairing potential volunteers up).
- Leaflets in community venues.
- Target newly retired people, who are looking for things to do.

Some comments were about the messages that could go out in advertising,

- Promote on Facebook in the words of a client how they have benefited from the relationship with a volunteer.
- Carefully explain the roles and flexibility of the roles.
- There was one comment about promoting it as something that could help to improve people's self-worth. As the baseline scores for volunteers were fairly high on the wellbeing, loneliness and social connection questions it may be that there is a cohort of people who would benefit more from volunteering, but who aren't currently applying.
- On the VASL website have a section specifically for volunteering which includes volunteering opportunities (there is already a page with all of VASL's volunteering opportunities), but also positive comments from volunteers about volunteering with VASL, clients' feedback about being supported by a volunteer, photos, information about social events, staff name and contact details, so new volunteers know who to ring or e-mail.

One respondent commented on involving the volunteers that VASL already has with more clients,

Maybe have a few clients and one volunteer looking them on an hour or two meeting

7.3 The Community Champions steering group

Steering group members have been able to work with a range of other stakeholders to influence the direction of the Community Champions project.

The steering group meets three times a year and consists of VASL staff, volunteers, clients and trustees as well as external partners including both Leicestershire County and Harborough District Councils, with around 15-16 attending each meeting. There have been new members this year from Harborough Community Buses, a local area coordinator (employed by Leicestershire County Council), and the coach leading Next Steps. Over the year it has discussed issues including:

- Monitoring digital sessions in libraries
- Challenges recruiting volunteers
- How clients and volunteers are matched
- Delivering hybrid events
- Warm Spaces
- Zoom Book Club
- Promoting equality events
- The impact of photo identification for voting
- Cost of living support.

A client member of the steering group told us,

I thought the steering group last week was excellent, it was interesting that partners had so much local information to share. You make it easy for people to contribute, thank you. I really enjoy these lively meetings.

7.4 Other services working with isolated older people

Clients' needs are better met through Community Champions working effectively with other organisations including voluntary and community, social, leisure, and cultural activity groups and local business.

New partnerships have been developed this year with new ones include:



- Canal and River Trust
- Robert Smyth Academy (Human Library)
- Welcomm (digital training)
- Wendy Aspland, coach who delivers Next Steps.

7.5 Promotion of Community Champions

Community Champions will share learning through regular newsletters, and local media.

Press cuttings are included in previous sections. VASL also has a fortnightly slot on Hfm radio, and some include promotion of Community Champions activities to attract clients and volunteers.

Monthly newsletters are sent out to clients with a separate version sent to volunteers and partners.

 <p>Volunteer Newsletter February 2023</p> <p>Get in Touch: Rohini, Jenny, Sam & Denise. Mon - Thurs 9am - 5pm, Fri till 4.30pm. T: 01858 439 262 E: champions@vasl.org.uk Torch House, Torch Way, MH, LE16 9HL</p>	<p>January Community Gathering 20 people (clients, volunteers, staff and a guest speaker) met at The Roebuck on a bright cold January afternoon for the first gathering of 2023. Those coming by mini-bus had a long journey due to the various road closures, but did not let this delay affect their mood. Volunteers (Roger, Mary, Helen, Alan and Kim) welcomed all and ensured that people had hot drinks and plenty of cake to fuel conversations. People talked about being ill over the festive period, how much they had enjoyed the Christmas day community lunch, the excitement of hearing from friends in Australia and the chance to catch up with family. Rohini welcomed Paul to his first CG and gave short notices before introducing Luke, Community and Well-being Officer from Harborough District Council, who explained the local activities on offer for older people, including walks, Twilight Games, cycling and JUST, an activity programme for women, see Ww.active-harborough.org/ Annie talked about the difficulty in making digital bookings and asked for information about activities to be available in paper format. She also suggested holding events in the lounges of residential blocks, which often lay empty. "Thank you for this useful feedback" said Luke "we are keen to make it easy for people of all ages to take part in local activities so will act on what you suggest". "Another lovely afternoon, thank you for the information, company and nice cakes".</p>	<p>CC Steering Group The CC Steering Group is made up of volunteers, clients, staff and partner organisations (e.g. Harborough District Council, Leicestershire County Council) and meets to discuss how the project is reducing loneliness. 16 people met in January to hear CC project updates, VASL news and all fed back about their experience of the project. "As a client can I say how much I appreciate all the hard work you do, I have benefitted in so many ways, digital and social. Thank you". Topics discussed included Warm Spaces, Zoom Book Club, promoting Equality events, photo identification for voting (see next column for details) and Coat of Living support.</p>	<p>Local Elections and Voter ID requirements The UK Government has introduced a requirement for voters to show photo identification (ID) when voting at a polling station at some elections. This new requirement will apply for the first time in England, at the local elections on Thursday 4 May 2023 which are being held within the Harborough district. Residents who intend to vote in person at a polling station will need to show one form of ID. It needs to be the original version and not a photocopy. Valid forms of ID include: passport, driving licence, blue badge and some discount travel cards. If you don't have an accepted form of ID you can apply for a free voter ID document, known as a Voter Authority Certificate or apply to vote by post. Help with this is available by calling T: 0800 328 0280 or 01858 821 372 or E: a.services@harborough.gov.uk. They can also help with filling in the form.</p>
<p>This month Face to Face Community Gathering Tues 14 Feb 2 - 3.15pm. Welland Park Academy, Welland Park Road, Market Harborough. 20 places available, transport provided, priority will be given to current clients. Please call to book by 9am Thurs 9 Feb. You must call in to book a place as staff will not be calling to remind.</p> <p>Market Harborough Library Digital Session Weds 1 Feb. Lutterworth Library Digital Session Mon 13 Feb. Appointments available from 10.30am at both venues.</p> <p>Safeguarding Refresher Course Tues 21 Mar 10am - 12 noon. Torch House, Torch Way, Market Harborough. Open to all volunteers, aiming to explore what safeguarding means, what abuse and neglect are, signs to look out for and what to do if you have concerns.</p> <p>Zoom Book Club 2nd Weds each month, next is Weds 8 Feb 11am. The group will be discussing any novel by Jodi Piccolt. Call us for details of how to join.</p> <p>Zoom Mini Gathering Weds 22 Feb 2pm. Let us know if you are interested and a link will be sent to you nearer the time.</p> <p>Call or email Community Champions for details or to book on any session.</p>	<p>Steady Steps This weekly 1 hour course is designed to help people prevent and recover from falls. New courses are starting soon in Church Langton Tues 11.30am from the end of Feb and Kibworth on Weds 1.30pm from the end of March. Booking is essential by calling or emailing Kate Gardiner. M: 07818 580 419 E: activetogether@harborough.gov.uk</p>	<p>Next Steps Update After the end of the Next Steps course, participants formed a WhatsApp group to stay in touch, outside of the CC project. John fed back "The group is very active. The plan is to meet soon for coffee. It's nice to hear what everyone is doing, what they did for Xmas and New Year". One volunteer fed back on her experiment. Yvonne had completed the HFM broadcasting course, introduced 3 records on live radio and had written a blog about it for The Harborough Mail. "I am excited to see what comes next" she said. What a wonderful achievement and great example of trying new things to challenge ourselves. We will keep you updated about how the group progresses. The Next Steps course is again planned for Weds 26 April, 3 May and 24 May 10am - 12 noon, contact us if you are interested.</p>	<p>Walk and Talk Harborough Leicester Life Links, part of the Richmond Fellowship a charity providing mental health services, is now offering a monthly walk in Welland Park, Market Harborough. The meeting place is the café and there is no need to book. Held on the 3rd Thursday of each month from 1pm till 2pm they aim to create a friendly group and improve participants well being. Call T: 0800 0234 575 or see W: riflelinks.co.uk for more information.</p>
<p>Community Champions Volunteer Opportunities</p> <p>Community Champions is inviting you to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteer Catch Up Weds 8 Feb, 10 - 12 noon at Torch House. This will be a chance to meet other volunteers and staff informally, to share your volunteering highlights and challenges, and to seek solutions from the group. Wendy, a former CC volunteer and trained coach who is facilitating the Next Steps course will also share some tools you can use to stay focussed/be present during your volunteering. Volunteer training Weds 8 March 10 - 12 noon at Torch House. Learn how to "Help your clients move on from CC". CC Team and Wendy will suggest a mix of practical signposting suggestions and how to develop the relationship between volunteer and client. Next Steps (Weds 26 April, 3 and 24 May 10 - 12 noon at Torch House). Three informal sessions with or without your client, aiming to help them make connections beyond Community Champions. Any actions are tailored to the clients needs and interests. The first Next Steps course (pictured) has resulted in people trying all sorts of new things, from visiting family, completing a radio broadcasting course, setting up a cards group and meeting socially as a friendship group. Please let us know if you can come - we really enjoy meeting you. 	<p>Celebrating Equality, Diversity and Inclusion</p> <p>Dates for the diary this month are 21 Feb Shrove Tuesday, also known as Pancake Day and 22 Feb Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Also 1 March is St David's Day a celebration of the patron saint of Wales. February also marks LGBT+ history month, this year's theme being 'Behind the Lens'. Celebrating LGBT+ contributions to film and cinema. See W: lgbtplushistorymonth.co.uk/light-history-month-2023 for details of events and how to get involved. The progress flag will be flown this month at The Symington Building in support of our LGBT+ communities.</p>	<p>Carers Hospital Discharge Grant This is a one off grant administered by VASL Support For Carers, available to unpaid carers who look after a family member or friend. If you incur costs as a result of a hospital discharge you may be eligible. For example grants can be issued to support with cleaning, sitting services, fuel or loss of income as a result of caring after a hospital discharge. The grant is available by application online: W: supportforcarers.org/what-we-offer/carer-support-hospital-discharge-grant Alternatively T: 01858 463 543 or E: maureen@supportforcarers.org for more information and help with the form. The closing date is 31 Mar 2023 and eligibility criteria apply.</p>	<p>The winning photo from a national survey by the Canal and River Trust, The Grand Union Canal at Wistow, in the Harborough District.</p> 

The newsletters include details of activities coming up both within Community Champions and in the wider community, a report about activities in the previous month, and information about other services and activities in the community. They are all available on the Community Champions website.

VASL also has a weekly blog published in our local newspaper, The Harborough Mail, which the Community Champions Manager coordinates. Over the last year many of these blogs have been about Community Champions activities like Digital support, Next Steps, learning sessions, Human Library, some pictures of the blogs are included in this report. We often get feedback about these blogs,

It is so good to hear about all the community activities that VASL does, it gives us confidence to make donations.

7.6 Continual development of activities

VASL and Community Champions will be working more effectively to relieve loneliness and isolation.

VASL's profile and influence is increased as an expert in working with older people and the community in reducing loneliness and isolation.

Comments from volunteers emphasised the quality of support that they receive from staff at Community Champions and the wider organisation,

They appear to be very professional. I found my only session so far with a clients to be interesting and rewarding.

Meeting the office staff they are always so helpful.

Working with a deeply professional organisation and trying to give something back.

Feeling valued by the staff.

The help and support each staff member provides me, I feel very valued.



Community Champions staff, Rohini Corfield, Denise Heseltine, Jenny Young, Sam Gisborne

A comment from a client also compared Community Champions favourably with their experience of other services,

It's a good project, better than other projects I have used.

Developments that Community Champions has made this year include:

- Presenting **digital and befriending case studies** at each steering group as a prompt for discussion.
- **Project processes** have been allocated to specific staff, one officer is now leading on volunteer recruitment, with the manager doing follow up and the other officer leading on client assessments.
- The **administrator is now coordinating the monthly digital volunteer-led Zoom** to take pressure away from other staff.
- There is **more volunteer-led training**, for example the bladder health workshop and training on Android phones.

Other partnership activities have included:

- Regular **media appearances** on Hfm and Radio Leicester.
- Chairing **Leicester Befriending Network** to share experiences with similar projects across the area.
- VASL staff have been going out to give **more talks**, for example at retirement complex Welland Place, and have stalls at community events such as Lutterworth Age UK day, and a volunteer event in Market Harborough.
- The Community Champions manager was asked to **consider becoming a trustee** at Befriending Networks in recognition of her expertise, although she declined due to other commitments.
- The Community Champions manager was asked to give a **talk about recruiting and retaining volunteers** at a Voluntary Action LeicesterShire-VASL event because Community Champions is seen as an effective volunteer-involving project.

8. Future plans

Community Champions current activities to reduce loneliness amongst people over 60 living alone in Harborough District include a variety of interventions including face-to-face and telephone befriending, email and pen pals, and providing support with digital inclusion. We also organise regular social and learning events, including inter-generational contact. We have constantly learned from our experience and feedback from participants and stakeholders to be dynamic in developing from VASL's original one-to-one befriending to an active project community with many activities and more and more connections into the community each year.

New interventions we are planning to develop to reduce loneliness include embracing changes like the benefits of blue/green social prescribing such as client boat trips, Nature Connectedness sessions). We will also expand group befriending, volunteer-led groups and buddying relationships to build clients' agency. The Next Steps course has proved beneficial, and we will continue to roll this out, tweaking it based on learning and feedback.

Community Champions already incorporates much of the National Lottery Community Fund's community missions to enable people to connect in different ways (online and face to face), to promote environmental sustainability, to enable young people to thrive and encourage all to lead healthier lives. We will review all of our activities against them to identify where we could be doing more.

9. About VASL

Community Champions is part of VASL, a local charity providing services and support across Harborough District and Leicestershire.

VASL's mission is to improve and enrich the lives of people in our community by providing services as well as volunteer facilitated activities. Other services include Support for Carers, delivered across Leicestershire, including administering carers' hospital discharge grants; the Car Scheme providing transport for older, disabled or rurally isolated people; Mental Wellbeing Befriending providing mental health support; and a Dementia Guardians project.

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