

Community Champions Impact report 2023-24



“VASL Community Champions are amazing and have transformed our lives and given us the confidence to move out and do other things. Huge thank you to all who contribute to making it such an outstanding success.”

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is Community Champions?

Community Champions recruit 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 two years ago, so this is the second-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. 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 making new connections by joining local groups and activities
- 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.

102 “Community Friends” relationships since the start of Community Champions, pairs who now have an ongoing friendship and meet outside of the project (**14** 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

50 people have been helped by our digital volunteers either at Market Harborough or Lutterworth library, or via home visits.

- **26** clients have had home visits
- There have been **24** library digital sessions in total, **12** in Market Harborough and **10** in Lutterworth, helping **42** people through **77** appointments.

Please see our Digital Review Report for more detailed information about our progress in Digital inclusion, and the work of the Digital Volunteer Peer Team.

2. Events and activities

2.1 Community Gatherings

We have organised monthly Community Gatherings at a variety of cafes, golf clubs, pubs and a local secondary school across Harborough District. We use accessible Harborough Community buses to pick clients up from home, transport them to the venue and back home again. Clients enjoy the companionship of the journey, like getting out into the countryside over the summer and appreciate the patient help of the Volunteer drivers and CC team escorts. At the venue we provide refreshments (tea/coffee/cake) and have had a variety of speakers e.g. from Home Instead to talk about their Friendship Lunches, and The Vita Health Group to talk about free Talking Therapies available for older people with any worries.

Students who are studying for Health and Social Care qualifications at Welland Park Academy organise a Valentine and Christmas Community Gathering and decorate the tables, plan and serve refreshments, talk to clients, arrange entertainment and provide gift bags. These Gatherings are often cited as the ones that clients enjoy the most.

"Loved our time out, tea and cakes and venue were amazing. To see the animals, to touch them, was just wonderful. The sun shone on us all"

"I have made a new friend! We have swapped numbers. I have really enjoyed this event, thank you and I will book on the next one."

2.2 Other group activities

Zoom Book Club

A volunteer who is a retired English teacher hosted a monthly online book club and was skilful in involving clients with ideas for books and authors. Sadly, despite much promotion very few clients participated in the online book club, so this has now stopped. On a positive note, this volunteer now befriends a client who is a bibliophile, and they meet each week to talk books, which they both thoroughly enjoy.

Volunteer-led groups

We have the following groups: attendance numbers can vary but the volunteers and clients who attend really enjoy the camaraderie and informality of these groups. There is no pre-booking, no transport and people just turn up and pay for their refreshments.

Enigma Elevenses meets fortnightly in Market Harborough and is a social group

Walk and Talk enables volunteers/clients and their dogs to meet for a monthly walk, either in Market Harborough or Lutterworth. Clients with mobility scooters also join in, and the group usually go to the café afterwards. Members of the public and volunteer's children have also joined in.

Beanies, a monthly social group in Lutterworth is taking a break over the summer but plans to re-start in the autumn.

2.3 Intergenerational work

We organise **Human Library** sessions at Robert Smyth Academy where volunteers, clients and our partners give talks to different groups of students about their professional lives, hobbies or travel experiences. This year we had a 90-year client talk about her amazing life as a Social Work Senior manager and mother of three, a local author talk about his book on Niki Lauder, a volunteer talk about his 35-year career in the Prison Service, and a volunteer's daughter talk about the role of an Air Traffic Controller. Students ask intelligent questions and have reported how much they value these sessions. The school's Principal has written to all speakers thanking them for inspiring students by widening their horizons.

"The students have learnt so much from interacting with the older people" PA to Headteacher

Welland Academy host **themed Community Gatherings** for us (see 2.1 above); students and clients report they really enjoy this inter-generational dialogue.

"The students have been delightful. Thank you so much for the way you have looked after us". Client.

"This is always the best Community Gathering we have each year". Client

Ullesthorpe Primary School pupils make **Christmas cards** for our clients, which are cherished.

2.4 Learning sessions

We have provided accessible transport for a variety of face-to-face learning sessions – these are open to clients, volunteers and partners. Our topics this year include: -

- Coping With Change
- Creative Journaling for Well-Being
- Travelling to Antarctica
- Bowel health
- Indoor Nature Connection
- Safeguarding for volunteers
- NHS App familiarisation for digital volunteers

We have also offered online training

- Bereavement Support

Evaluations from learning sessions show how much they are valued.

“Thank you so much for this learning session. The talk given was just amazing. On par with David Attenborough's talks and film making videos. VASL Community Champions are amazing too and have transformed our lives and given us the confidence to move out and do other things. Huge thank you to all who contribute to making it such an outstanding success”. Volunteer

3. Causes of loneliness

3.1 What do people want from joining Community Champions?

- Home visits and one-on-one interaction, someone to talk to regularly.

"Community Gatherings and have someone to visit at home."

"Some company, preferably a female volunteer, to visit each week."

"Someone to visit me at home, someone to talk to."

- Social and community engagement, some people are interested in participating in the larger Community Gatherings or smaller social groups rather than the larger, more noisy events.

"Would like to attend Community Gatherings."

"Visitor, trips out, joining in with things."

"I don't like big busy noisy groups; smaller groups suit me."

- Emotional support and listening, highlighted as a significant need, with several people mentioning the difficulty of finding someone to talk to about personal issues, including bereavement.

"I can't talk to family about [my husband], they seem to feel it's best not to talk about him."

"The person I can count on to listen is a professional therapist, not a friend."

- Some identified particular volunteer characteristics, including traits.

"Would like a chatty older female volunteer to visit at home."

- Practical assistance, some of which Community Champions can provide (digital) and otherwise can refer to partner organisations.

"Digital help, needing to find a job and somewhere to live."

- Overcoming barriers, some people face specific challenges like hearing difficulties or health conditions, making it hard to engage without tailored support.

"I can't hear on the phone."

"I can't get out because of my [health] condition."

4. Changes for clients

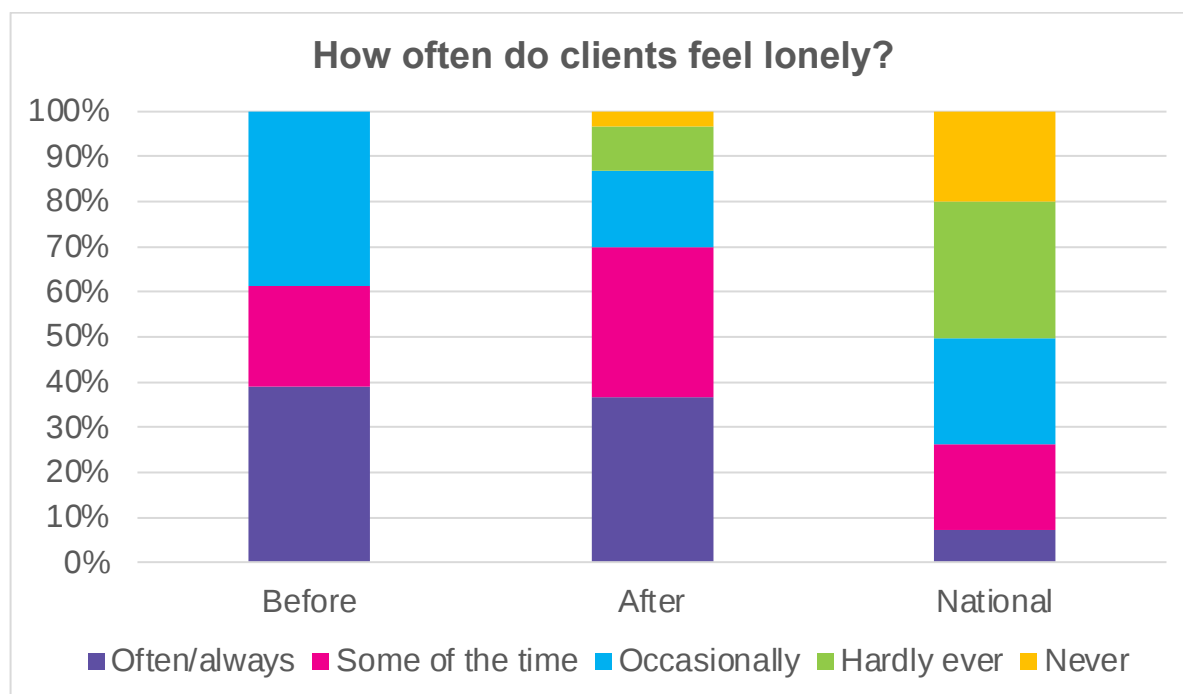
Clients feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community and reduced their loneliness and isolation.

4.1 Changes reported by clients

Average levels of loneliness have decreased for clients since their initial assessment.

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



¹

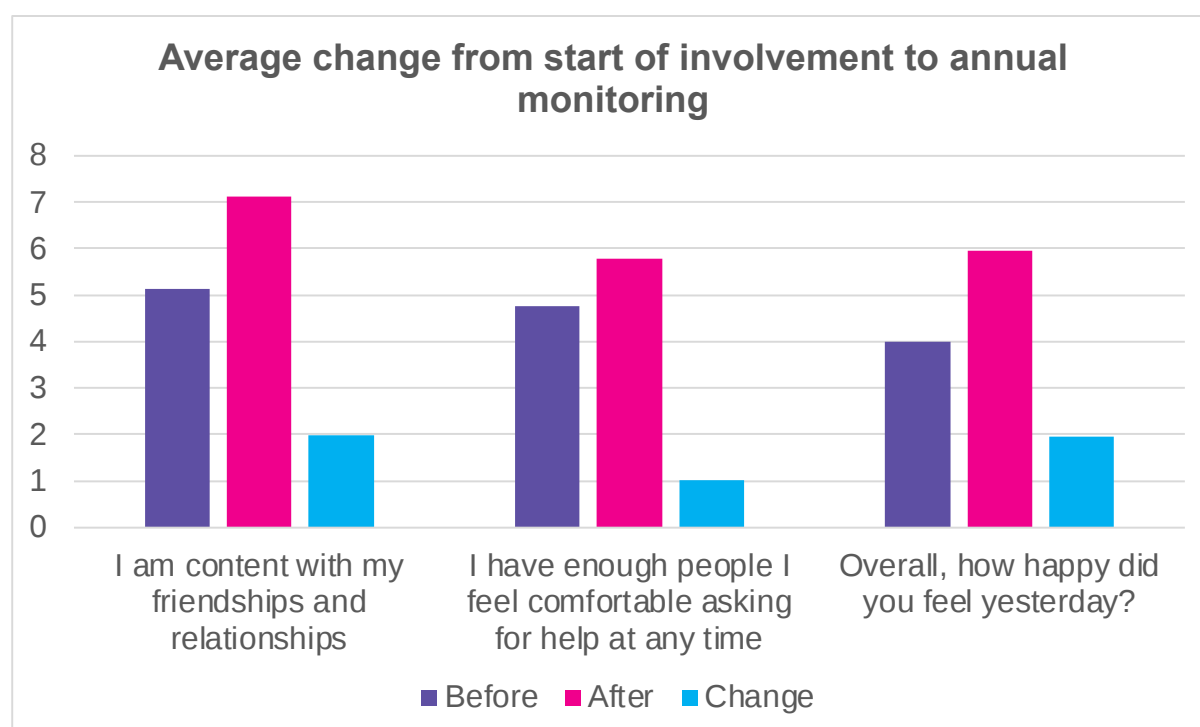
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/measuringlonelinessguidanceforuseofthenationalindicatorsonsurveys>

national average for this indicator, demonstrating that Community Champions clients are considerably lonelier than the general population².

There has been positive change on all three indicators around relationships, asking for help and happiness.

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?



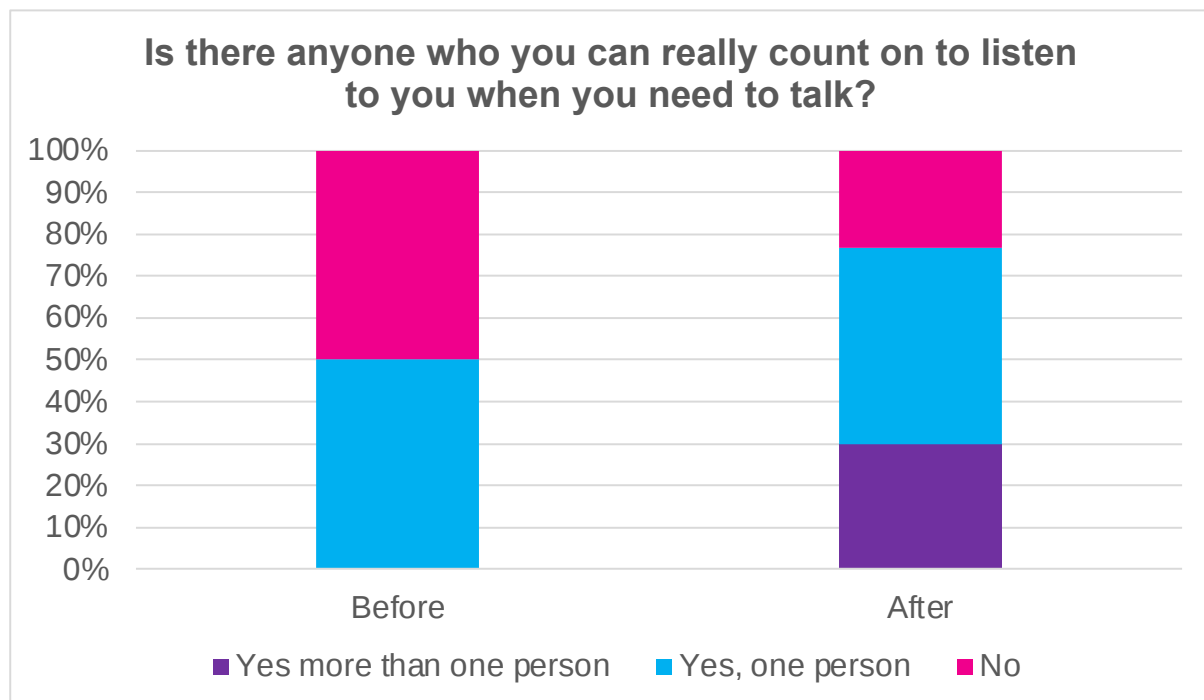
² From Community Life Survey October to December 2023, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-october-to-december-2023-quarterly-release>

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

Clients on average are more likely to have people who will listen to them when they need to talk

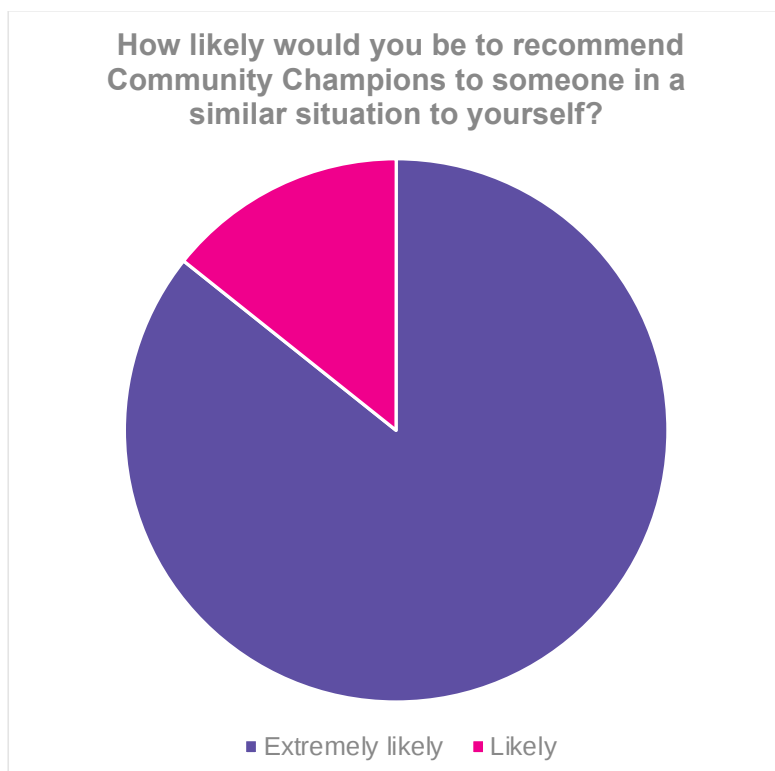


Finally we asked a question from the Community Life survey⁶ about whether clients had someone to listen when they needed to talk. It is interesting to note that some clients have more than one person they can talk to, this may be a result of their growing social confidence coupled with our encouragement to form relationships with people outside CC.

All clients were extremely likely (86%) or likely (14%) to recommend Community Champions.

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

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



Clients' changes in their own words

The changes that clients say they have made since being involved in community champions are summarised below,

Social and emotional changes

1. Reduced loneliness:

"I was lonely when i approached VASL, but now I feel more connected."

"Having my volunteer visit me has lifted my spirits and given me confidence."

2. Improved mental health:

"The project has made my life better. I miss going out for meals or to the theatre with someone. I can't go on holiday by myself, so i don't get away at all."

"Amazing project—you have saved my life. I was getting depressed, I had been scammed, and had no one but my son to talk to. Having my volunteer visit me has lifted my spirits and given me confidence."

3. Increased companionship:

"I'm quite happy with everything. My volunteer and I have become friends."

"My volunteer is really nice. We're very similar as people, and we laugh a lot together. She 'fits me like a glove.'"

4. Enhanced emotional support:

"I enjoy talking to my volunteers—they are all different. We always manage to chat about something."

"My volunteer and I can talk about everything, our families, our lives. We get on very well."

Practical and lifestyle changes

1. Engagement in activities:

"The community gatherings are great, and I really enjoy them."

"I have gone from strength to strength and don't need the project to help me."

2. Increased participation in hobbies:

"With my volunteer we talk about a different book each week, which is great. I am reading books I would never have chosen!"

"I have been to both curling groups advertised in the newsletter. I'm not as lonely as I used to be before I got involved with VASL."

3. Improved digital literacy:

"Community Champions has been a great help. Digital help has had the biggest impact, and now I know how to use a computer."

Personal development and confidence

1. Enhanced confidence:

"Having my volunteer visit me has lifted my spirits and given me confidence."

"You're all doing a marvellous job and bring a bit of sunshine to my day."

2. Increased independence:

"My life has turned around. My volunteer has been great. We gelled and had nice chats. I now have a busy social diary."

Physical health and mobility

1. Improved physical activity:

"Having a volunteer helps me. It gets me out of the house, and I enjoy walking her dog and patting it."

"I enjoy the various activities and community gatherings organised by the project, which keep me active."

2. Improvement and better management of health issues:

"I'm not feeling too bad these days, despite health issues. I look forward to my volunteer coming. We talk about handicrafts and our lives."

"Regular interactions with my volunteer have helped me cope better with my health issues."

Social integration and community involvement

1. Greater community involvement:

"I have now been involved in other organisations, such as church groups and coffee afternoons."

2. Expanded social networks:

"The project has helped me expand my social network and meet new people."

"I love the gatherings and talking to people. It has made a big difference in my social life."

4.2 Changes for digital clients

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

4.3 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.

Volunteers identified:

- Clients experience reduced loneliness and increased confidence, particularly those with limited mobility or who have suffered loss.
- Connecting people to the outside world.

"I think they enjoy hearing what is going on in our lives as well as unloading any problems or concerns they may have."

"I think we make clients feel less alone in their problems and in the world in general."

- Clients have something to look forward to weekly, brightening their days and helping them cope with silence and isolation.

"Definitely brightens up my client's week. She describes the silence in the house since her husband's death as deafening and reality appreciates the company."

- They become more socially active and open up about their problems, leading to improved mental wellbeing and reduced feelings of grief.

"My client has become more open, no longer depressed and very cheerful."

- They are able to talk about themselves and reflect on their lives.

"My client is quite lonely but has led an interesting and fascinating life and for him to recount his memories connects him with the past by saying it out loud."

- Some clients gain confidence to engage in activities outside their homes, such as visiting cafes.

"Sometimes very little input from Community Champions can have a massive impact on their lives."

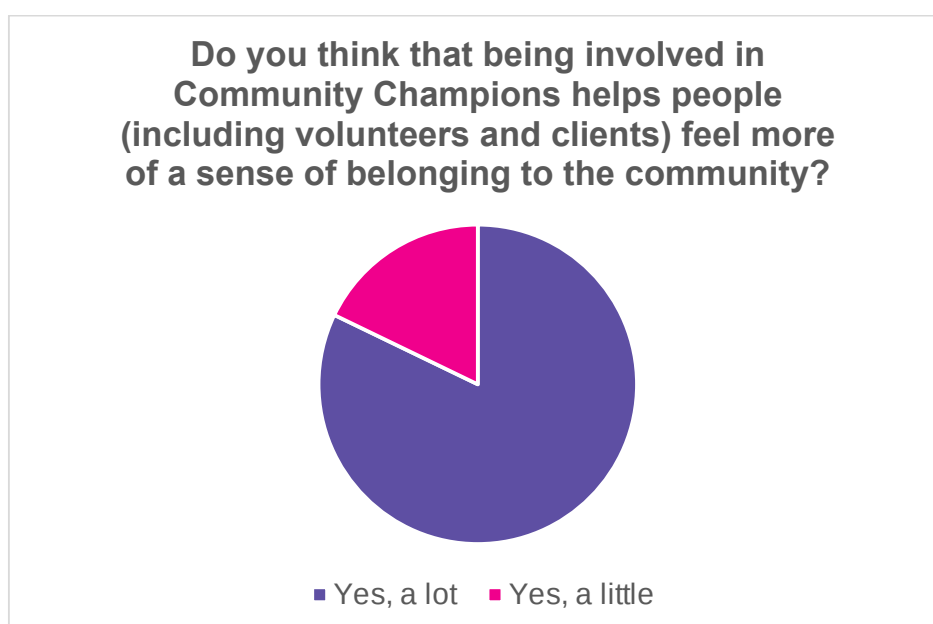
- Regular interactions and the companionship provided by volunteers improve clients' happiness, social skills, cognitive functioning, and digital literacy.
- Activities including transport and social gatherings, help clients stay connected and feel valued.

Some volunteers weren't sure what different their involvement had made but knew that their clients looked forward to their involvement.

4.4 Feeling belonging

Creating a project community in which clients and volunteers feel they are all in it together and the ability to be both a client and a volunteer concurrently or sequentially has always been one of the areas of Community Champions that participants have consistently commented on.

Volunteers all thought that the project created a sense of belonging.



We asked volunteers what they thought created this feeling of belonging:

Inclusivity and participation

- Inclusive participation and encouragement.
- Feeling included and valued.
- Encouraging independence through training
- Being involved and no longer feeling like an outsider.

Social interaction and community building

- Community Gatherings and other social events.
- Meeting new people and using skills socially.
- Opportunities for social interaction.
- Befriending and visiting.

Support and care

- Showing care and concern for welfare.

- Office support for communication and problem-solving.
- Valuing clients' roles and learning from them.
- Renewing self-worth and involvement.
- Listening to and helping individuals with personalised support.
- Providing training and thanking volunteers.

Connection and relationships

- Connecting individuals and fostering relationships.
- Matching clients with volunteers for personalised support.
- Enhancing confidence through regular visits and contact.
- Reducing isolation and improving relationships.

Information and resources

- Providing community support and resources.
- Regular communication and updates.
- Informing clients about local events.

Volunteers were asked whether there was anything that could be further done to increase feelings of belonging. Many respondents expressed satisfaction with the current efforts, praising the VASL team and saying that no further actions are necessary.

“In my working life I headed accounting and admin departments and I have been very impressed with how the VASL team operates on all counts.”

“No they are just amazing.”

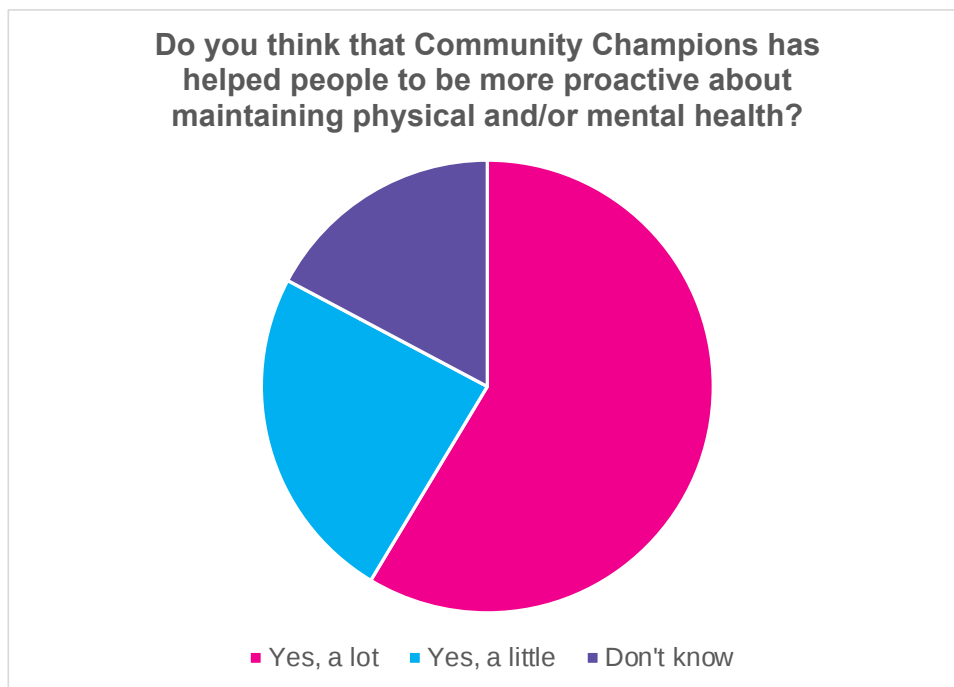
Suggestions:

- Keep clients updated and explore new ways of drawing people together.
- Organise more social gatherings, outings, and utilise the community bus for trips.
- Provide extra encouragement for clients with telephone befrienders to attend Gatherings and other events
- Increase group digital sessions.
- Treat each client as an individual, catering to their specific interests and needs.
- Be mindful of different challenges such as autism and provide additional support for event participation and volunteering.

Some noted that limited resources constrain further actions but felt that the current balance of involvement works well.

4.5 Helping people maintain physical and mental health

We asked volunteers whether they thought that Community Champions has helped



people to be more proactive about their health.

Suggestions for further actions for Community Champions around this included:

- Basic cookery skills.
- Instead of tea and cake gatherings, switch to soup lunches or sandwiches.
- Days out for isolated people.
- Wellbeing talks.
- Speaker sessions on mindfulness, positive thinking, self-esteem, and exercise, possibly using videos.
- Paired meet-ups to double the contacts for clients.
- Sending quarterly packs to clients, potentially with donations from local businesses.
- Events around themes like visits to leisure centres or Tai Chi sessions.
- Demonstrations (e.g. using an air fryer).
- Talks on life experiences.
- Sessions on mental health issues and difficulties for clients and volunteers.
- Provide safe spaces for discussing mental health and participating in activities.

4.6 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.

4.7 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 during this second project. 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. It took place through three two-hour sessions which included some facilitator input, discussion, and a call to action.

The first Next Steps cohort gelled well, and still meet as a social group over a year after the course finished. A volunteer set up a What's App group and this has enabled the group to exchange information and arrange meals out independently of the project team. Sadly, the second Next Steps cohort did not gel to the same extent, so we have delivered the content in different ways.

Many of our volunteers and clients have increased their agency as shown by: -

- Clients making new friendships with people in and out of the project and going out for drinks/meals independently of the project
- Clients joining a variety of local groups and events like Holiday at Home, Friendship Lunches, Young at Heart monthly meetings, garden parties, Christmas celebrations.
- Clients trying new activities to boost their well-being like boccia, walks and kurling.

- One client set up a card-playing group but this dwindled
- One volunteer organises shopping trips to local towns for older people.
- We also have clients helping regularly at volunteer-led groups e.g. Enigma Elevenses, Walk and Talk Market Harborough
- Some clients have prepared and delivered a Human Library talk to 30 students, this takes significant confidence!
- One volunteer also explained how the project has helped increase her social confidence and connections to 20 staff from Market Harborough Building Society
- Several volunteers and clients have had to deal with challenges (e.g. health, family bereavement, relationship breakdown) and been able to carry on with their involvement in the project at an appropriate level. This resilience is admirable.
- The case-studies in our Learning and Reflections Report give further examples of people building their social confidence, resilience and agency.

5. What makes a difference?

This section looks at the factors that clients and volunteers say contribute towards change, and those that hinder it.

5.1 What activities and factors help a positive change?

What do clients think helps?

Companionship and social interaction:

- Regular visits from volunteers provide companionship and reduce feelings of loneliness.
- Volunteers who engage in meaningful and enjoyable conversations help clients feel connected and valued.

Participation in activities:

- Clients enjoy the organised Community Gatherings which provide social interaction and engagement.
- Activities such as reading books, attending curling groups, bowling, and other events keep clients mentally and physically active.

Practical help and support:

- Helping clients with digital skills, like using a computer, has had a significant positive impact.
- Assistance with tasks such as writing Christmas cards and providing information about various groups and activities.

Personal development and wellbeing:

- Having someone to talk to about personal issues, family, and life helps clients cope with emotional challenges.
- Community Champions has helped clients feel less lonely, more confident, and has generally improved their mental health.

Flexibility and adaptability:

- Volunteers tailoring their visits and adjusting their visit times and activities based on the clients' preferences and schedules.
- Volunteers showing empathy and understanding towards clients' situations and needs.

What do volunteers think helps?

- Increased digital skills, enabling better communication with family and friends.
- The opportunity to discuss sensitive issues with someone outside their immediate circle.
- Regular, meaningful social interactions and encouragement to join social groups.
- Tailored support from volunteers who share similar interests or provide practical assistance, such as walking dogs together.
- Reliable and empathetic support from VASL, creating a sense of friendship and belonging.
- Motivation from volunteers helps clients make positive changes in their lives, such as planning holidays or reconnecting with estranged friends and family.

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.

What do clients think hinders change?

Health and mobility issues

- Some clients struggle to attend events or engage in activities due to mobility issues.
- Ongoing health problems and chronic pain make it difficult for some to fully participate.

Need for more interaction

- A desire for more frequent or longer visits from volunteers.
- Some clients feel the need for additional volunteers to cover when their primary volunteer is not available.

Matching and communication issues:

- One client felt that their volunteer is not ideally matched to their personality or interests.
- Effective communication is hindered by issues like hearing problems, making interactions less enjoyable.

Mental health and bereavement:

- Some clients continue to struggle with depression and loneliness.
- Ongoing grief and bereavement issues require more specialised support.

Logistical challenges:

- Difficulty in attending events or Gatherings due to transportation or physical limitations.
- Some clients are unable to complete surveys due to health or other issues, making it harder to get comprehensive feedback.

What do volunteers think hinders changes for clients?

- Insufficient volunteer time or numbers to meet all clients' needs.
- Health issues, such as limited mobility or sudden illness, preventing participation in activities.
- Difficulty getting GPs appointments to address health issues.
- Effect of bereavement and friends not feeling able to explore clients' grief.
- No one left who shares their early memories.
- Financial constraints or difficulty in budgeting on a limited income.
- Physical disabilities or conditions like dementia limiting the effectiveness of volunteer support.
- Routine nature of calls can reduce their impact over time, calls could possibly end sooner if people have other interests.
- Getting started with something new, can be a big hurdle to overcome.
- Reluctance or apprehension to engage in social or technological activities.
- Reluctance to embrace technology.
- Challenges practicing new IT skills without support.
- Clients' increasing frailty or declining confidence in socialising.

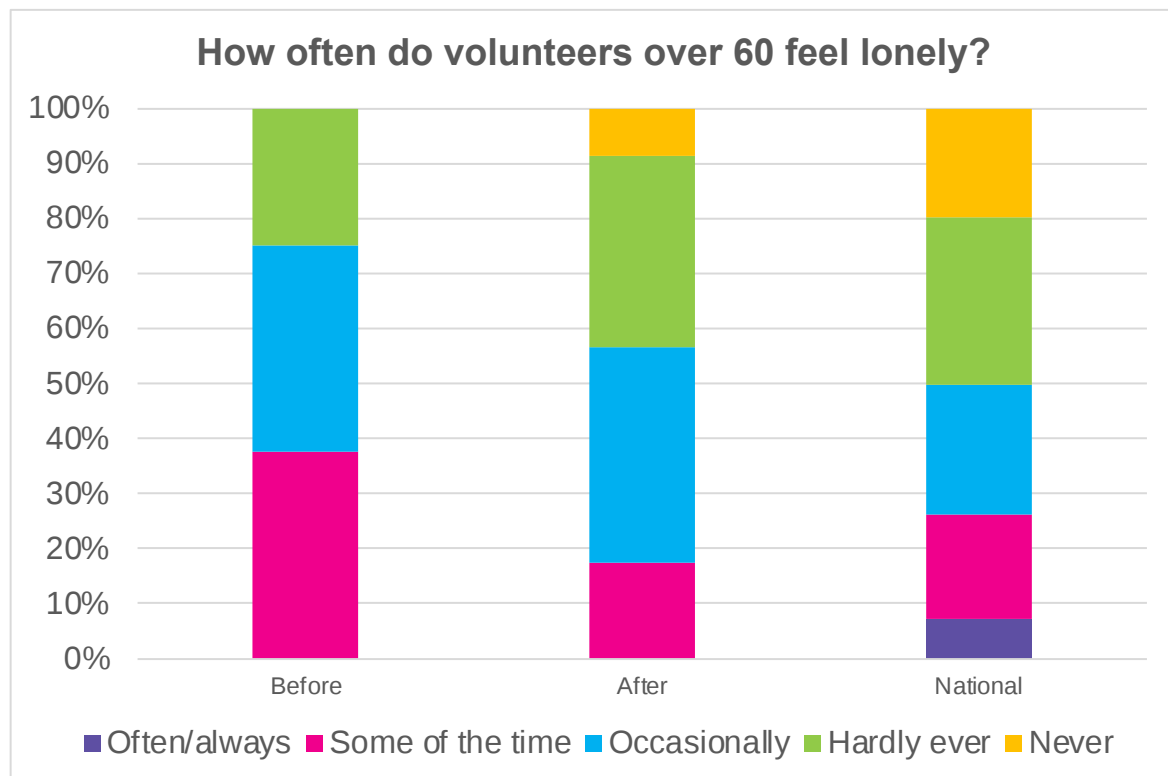
6. Changes for volunteers

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

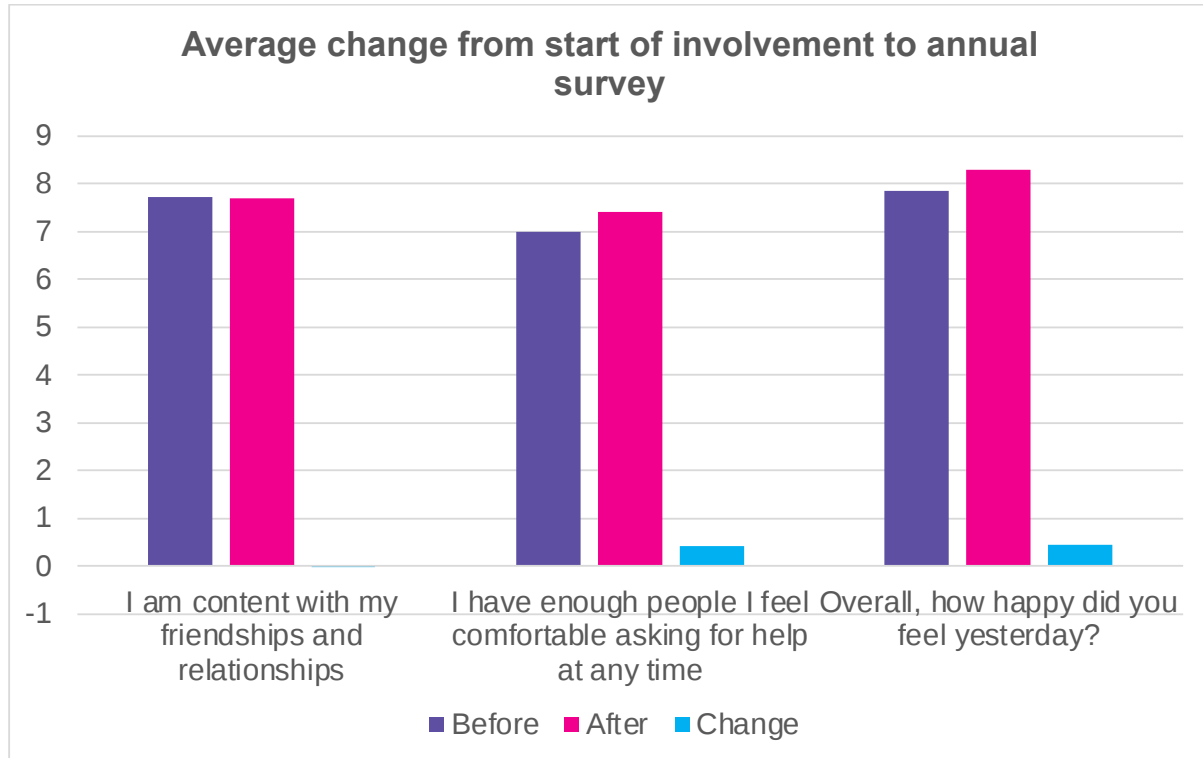
Volunteers feel that Community Champions has helped them to feel a connection to the local community and volunteers over 60 will have reduced their loneliness and isolation.

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. With smaller numbers of volunteers, it's difficult to draw any firm conclusions, but the results of the questions for volunteers over 60 show generally a positive picture.

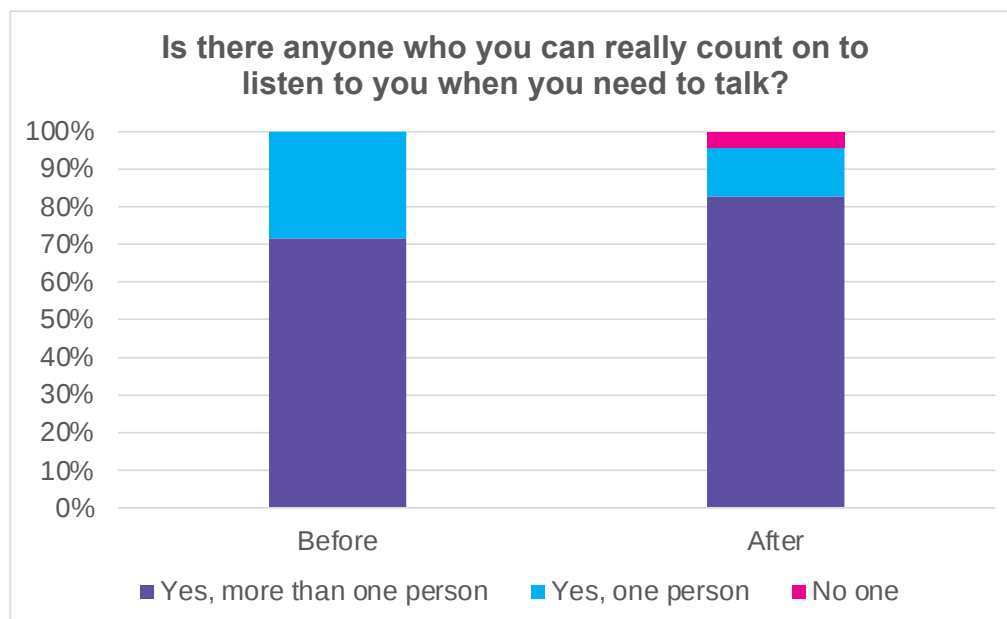
Our volunteers, unlike our clients, are less lonely than the national average, and this year demonstrate an improvement from start to end of the year.



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. There have been very small changes, one tiny negative change and two small positive changes.



The percentage of volunteers who have more than one person to talk to has increased.



6.1 How did volunteers hope to help?

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

- **Relieve loneliness:** Volunteers want to alleviate loneliness by providing companionship and befriending clients,
“To try to relieve the awful thing called loneliness. I have been lonely in my life and know exactly what it's like.”
- **Genuine connection:** to engage in meaningful conversations, creating a positive and relaxed atmosphere, to make people feel valued,
“For us both to have a fun conversation that flows and they feel at ease.”
- **Post-pandemic support:** Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping people who have lost confidence,
“People do not socialise anymore, so the elderly can feel very isolated.”
- **Anticipation and routine:** Giving clients something to look forward to on a regular basis, reducing their sense of isolation.
- **Digital inclusion:** Introducing people to the digital world, helping them overcome fears of online activities such as digital banking,

6.2 What did volunteers hope to gain from volunteering?

In addition to the client-focused reasons for volunteering, volunteers identified what they hoped for themselves from their roles:

- **Community contribution:** contributing to the community and making a small difference.
- **Personal growth:** volunteering is a way to push themselves out of their comfort zones.
- **Making connections:** making new friends and feel happiness from helping others.
- **Finding a sense of purpose.**

6.3 How has volunteering impacted volunteers?

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

1. Listening:

"I've learnt the importance of listening as being a key and fundamental part of communication."

"I have become a better listener."

2. Communication: vital for conveying information and building relationships.

"I have learnt how to communicate with people who are alone and lonely to offer them friendship."

3. Empathy and compassion: for understanding and relating to others' needs and emotions.

"The ability to communicate effectively, be adaptable and empathise."

"I have a greater understanding of people's problems and how I can help them find solutions."

4. Patience:

"Listening empathy compassion patience."

"I feel my patience has increased, whilst some stories may be repeated it is essential to remain interested and engaged"

5. Technical skills and knowledge:

"Improved my internet skills, health and wellbeing knowledge,"

"More internet knowledge."

6. Understanding community needs:

"Many people are isolated and lonely in community. Meeting and getting to know people and their problems,"

"I have a greater understanding of people's problems and how I can help them find solutions."

7. Connection, teamwork and collaboration:

"Working with clients and the team at the top,"

8. Adaptability:

"The ability to communicate effectively, be adaptable and empathise."

The two categories below demonstrate how volunteering can relieve loneliness and isolation in volunteers as well as clients.

9. Personal growth and purpose:

"Helped with my own personal issues by giving me a purpose in life"

"Confidence boost (taking on something new)"

"Having structure to my week"

"I feel I'm doing my bit which is rewarding"

"It has endorsed my sense of responsibility and socialism"

10. Social connections and friendship:

"Made new friends."

"Yes it cured my own loneliness and helping clients to feel the same."

"Friendships gained."

"I feel a part of something worthwhile and a part of a 'family' of like minded people."

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, only three people out of seven (43%) said

they thought they'd volunteer for another project with older people, so without Community Champions the contribution of others to relieving loneliness in the district would likely have been 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,

"You seem to have answered all my questions, comments and suggestions. I have been very impressed with your professionalism and commitment."

"I have not experienced any activities but the process of becoming a volunteer has been seamless and professional."

"After speaking to Jenny and Rohini, feel very positive about joining Community Champions."

"The on-boarding process has been very clear and reassuring and has strengthened my commitment to making a contribution to the project."

Volunteers are asked what they think the best thing is about Community Champions.



- Feeling a sense of belonging and knowing that a little bit of time volunteering can make a big difference to clients
- Listening to the stories of clients
- Meeting my client who is lovely
- Friendships and making better use of time
- Treating volunteers very well and with respect
- Making connection with people that care
- Joining people together
- Meeting other older people makes me realise how well off I am
- Caring dedicated people
- Getting involved in the community after moving to the town four years ago
- Meeting my client and establishing a friendship plus the sense of doing good
- The chance to give support to some lonely or alone person.
- Meeting new people.
- Managing challenging visits with patience.
- Every day is a school day.
- Giving me a sense of purpose and pleasure in making a change for others
- To focus on the positive
- Feeling involved and useful.
- Using skills.

- Feeling like you are making a genuine difference.
- Seeing people do things for themselves.
- A friendly organisation which focuses on the needs of the service users
- I have enjoyed being part of the local community getting to know Market Harborough
- Belonging to a lovely caring friendly community and helping others to enjoy their community
- Always make me feel a valued member of the team
- Meeting new people
- Feeling valued and hopefully making a difference if only for one person
- Meeting some wonderful older folk in their homes and hearing about their fascinating lives! Also making friends with fellow volunteers.

7. Systems and partnerships

7.1 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, the Manager of the local area coordinators (employed by Leicestershire County Council), Social Prescribers from local GP surgeries and a representative from the Canal and River Trust.

Over the year it has discussed issues including:

- How to attract more volunteers
- How to deploy existing volunteers to manage client waiting lists
- Where to seek further funding
- Which organisations to work in partnership with for mutual benefit

7.2 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 including:

- Canal and River Trust – we worked in collaboration to offer clients a free 4-hour boat trip in Leicestershire
- The Vita Health Group – who explained how clients can access free talking therapies to help manage worries
- Market Harborough Building Society who encourages their staff to volunteer for us and enable us to use their building for meetings

7.3 Promotion of Community Champions

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

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 such as

- Strengthening Your Social Muscle
- Human Library talks
- Celebrating Volunteers
- Developing voluntary sector leaders
- Loneliness – are we a me or we society?
- Technologies to aid social well-being
- Digital volunteers helping get people online
- The benefits of being a befriender
- Investing in Volunteers
- Next Steps
- Nature Connection
- Self-Care

7.4 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,

"The dedicated staff at VASL do a great job. I salute them!"

"Very well-run organisation."

"Keep going you are doing a sterling job."

"Community Champions give as much support, care and understanding to their volunteers as they do to their clients."

Developments that Community Champions has made this year include:

- Working with private sector companies e.g. Market Harborough Building Society, Vita Health Group
- Supporting our Chair of Trustees to raise money for World Vision, a global development charity
- Consulting with GP surgeries to develop a train the trainers workshop for Digital volunteers about how they can support older people to use the NHS App to book online doctors appointments and order repeat medication
- Delivering individual digital support to older people in Platform Housing properties

There were a couple of suggestions for development, applicable to VASL more widely:

- Keep up the good work. It is much valued. Perhaps liaise more with Citizens Advice and Social Services.
- Community Champions and VASL should be more accessible. At present VASL is located on the periphery of Harborough. They were once in the heart of the town and people; clients could pop in and meet the team. Now I think a lot of people only know them as voices over the phone.
- Be bold and try out more possible routes to help others, shout about what great work you do, and the volunteers will come.

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
- Leading a workshop about **Valuing Volunteers for Befriending Networks** – 25 participants from across the UK

7.5 Making Harborough district more “age friendly”

We asked volunteers what they thought would make Harborough more friendly and accessible for older people. Some of the answers refer to places but don't specify which location they are referring to, although some of the answers could apply across the district.

1. Increasing public awareness

- More publicity about the various clubs and events that are available.
- Possible talks or workshops at schools to raise awareness of the difficulties of older people and how young people could help in the community.
- Provide a free local paper informing the community of local issues and events.

2. Social engagement and community activities

- Have some games afternoons in a warm place in winter.
- More social engagement with the community and meetings for them.
- “Chatty” benches or places where people can feel ok reaching out to others.
- More facilities for over fifties and special evenings now and again.
- More available transport, more social pop in centres.

3. Accessibility and infrastructure

- Bike lanes wide enough for mobility scooters to use so they are not travelling dangerously along roads.
- More accessible shops and transport for those with mobility issues who need special help to get out and about.
- The access to the library is not great.
- Provide more public toilets. Many people stop going out because they have a fear of not being able to reach a toilet.
- More social pop in centres.

4. Community integration

- The market has become a very vibrant place to meet with easy access, also a good variety of age ranges are present there.
- Some areas are very friendly, it is difficult for newcomers, but younger people are moving in which seems to be breaking the mould.
- It is not the district that needs change, but the people who live in the district.

5. Transport challenges

- The most obvious is transport. We are bringing people together once a month with volunteer drivers but if a client happens to connect with someone in a different town or village, how can they keep that connection without decent transport links?
- Make the High Street pedestrian and get the council to improve the bus service. More frequent mini buses so that people are not discouraged to go out into Harborough because they don't want to be trapped waiting for a bus that only runs every few hours.

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.

This year we have seen the development of volunteer-led groups, such as *Walk and Talk* in both Market Harborough and Lutterworth, and social groups like *Beanies* and *Tuesday Natter*. These have had mixed success, and we are learning what the key success factors are. We are encouraging peer learning between the coordinators of these groups and will continue supporting them as part of our sustainability plans.

New interventions we are planning to develop to reduce loneliness include: -

- rolling out one to one support for clients in community settings (e.g. GP surgeries, supported residential settings, carers groups) showing them how to use the NHS App on their smartphones so that they can order repeat prescriptions and book doctors appointments online. This helps increase their agency and enables GP surgeries to work more efficiently.
- organising learning sessions exploring how people can handle their worries, make new friendships and connections, and how they can support people with visual impairments
- we are learning more about the World Health Organisation's Age -friendly standard, and plan to ask our local authority, Harborough District Council, to work with us in partnership to embed this making our local communities more age-inclusive.

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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